

The US Civil Rights Movement (1942-1968)

Dr. Stephen Zunes & Jesse Laird
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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance
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Dates: 1942-1968

Nature of Struggle: Civil rights

Target: Legally-enforced segregation

Movement: Pacifist and civil rights organizations, including the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), as well as religious denominations, trade unions, and others.

Conflict Summary:

The US Civil Rights Movement (1942-68) restored universal suffrage in the southern United States and outlawed legal segregation. The movement's overall strategy combined litigation, the use of mass media, boycotts, demonstrations, as well as sit-ins and other forms of civil disobedience to turn public support against institutionalized racism and secure substantive reform in US law. Thousands were arrested in nonviolent protests as images of the confrontations inspired widespread public support for the movement's objectives. Hundreds of thousands more participated in marches, boycotts and voter registration drives throughout the US South. The movement helped spawn a national crisis that forced intervention by the federal government to overturn segregation laws in southern states, restore voting rights for African-Americans, and end legal discrimination in housing, education and employment.

Political History:

The US Civil Rights Movement grew out of four hundred years of violent and nonviolent conflict, rooted in the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans to work primarily in the plantation economy of the US South. Abolitionists, for both principle and strategy, practiced nonviolent resistance often in the period between colonization and the American Civil War (most notably

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members of the historic peace churches—the Quakers, Mennonites and Church of the Brethren). In addition to periodic rebellions, slaves would deliberately ruin equipment and supplies, slow down work, fake illness, escape and practice dissembling. Their free allies published letters and polemics, shielded escapees, purchased freedom for slaves and waged direct action. William Lloyd Garrison founded the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave inspired by Garrison’s radical weekly *The Liberator*, publishes the first issue of the *Abolitionist North Star* in 1847. Many escaped slavery through a secret network of safe houses linking the US South to Canada.

Militant perspectives grew among Abolitionists in the years leading to the Civil War, most notably that of an attempted armed uprising led by John Brown. More than 200,000 black soldiers fought in the Civil War and 38,000 died from combat. Despite the abolition of slavery and the passage of constitutional amendments establishing equal protection and due process and universal adult male suffrage, African-Americans are still denied equal rights. Racist state laws, called Black Codes during the Reconstruction Era (1863-77) and Jim Crow Laws subsequently, deny most African-Americans the right to vote and confine them to racially segregated transportation, theaters, schools and restaurants throughout most of the former states of the confederacy. Despite these challenges, more than 30,000 African American teachers were trained and employed by 1900, making literacy widespread throughout black communities. African-Americans founded hundreds of churches and mutual support organizations.

African Americans, despite facing harsh injustice, organize on a mass scale for equal access to jobs and other rights in the face of widespread violence, with hundreds of African-Americans lynched by white mobs in the early years of the 20th century and race riots led by white racists decimate African-American communities in a number of cities across the country. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1909 and 8,000 African Americans marched in silence down Fifth Avenue in New York City seeking fair wages and jobs. Prominent black intellectuals, including W.E.B. Dubois and Wendell Johnson, were among those present to “make America safe for democracy.” The Communist Party

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established the American Negro Labor Congress in 1925 to advance the rights of African Americans. The same year the mostly African-American Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters is founded, which becomes an influential organization in the civil rights movement.

News of Gandhi's campaigns in India reached African-American activists, inspiring powerful movement leaders such as A. Phillip Randolph (President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters) and Howard Thurman (Dean of the Chapel at Howard University) to consider his methods of strategic nonviolence. In 1941 Randolph called for a massive march on Washington, D.C. to protest job discrimination in the defense industry in which 100,000 are predicted to join, prompting President Roosevelt to immediately issue an Executive Order banning discrimination in defense hiring. The march, having won its objective without having happened, is called off. A group of American conscientious objectors and pacifist allies, also inspired by the remarkable success of Gandhi, found the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942. The organization began and remained relatively small—never more than a few hundred members—yet it waged a series of successful sit-ins Chicago (1942), St. Lewis (1949) and Baltimore (1952) to desegregate public facilities. In 1947 CORE partners with the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) in the first Freedom Ride, in which an interracial group of eight white and eight black men provoke harassment and arrest as they ride interstate buses through Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Kentucky. The action, called a Journey for Reconciliation, focuses national attention on CORE, nonviolent action and the injustice of segregation.

Critical legal victories paved the way for an escalation of direct action. A class action lawsuit filed in 1951 by African-American parents from Kansas on behalf of their children challenging racial segregation in schools resulted in a landmark Supreme Court decision affirming that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. A case the following year challenging racial segregation on private interstate buses and railways led to a ruling that racial segregation on private interstate trains and buses was illegal.

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Strategic Actions:

Direct action became the movement's salient strategic weapon by the mid-1950's. The Highlander Folk School in Tennessee began to discuss strategic nonviolence with civil rights workers such as Rosa Parks of the Montgomery, Alabama chapter of the NAACP, who—upon her return from Highlander—was arrested for failing to give up her seat for a white man as a test case challenging the city's racist ordinances. A bus boycott was organized under the leadership of the newly-founded Montgomery Improvement Association, which became headed by the then 26-year old Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. The boycott involved 42,000 people, lasted 381 days, and economically crippled the municipal bus service, resulting in the successful integration of all city buses.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott energized young African-Americans to support a broader civil rights based upon strategic nonviolent direct action. King, riding the wave of energy created in Montgomery, founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) with Baynard Rustin, William H. Borders, Charles K. Steele and Fred Shuttlesworth in 1957. Together they asked President Eisenhower for a White House Conference on Civil Rights. When the president refused, SCLC responds by leading 25,000 people in a prayer march on the Lincoln Memorial. Speakers called for nonviolent struggle, boycotts, work slow-downs and strikes. In the wake of the event, which remained peaceful, Wichita and Oklahoma City are targeted by sit-ins. The United States Congress, reacting to events, authorized the Justice Department in the Civil Rights Act of 1957 to sue on behalf of African Americans that are still unable to vote in the Southern States. Meanwhile, nine students created a national crisis as they tried to be the first African Americans to enroll at the newly desegregated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. When the governor the Arkansas National Guard tried to prevent them from entering the school, public outcry led to a new judicial ruling and intervention by federal troops. CORE continued its work in the Northern States while SCLC focused on the Southern. King resigned his pastorate in Montgomery, moving with the SCLC to a new headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia in 1960.

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The sit-ins pioneered by CORE rapidly spread across the southern United States in 1960. In Greensboro, North Carolina university students who had learned about nonviolent direct action from comic books and manuals published by FOR and CORE engaged in a sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter. Other students quickly joined. Seasoned direct action strategists James Lawson, Glen Smiley and Charles Walker arrived to advise the young activists. Dramatic footage of sit-ins in Nashville, Tennessee showed students being harassed and arrested for sitting at the lunch counter. Bernard Lafayette and John Lewis are key participants of the Nashville sit-ins—both go on to make profound contributions to the movement as leaders and trainers. More sit-ins rocked South Carolina, Tennessee, North Carolina, Florida, and Virginia. Rather than slow the sit-ins, the arrests publicized them, as sit-ins hit 50 American cities in just three months. One lunch counter after another became integrated. More than 3,600 people were voluntarily arrested in the sit-ins. Out of this movement is formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in April of 1960, which soon became a powerful force for civil rights.

The movement took advantage of another Supreme Court case in 1961 which expanded the ban on segregated interstate travel to include station restrooms, waiting areas and restaurants. CORE tested this ruling by organizing a second Freedom Ride, this time far deeper into the South. Seven blacks and six whites leave Washington, D.C. on May 4 in two integrated groups were met by violent white mobs and arrests by police. Federal authorities stepped in to guarantee protection and a new group of mostly SNCC arrived to continue the Ride until they were arrested and jailed. Like the lunch counter sit-ins, more and more activists arrive to fill the seats of the jailed and beaten Riders. 328 people are arrested before they finish. By November, Attorney General Robert Kennedy and the Interstate Commerce Commission intervene to force integration. In just a few months the Freedom Riders had integrated interstate travel.

Thousands more join diverse campaigns between 1960 to 1963. In 1960 CORE, SNCC, SCLC, NAACP and the Urban League formed the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to administer the Voter Education Project

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(VEP), a massive voter registration drive. Confusing and discriminatory technicalities kept many African-Americans from voting. Despite volunteer dedication VEP enjoyed little success: progress was slow and marked by violence against rights workers, including murders. At the same time SNCC and the NAACP run into trouble in Albany, Georgia, where the police chief had studied Gandhian tactics in preparation for the confrontation and developed a counter-strategy to minimize police violence, send arrested protesters out of town, and avoid negative media coverage.

As that campaign floundered, a larger campaign got underway in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, where a selective buying boycott was pressuring local businesses for equal access to jobs and sit-ins hit Birmingham libraries and restaurants. Kneel-ins disrupted services in all-white churches. Demonstrations continued in violation of a court order barring further protest, resulting in hundreds of arrests, including that of King. In a radical escalation of the conflict, over 1,000 young African-Americans, teenagers and even younger, walked out of school for a downtown protest where most were arrested. Youthful protests the following day were met with police dogs and high-pressure water cannons, provoking widespread international support for the movement as images are broadcast and published. As the protests escalated, jails overflowed and businesses were occupied by protesters, and local business leaders entered negotiations and agreed to the movement's demands for integration and an end to discrimination in hiring.

As the movement's strategy of direct action resulted in widespread national support for its objectives, its leaders organized a national March on Washington for Jobs and Justice in early that August, where over a quarter million people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial. Within a year, the Omnibus Civil Rights Act outlawing segregation nationwide was signed into law.

In the summer of 1964, COFO brought in a thousand activists to Mississippi to register voters, teach, and help develop—as an alternative to the segregated state branch of the Democratic Party—the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Three student volunteers were murdered by local police. In Selma, Alabama a SNCC-led effort to register voters was met with violence. A subsequent march from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery was

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violently broken up by police before federal marshals and additional volunteers arrived to complete the initially aborted march. This provided greater momentum for the passage of a federal voting rights act, which was signed into law the following year, transforming the politics of the South.

In subsequent years, King and the SCLC began placing a greater emphasis on economic justice, particularly ending segregated housing, which also afflicts northern cities. Meanwhile, SNCC and some other elements of the movement begin adopting a strong Black Nationalist orientation and many abandoned their commitment to nonviolence. Despite King's assassination in 1968 and further splintering in the movement, important victories continued to be won over the coming decade, including open housing legislation, increasing desegregation in schools and workplaces, stronger affirmative action, a greater number of African-American elected officials, and advances in economic opportunities. Work towards greater racial equality continues today.

In summary, there was an enormous array of tactics utilized in the movement from 1942-68. Sit-ins, boycotts, marches and civil disobedience were signature actions of the struggle, in which thousands were arrested. Hundreds of thousands participated in marches, boycotts and voter registration drives. More than almost any movement since the Indian struggle for independence, King and other leaders consciously adopted Gandhian satyagraha as the principal model for the nonviolent struggle. There was also a strong spiritual basis to the movement rooted in the African-American church. Poetry, the visual arts and particularly music played an important role in the struggle.

Ensuing Events:

The struggle for racial equality continues in the United States. Many key organizations of the 1942 – 1968 period are still active. The NAACP, CORE, FOR, WRL (War Resisters League) and SCLC maintain current websites detailing their activities. The Highlander Folk School is now Highlander Research and Education Center and continues its grassroots organizing in

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Appalachia and the American South. The election of President Barack Obama is an important milestone, but African-Americans continue to face injustice throughout the United States. Key civil rights leaders—such as Bernard Lafayette, John Lewis and James Lawson—are still active in government, education and society.

For Further Reading:

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