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Summary

TELESCOPING THE TIMES *Civil Rights*

CHAPTER OVERVIEW After decades of discrimination, African Americans begin a struggle for equality. They make gains against unfair laws in the South, but as the movement reaches Northern cities, gains are fewer.

🕒 Taking on Segregation

MAIN IDEA Activism and a series of Supreme Court decisions advanced equal rights for African Americans in the 1960s.

In the 1950s, social changes begun by World War II set the stage for overturning the laws that forced separate, or segregated, facilities for African Americans and whites in the South. Many African Americans had enjoyed expanded job opportunities in defense industries in the 1940s. Many more had fought in the war. They returned home determined to fight for their own freedom.

Lawyers for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) won cases that weakened segregation. The biggest victory came in the 1954 school desegregation case *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Supreme Court ruled that separate educational facilities were “inherently unequal.” The segregated schools were declared unconstitutional.

Within a year after *Brown*, more than 500 school districts had desegregated. But in some areas, leaders vowed resistance. The issue reached a crisis in Arkansas. The governor ordered the National Guard to prevent nine African-American students from enrolling at Little Rock’s Central High School. A federal judge ordered the governor to admit the students. When he refused, President Eisenhower sent federal troops to allow the students to enter the school. Meanwhile, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957. It gave the attorney general greater power to push desegregation in schools.

Another drive had arisen over segregation of city buses. An African-American woman named Rosa Parks had refused to yield her seat to a white man, as the laws of Montgomery, Alabama, required. After her arrest, African Americans in that city organized a yearlong boycott of the city’s bus system. The crisis ended when a Supreme Court ruling ruled segregated buses illegal.

Helping lead the Montgomery bus boycott was Martin Luther King, Jr., who rose to prominence in

the civil rights movement. He joined with other ministers to form the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), which taught the techniques of nonviolent resistance to unjust laws. By 1960, there was another influential civil rights group—the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). It was formed mostly of college students who felt that the pace of change was too slow. They staged sit-ins, in which African Americans sat in protest at segregated lunch counters, forcing restaurants and stores to desegregate.

🕒 The Triumphs of a Crusade

MAIN IDEA Civil Rights activists broke down racial barriers through social protest. Their activism prompted landmark legislation.

In the Freedom Rides, African Americans tested the Supreme Court ruling that banned segregation in interstate bus transportation by riding on buses into the South. Many were met by angry mobs that attacked and beat them. As more incidents occurred, the Kennedy administration stepped in. U.S. marshals were sent to protect the last group of Freedom Riders and the Interstate Commerce Commission, which regulated bus companies, issued orders banning segregation.

In 1962, a federal court ruled that an African American could enter the all-white University of Mississippi. The state’s governor refused to admit him, however. The Kennedy administration sent U.S. marshals to force the governor to yield.

Another confrontation occurred in 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama, where King and other civil rights leaders led an effort to desegregate the city. The city police attacked marchers—including children—with dogs and water hoses. Many people across the country were outraged by these attacks. President Kennedy became convinced that the nation needed a new civil rights law. His bill guaranteed African Americans equal rights in all public facilities. It also gave the government power to push for school desegregation.

Civil rights leaders staged a massive march in Washington in August of 1963. More than 250,000 people showed up, urging passage of the civil rights bill. After Kennedy was assassinated, President Johnson pushed Congress to act. The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964.

Civil rights workers next began a campaign to register African-American voters in the South. They called it Freedom Summer. They met opposition and some violence. At the Democratic convention that summer, only two African American delegates were seated, leading some of the delegates to feel betrayed.

In 1965, a harsh police response to a civil rights march in Alabama led thousands from all over the country to join the march. President Johnson spurred Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act. The law stripped away state laws that had prevented African Americans from voting.

🔗 Challenges and Changes in the Movement

MAIN IDEA *Disagreements among civil rights groups and the rise of black nationalism created a violent period in the fight for civil rights.*

The civil rights movement met difficulties as it moved North. In the South the problem had been unfair laws, called de jure segregation. In the North, the problem was de facto segregation, which arises from racist attitudes. It is harder to change attitudes than to overturn unjust laws.

The Great Migration had brought tens of thousands of African Americans to Northern cities, but “white flight” had left the cities poor and with few jobs. African Americans were angered by these conditions and by harsh treatment from largely white police forces. This anger boiled over in several riots that brought many deaths and much damage to many cities from 1964 to 1968. President Johnson had declared “war on poverty” to combat some of the social ills that African Americans were protesting. But the growing involvement in the Vietnam War robbed the war on poverty of needed resources.

New African-American leaders arose, many of them boosting black nationalism. Malcolm X began by telling his audiences to use armed self-defense when unlawfully attacked. He later urged pursuit of peaceful means—especially voting—to win equality. He split with other leaders of his church. Then, in 1965, he was assassinated.

Another split occurred between King and the SCLC and other, younger, members of the movement. SNCC leaders began to use the slogan “Black Power” to symbolize their call for African-American pride and stronger resistance to racism. The Black Panthers adopted military-style dress and harsh words, raising fears among moderate African Americans and many whites.

King objected to the fiery language of the Black Power movement. He believed that it would have evil consequences. It was he who suffered, however. In April 1968, King was shot and killed. Many cities erupted in riots caused by African-Americans’ anger and frustration.

A commission reported to President Johnson that the urban riots were caused by white racism and the lack of opportunities for African Americans. But the administration did not act, fearing the lack of white support for the sweeping changes required. The civil rights movement had achieved many triumphs, including the banning of segregation in education, transportation, employment, and housing and the winning of voting rights. Many problems remained, however, and de facto segregation has continued throughout America even up to today.

Review

1. How did the civil rights movement begin?
2. What events led Congress to pass the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts?
3. How did the civil rights movement change?
4. Why could the results of the movement be called mixed?