CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1945–1966

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CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
* Legal and political origins of the African American civil rights struggle
* Martin Luther King’s rise to leadership
* Student protesters and direct action in the South
* Civil rights and national politics
* Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965
* America’s other minorities

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT
In 1955 Montgomery’s black community mobilized when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat and comply with segregation laws. Led by Martin Luther King, Jr., a Baptist minister, the boycott drew upon a network of local activists who organized car pools using hundreds of private cars to get people to and from work. Leaders endured violence and legal harassment, but ultimately won a court ruling that the segregation ordinance was unconstitutional. The vignette illustrates how direct action campaigns were shaking American communities and how a community grew together to challenge injustice.

ORIGINS OF THE MOVEMENT
The WWII experiences of African Americans laid the
foundations for the subsequent struggle. A mass migration to the North brought political power to black people who were now working through the Democratic Party. President Harry Truman boldly endorsed integration of the armed forces and indicated his support for other civil rights programs, leading to a Democratic split in 1948. The NAACP grew in numbers and its Legal Defense Fund initiated a series of lawsuits to win key rights. Jackie Robinson’s entrance into major league baseball and Ralph Bunche’s winning a Nobel Peace prize were key ways that black people were breaking the color barrier. A new generation of jazz musicians created be-bop, a sophisticated music that proved difficult to adapt to mainstream white tastes.

In the South, segregation and unequal rights were still the law of the land. Law and custom kept blacks as second-class citizens with no effective political rights. Black people had learned to survive and not challenge the situation. But the NAACP initiated a series of court cases that challenged the constitutionality of segregation. In Brown v. Board of Education, newly appointed Chief Justice Earl Warren led the court to declare that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. The court postponed ordering a clear timetable to implement the decision. Southern whites declared their intention to nullify the decision. In Little Rock, Arkansas, a judge ordered integration. The governor ordered the National Guard to keep black children out of Central High. When the troops were withdrawn, a riot erupted forcing President Eisenhower to send in more troops to integrate the school.

NO EASY ROAD TO FREEDOM, 1957–62 Martin Luther King had emerged from the bus boycott as a prominent national figure. A well-educated son of a Baptist minister, King taught his followers nonviolent resistance, modeled after the tactics of Mohandas Gandhi. The civil rights movement was deeply rooted in the traditions of the African-American church. King founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to promote nonviolent direct action to challenge segregation. African-American college students, first in Greensboro, NC, took matters into their own hands and began sitting in at segregated lunch counters. Nonviolent sit-ins were widely supported by the African-American community, and often were accompanied by community-wide boycotts of businesses that would not integrate. A new spirit of militancy was evident among young people, which upset many people white and black who were in power. A conference of 120 African-American activists created the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to promote nonviolent direct challenges to segregation. The young activists were found at the forefront of nearly every major civil rights battle.

The race issue had moved to center stage by 1960. As Vice President, Nixon had strongly supported civil rights, but it was Kennedy who pressured a judge to release Martin Luther King, Jr. from jail. Black voters provided Kennedy’s margin of victory, though an unfriendly Congress insured that little legislation would come out. Attorney General Robert Kennedy used the Justice Department to force compliance with desegregation orders. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) sponsored a freedom ride of biracial teams to ride interstate busses in the South. Although the FBI and Justice Department knew of the plans, they were absent when mobs firebombed a bus and severely beat the Freedom Riders. There was more violence and no police protection at other stops. The Kennedy Administration was forced to mediate a safe conduct for the riders, though 300 people were arrested. A Justice Department petition led to new rules that effectively ended segregated interstate busses. But where the federal government was not present, segregationists could triumph. In Albany, Georgia local authorities kept white mobs
from running wild and kept police brutality down to a minimum. Even though Martin Luther King, Jr. was twice arrested, Albany remained as segregated as ever. But when the federal government intervened, as it did in the University of Mississippi, integration could take place.

**THE MOVEMENT AT HIGH TIDE** Civil Rights movement leaders looked to build the national consensus needed for new laws by broadening their base of support. In conjunction with the SCLC, local activists in Birmingham, Alabama planned a large desegregation campaign. Demonstrators, including Martin Luther King, Jr., filled the city’s jails. King drafted his *Letter From a Birmingham Jail* which presented the movement’s case before a wide audience. A children’s march attracted a wide TV audience which was horrified to see water cannons and snarling dogs break it up. A settlement was negotiated that desegregated businesses, though it was denounced by many southern whites. Violence erupted but was quelled by federal troops, Birmingham changed the nature of the civil rights movement by bringing in black unemployed and working poor for the first time.

The shifting public consensus led President Kennedy to appeal for civil rights legislation. A. Philip Randolph’s old idea of a march on Washington was revived, and despite SNCC’s frustration with the Kennedy Administration’s lack of support, the march presented a unified call for change and held up the dream of universal freedom and brotherhood. The assassination of John Kennedy threw a cloud over the movement as the new president, Lyndon Baines Johnson, had never been much of a friend to civil rights. But LBJ used his skills as a political insider to push through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that put a virtual end to Jim Crow.

In 1964 civil rights activists targeted Mississippi for a “freedom summer” that saw 900 volunteers come to open up this closed society. Two white activists and a local black activist were quickly killed. Tensions developed between white volunteers and black movement veterans. The project riveted national attention on Mississippi, though the movement’s strategy of challenging the regular Democratic Party’s delegation to the national convention brought only a token concession. With an overwhelming Democratic victory in the 1964 elections, movement leaders pushed for federal legislation to protect the right to vote. Frustrated with the limits of nonviolence and politics, many younger, civil rights activists were drawn to the vision of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. Malcolm ridiculed integrationist goals and urged black audiences to take pride in their African heritage and break free from white domination. He broke with the Nation of Islam, made a pilgrimage to Mecca, and returned to America with changed views. He sought common ground with the civil rights movement. He was murdered in 1965. Even in death, he continued to point to a new black consciousness.

Movement leaders had been working in the city of Selma, Alabama where whites had systematically kept blacks off the voting lists and brutally responded to protests. A planned march to Montgomery ended when police beat marchers, sending 50 to the hospital. A court injunction threatened the march. Just when it appeared the Selma campaign would fade, a white gang attacked a group of Northern whites who had come to help out, one of whom died. President Johnson addressed the nation and thoroughly identified himself with the civil rights cause, declaring “we shall overcome.” The march went forward. In August 1965 LBJ signed the Voting Rights Act which authorized federal supervision of voter registration in the South and led to a great leap in the number of black voters.
FORGOTTEN MINORITIES, 1945–65 The civil rights movement inspired other minorities to adopt more militant strategies. Mexican Americans had already formed groups to fight for their rights and had used the courts to challenge discrimination. Legal and illegal Mexican migration increased dramatically during and after WWII. During the 1950s, efforts to round up undocumented immigrants led to a denial of basic civil rights and a distrust of Anglos. Although Puerto Rican communities had been forming since the 1920s, the great migration came after WWII. Despite being citizens, Puerto Ricans faced both economic and cultural discrimination. In the 1960s and 1970s, the decline in manufacturing jobs and urban decay severely hit them. American Indians also experienced significant changes. During the 1950s, Congress passed a series of termination bills that ended tribal rights in return for cash payments and division of tribal assets. Indian activists challenged government policies leading to court decisions that reasserted the principle of tribal sovereignty. Reservation Indians remained trapped in poverty; Indians who had left the reservation found themselves losing much of their tribal identities. Urban Indian groups arose and focused on civil instead of tribal rights. During the 1950s, Congress removed the old ban against Japanese immigration and naturalization. In 1965, a new immigration law increased opportunities for Asians to immigrate to the United States. As a result, the demographics of the Asian-American population drastically changed.

CONCLUSION: FREE AT LAST? The civil rights movement transformed race relations, but was unable to address poverty and institutional racism.

Lecture Suggestions

1. Make the connection between the changes that had occurred during WWII and the emergence of the civil rights movement. Specifically, connect the growth of a northern, urban black population with the changing political climate in the post-war era. Connect the struggle against Nazism and the revulsion with American-style racism on the part of some members of the white community (particularly President Truman).

2. Students tend to see the civil rights movement as the work of charismatic individuals like Martin Luther King. Yet as the chapter emphasizes, ordinary men and women at the grass-roots level carried out much of the real work. A lecture that shows how ordinary people like Rosa Parks became extraordinary actors in this drama should give students a clearer sense of how the movement actually grew.

3. One way of looking at the civil rights movement is to examine its relationship to the various administrations in Washington. A lecture that examines how Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson each responded to the movement should give students a clearer sense of the complexities involved.

Discussion Questions

1. How did World War II influence the development of the civil rights movement? What changes occurred in the black community? What changes occurred in the white community?
2. Why did Martin Luther King emerge as a great civil rights leader? What qualities did he possess?

3. The text refers to the Albany struggle as a failure and the Birmingham struggle as a success. What did the movement need for successful struggles? What was the role of the federal government?

4. How would you evaluate the roles of presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson?

5. Why did the civil rights movement concentrate on the South? Weren’t the problems just as severe in the North?

Out of Class Activity

The civil rights movement involved communities north and south in the struggle for change. Most communities had some incident or else had some veteran of the movement. Interviews with law enforcement personnel, reporters from the 1960s, clergy, etc. should reveal a sense of what the movement looked like to the average person.

If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject


Audio-Visual Aids

One of the finest historical series is “Eyes on the Prize” (1986, 1990). The first six episodes cover the movement up through 1965 and concentrate on showing the development of the southern civil rights struggle.

“Martin Luther King, Jr.” Covers King’s life and career, belief in nonviolent protest, and his impact on the civil rights movement. (Color, 24 minutes, 1983)

“Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker” One of the most prominent female civil rights activists tells her story. “Fundi” is Swahili for a person who passes skills from one generation to another. (Color, 45 minutes, 1986)