The Rising Tide of Discontent

In the early 1940s, a public opinion survey revealed that the vast majority of white Americans believed blacks were content with their social and economic conditions. They were quite wrong. Although the passage of the [Thirteenth Amendment](http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=40) in 1865 brought an end to the institution of slavery in the United States, black Americans had learned again and again, year after year, that the definition of "freedom" depended upon many things: the goals of those in political power, the national economy, international pressures, the mood of the nation, and the strength of the black masses and their leaders to influence all of the above. Since Radical Reconstruction, the nation's first great experiment in interracial democracy, African-Americans discovered that federal commitment to black suffrage, employment, land ownership, and civil rights was fleeting. Blacks also found that the former Confederacy sought to limit their confidence, intellectual development, and economic success.

By the turn of the century, little had changed. In the South, where nearly [90% of the nation's black population](http://www.inmotionaame.org/gallery/detail.cfm?migration=8&topic=1&id=8_002M&type=map) lived, [Jim Crow laws](http://www.nps.gov/archive/malu/documents/jim_crow_laws.htm) limited interaction between the races in parks, libraries, [billiard halls](http://z.about.com/d/afroamhistory/1/7/J/3/billardhall.jpg), schools, [restaurants](http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/immigration/whites-only.gif), [bathrooms](http://z.about.com/d/afroamhistory/1/7/4/3/whiteladiesonly.jpg), [bus stations](http://z.about.com/d/afroamhistory/1/7/5/3/waitingroomtn.jpg), markets,[theaters](http://z.about.com/d/afroamhistory/1/7/F/3/theater.jpg), bars, [hotels](http://z.about.com/d/afroamhistory/1/7/3/3/hotelclark.jpg), pools, and, even, brothels. White supremacy in the region still depended largely upon the suppression of black ambition, and white southerners used economic reprisals, terror, and [ritual lynching](http://www.withoutsanctuary.org/) to prevent blacks from voting, owning property, and expressing any desire to challenge the tradition of segregation. In the North, blacks also confronted discrimination in employment and housing, police harassment, and a judicial system that favored whites.

Labor demands created by World War I opened up new well-paid positions for blacks in northern industry. In the greatest single population shift in the nation's history, nearly [2 million black migrants left the South for northern urban centers](http://www.inmotionaame.org/migrations/landing.cfm?migration=8) in the years during and following the war. But despite black commitment to the war effort, the nation's atmosphere of racial intolerance remained stifling as whites in both the North and the South feared black competition for economic and educational opportunities.[Between 1918 and 1927](http://www.autopsis.org/foot/lynchdates2.html), more than 400 blacks were lynched, at least 42 of them burned alive.[5](http://www.shmoop.com/civil-rights-desegregation/citations.html#5)

Waging the "Double V" Campaign

By 1940, African-Americans had more access to rights considered essential to the American experience—political, material, and civil—but they were by no means equal under the law. Although [black leaders](http://www.naacp.org/about/history/dubois/) during World War I had implored their people to set aside grievances for the sake of national unity, black leadership during the Second World War declared a battle on *two* fronts, a ["Double V" campaign](http://edcommunity.apple.com/ali/story.php?itemID=13243)—"victory over our enemies at home and victory over our enemies on the battlefields abroad."[6](http://www.shmoop.com/civil-rights-desegregation/citations.html#6)Organizers such as [A. Philip Randolph](http://www.georgemeany.org/archives/apr.html) and [Bayard Rustin](http://rustin.org/) personified this new way of thinking and rallied black citizens to demand greater rights, equal privileges, and federal protections against violence.

At the same time, [World War II](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/world-war-ii.html) did much to destroy the legitimacy of racism as a respectable ideology of civilized society. The central pillar of Adolf Hitler's worldview had been the absolute racial supremacy of the "Aryan" German people, and the Nazi regime's maniacal pursuit of racial "purity" ended in modern history's worst genocide—the Holocaust, in which Hitler's minions orchestrated the murder of six million European Jews. Before [World War II](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/world-war-ii.html), both anti-Semitism in particular and racism in general had been widely accepted, "normal" features of life in most Western nations, including the United States. But the manifest evil of the Nazis' crimes against humanity generated worldwide horror and disgust, forcing people everywhere to confront the nightmarish consequences of aggressive ideologies of white superiority. Hitler gave anti-Semitism (and racism more broadly) a bad name.

Freedom Abroad

The world that entered World War II was, in many ways, not the same world that emerged from it. From the late 1940s through the 1960s, nationalist struggles in Africa and Asia—in India, Vietnam, [Ghana](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/6382237.stm), Senegal, and [Kenya](http://www.kenyalogy.com/eng/info/histo13.html), among others—led to the decline of several European empires. One by one, nearly all colonized nations in Africa gained their independence. For African-Americans, the liberation struggles of black people abroad were both inspiring and galling, in light of continued oppression at home. [John Lewis](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/profiles/18_lewis.html) of the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/about_king/encyclopedia/enc_SNCC.htm) explains, "They were getting their freedom, and we still didn't have ours in what we believed was a free country. We couldn't even get a hamburger and a Coke at the soda fountain."

The Cold War and Race

The United States, too, had transformed after World War II. The nation entered into a[Cold War](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/cold-war-causes-origins.html) with the Soviet Union and the federal government found that to secure allies it needed to commit itself to progress in race relations, or at least to the illusion of progress. Even the United States Supreme Court took foreign concerns into consideration when deciding cases involving racial inequalities. In its monumental[ruling](http://www.nationalcenter.org/brown.html) in 1954 against school segregation in [*Brown v. Board of Education*](http://www.oyez.org/cases/1950-1959/1952/1952_1/), the Court agreed with the [NAACP](http://www.naacp.org/) lawyers who argued that each and every decision regarding the lives of African-Americans could have great repercussions in the Cold War world. "Racial discrimination furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills," the Court wrote, "and it raises doubt even among friendly nations as to the intensity of our devotion to the democratic faith."[7](http://www.shmoop.com/civil-rights-desegregation/citations.html#7) The nation's reputation was at stake, and anyone who cared about national security could no longer ignore racial injustice or think of it simply as a regional problem or a personal inconvenience.

"There Comes a Time..."

But for many, racial justice was not about winning the [Cold War](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/cold-war-mccarthyism-red-scare.html) or protecting America's international reputation. "There comes a time," young clergyman [Martin Luther King, Jr.](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/mlkpapers/) proclaimed, "that people get tired... tired of being segregated and humiliated; tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression."[8](http://www.shmoop.com/civil-rights-desegregation/citations.html#8) For thousands upon thousands of regular people, the struggle for civil rights meant the chance to increase their earning potential, register to vote, attend quality schools, and ultimately improve their communities and create a more promising future for themselves.

Strength in Numbers

In December 1955, these goals motivated some 50,000 working men and women to boycott the Montgomery city buses for more than a year. For a total of 381 days, the black community of Montgomery, along with sympathetic white citizens, organized carpools, rode in taxis, and walked miles to and from their destinations to protest bus segregation laws, which required black passengers to sit in rows in the rear of the vehicle, or to stand if white passengers needed seats. Boycott leaders [Jo Ann Robinson, Rosa Parks,](http://www.crmvet.org/crmpics/band/robinsonjoann.jpg)[Ralph Abernathy](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3f/Ralph_Abernathy.jpg), and the charismatic [King](http://www.blackpast.org/files/blackpast_images/King_Martin_Luther_Library_of_Congress.jpg%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)convinced black southerners to put their jobs and their lives on the line all for the hope of just one citywide victory. As these leaders would promise, one successful, brilliantly organized campaign to force a single southern city to reform its [Jim Crow](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/jim-crow-in-america.html) laws would be only the beginning of a massive nonviolent movement to finish what Radical Reconstruction had begun nearly a century before.

A Young People's Movement

Not long after the bus boycott, a younger generation of blacks became determined to get involved in the civil rights struggle. Young adults like [Anne Moody](http://books.google.com/books?id=gHh7bPqJw6UC&dq=Anne+Moody&ei=OPjzR5zQJKautgOHi_2oDQ&client=firefox-a&pgis=1), Franklin McCain, and Joseph McNeil who had come of age in the wake of the [Brown v. Board decision](http://www.nationalcenter.org/brown.html), the Montgomery boycott, and the [vicious murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till](http://www.fnewsmagazine.com/2005-feb/current/images/emmett_till_02.jpg), were anxious to tap their own courage to tackle white supremacy. It wouldn't be easy. [Diane Nash](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/profiles/25_nash.html), a student who led one of the first sit-in protests to desegregate lunch counters in the South, reveals, "With what we were doing, trying to abolish segregation, we were coming up against governors of seven states, judges, politicians, businessmen."[9](http://www.shmoop.com/civil-rights-desegregation/citations.html#9) Black and white students conducted [sit-ins](http://www.sitins.com/index.shtml) at restaurants, play-ins at parks, swim-ins at public pools and beaches, bowl-ins at bowling alleys, and read-ins at libraries. They were often met with [harassment and violence from angry whites](http://www.usm.edu/crdp/html/cd/M319-52b.jpg), but they chose to remain nonviolent and didn't strike back. By the end of 1960, tens of thousands of young people all across the country had participated in protest demonstrations against racial discrimination ushering in a decade of fierce political activism.

Money Talks in Birmingham

In January of 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the [SCLC](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/profiles/48_sclc.html) convened to discuss the tremendous success of the nonviolent strategies used by working people in Birmingham and by students throughout the nation, and decided to launch a similar campaign to desegregate businesses in downtown Birmingham. By May, more than[2,000 demonstrators](http://www-tc.pbs.org/wnet/historyofus/web14/features/see_it_now/images/1960.0018.jpg?Log=0) had been jailed, and images of resolute protesters—young and old—being [attacked by police dogs](http://www.binghamton.edu/ctah/student/2mohr/2mohrphoto.jpg), beaten with nightsticks, and [blasted with fire hoses](http://www.voicesofcivilrights.org/photoGallery/images/AARP_photo_gallery_04.jpg) appeared in national newspapers, magazines, and television news broadcasts. These dramatic confrontations, coupled with the loss of customers, forced the businesses to agree to desegregate their stores and hire black workers—a profound victory for the movement.

The March on Washington

Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement refused to allow [Kennedy's promise](http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/13/documents/jfk.civil/) to go unfulfilled. On 28 August 1963, a quarter of a million black and white Americans traveled to the nation's capital to call for the passage of the civil rights bill, as well as a plan to reduce unemployment, and an increase in the national minimum wage. Among the [sea of protesters,](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e6/March_on_Washington_edit.jpg)[picket signs](http://www.loc.gov/rr/mss/guide/ms058070.jpg) read, "Jobs and Freedom for Every American," "NO U.S. Dough to Help Jim Crow," "We March for First Class Citizenship *NOW*," and "Seek the Freedom in 1963 Promised in 1863." From the [Lincoln Memorial](http://www.nps.gov/linc/), dozens of civil rights, labor, and church leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke to the crowd, chanted freedom slogans, led people in song, and called for cooperation in the struggle against oppression. A. Philip Randolph, as the chief organizer of the march, would, at last, witness a demonstration for economic and racial justice just like the one he had conceived of over two decades before.

Still Seeking Freedom

But, as the years following the summer of 1963 would reveal, the movement had its limitations, and tensions brewed within. Plus, as economic disparities between blacks and whites replaced desegregation as the key issue in the movement, goals had to be rethought, strategies reassessed, and alliances reconsidered. The movement for civil rights would transform itself in the mid-1960s into something quite different from what it had been before the famous March on Washington.

* [BACK](http://www.shmoop.com/civil-rights-desegregation/)

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Deep Roots of a Landmark Decision

The landmark Supreme Court [ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*](http://www.nationalcenter.org/brown.html), which in 1954 delivered a decisive blow to legal segregation in the United States, was rooted in a long line of legal battles over educational opportunities. The famous case marked the dramatic culmination of a strategic assault that began in 1848 when [Benjamin Roberts filed suit against Massachusetts](http://brownvboard.org/research/handbook/sources/roberts/roberts.htm) for refusing to allow his five-year-old daughter to enroll in a local all-white elementary school.[13](http://www.shmoop.com/civil-rights-desegregation/citations.html#13) Roberts's loss would be the first of many setbacks in the fight for equal education for black Americans, but this brave legal challenge provided an example for dozens of plaintiffs who would testify to the inadequacies and injustices of segregated education.

By the 1930s, each state that followed the doctrine of "separate but equal" provided all-white elementary and high schools as well as all-black schools. By accommodating both black and white children, state governments fulfilled their responsibilities under[Jim Crow](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/jim-crow-in-america.html) law...[or so it seemed](http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/separate-but-equal.html). Few of these states had constructed separate university and professional schools for non-whites under the notion that very few blacks matriculated beyond high school. For those few graduates wishing to continue their education, governments allotted funds to send them to out-of-state schools. Those committed to dismantling school segregation began by arguing that these kinds of loopholes violated federal law.

In 1936, the [University of Missouri School of Law](http://law.missouri.edu/) refused to admit Lloyd Lionel Gaines, an African-American college graduate, on account of his race. The state of Missouri promised to construct a law school at the all-black Lincoln University and advised the 25-year-old Gaines to apply there instead. The new law school would take years to construct and Gaines, if granted admission, would have to wait indefinitely to begin his program. The state offered him only one additional choice: he could accept a scholarship to attend a school outside Missouri. Gaines refused the funding, and sued the state. [He lost his case](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_gaines.html), just as he expected he would.

[Charles Houston](http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/3-organized/charles-houston.html), a black veteran of World War I and one of the few African Americans to graduate from [Harvard Law School](http://www.harvard.edu/), chose to help Lloyd Gaines appeal his case to the United States Supreme Court. Houston, leading the [legal team of the NAACP](http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/3-organized/naacp-legal-team.html), believed success against the state of Missouri would set an important precedent against the "separate but equal" doctrine instituted by the 1896 *[Plessy v. Ferguson](http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=52" \t "_blank)*[decision](http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=52" \t "_blank). He intended to convince the Supreme Court that Missouri had violated*Plessy* because it did not in fact have "separate but equal" colleges available for black applicants, and without adequate funding to build new segregated facilities, the state would be forced to admit non-white students into its all-white schools. Houston understood that state governments could not afford to maintain a truly "separate but equal" system of colleges and universities. The law could not be followed and Houston planned to exploit that fact to "make plain the inequality" in access to education for blacks and whites.

In 1938, the Supreme Court heard arguments in [*Gaines v. Canada*](http://www.brownat50.org/brownCases/PreBrownCases/GainesvCanada1938.htm) and ruled in favor of Gaines, ordering his admission to the University of Missouri. Each state was responsible for providing equal access to legal education to its white and black residents and could not avoid fulfilling that obligation by simply sending non-white law students out of state or forcing them to wait for the construction of new schools. By denying black students the same opportunities created for white students, Missouri had violated Gaines's ["constitutional privilege."](http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/index.php/Equal_protection)

Several years following the *Gaines* decision, Heman Sweatt, a black mail carrier from Houston, Texas, sued the University of Texas School of Law for denying him entrance on the basis of race. Like Gaines, Sweatt lost his initial case. Around the same time, George McLaurin, a 68-year-old black professor seeking admission to a doctoral program, learned that his acceptance to the University of Oklahoma was to be under[Jim Crow](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/jim-crow-in-america.html) arrangements. McLaurin would be relegated to a small room cordoned off from the regular classroom, he would be required to work in a segregated space in the library, and he would be forced to eat at a designated table and only at a time when white students would not be using the university cafeteria.

In 1950, with the help of the [NAACP](http://www.naacp.org/) and Thurgood Marshall, one of Charles Houston's best students, [Sweatt](http://www.brownat50.org/brownCases/PreBrownCases/SweattPainter%28Texas%29.htm%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) and [McLaurin](http://www.brownat50.org/brownCases/PreBrownCases/McLaurinOklahoma1950.htm%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) brought their cases before the United States Supreme Court. In two consecutive rulings, the Court stated that each school had violated the Constitution. The University of Texas could not possibly create an all-black law school equal to its all-white institution, the Court said, and so Sweatt was to be awarded admission. And the segregation practiced by the University of Oklahoma's Graduate School of Education, the Court declared, violated the [Fourteenth Amendment](http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=43), which gave all Americans equal protection under the law.

*Brown v. Board of Education*

Victory in both the Sweatt and the McLaurin cases opened the door for civil rights lawyers to challenge segregation in elementary and high schools. In 1954, Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP gathered together five class action lawsuits, each calling for an end to segregated education for children. Under the title [*Brown et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka et al.*](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/brown/), the Supreme Court heard the testimonies of nearly 200 plaintiffs from Delaware, Kansas, South Carolina, Washington, D.C., and Virginia who revealed the fatal flaws of the doctrine of "separate but equal." In its final ruling, the Court agreed: "To separate [Negro students] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way very unlikely ever to be undone." Justice Earl Warren led a unanimous decision to declare "separate but equal" unconstitutional, and in one fell swoop the United States Supreme Court shattered the legal rationale upon which racial discrimination had been protected.[14](http://www.shmoop.com/civil-rights-desegregation/citations.html#14)

Segregationists React and Resist

A poll taken in 1955 revealed that over 80% of white Southerners [opposed desegregation](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/brown/images/br0168s.jpg). Segregationist political leaders were especially vocal in their abhorrence of the [*Brown v. Board* ruling](http://www.nationalcenter.org/brown.html). White southern leaders referred to the day the Court delivered its decision as "Black Monday," a reference to the term "Black Tuesday" which marked the infamous Stock Market crash of 1929 and the beginning of the [Great Depression](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/the-great-depression.html). "Ending segregation," Governor James F. Byrnes of South Carolina warned, "would mark the beginning of the end of civilization in the South as we have known it."[15](http://www.shmoop.com/civil-rights-desegregation/citations.html#15) Governor Herman Talmadge of Georgia deplored the Court's ruling in favor of integration and remarked that it would result in intermarriage and the["mongrelization of the races."](http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/family/cruz-berson.html)[16](http://www.shmoop.com/civil-rights-desegregation/citations.html#16) Alabama Senator Walter Givhan asked whether the real motives of the NAACP lawyers were "to open the bedroom doors of our white women to Negro men."[17](http://www.shmoop.com/civil-rights-desegregation/citations.html#17) Even President Dwight Eisenhower, who spent much of his childhood in the southern state of Texas, said "I am convinced that the Supreme Court decision set back progress in the South at least fifteen years."[18](http://www.shmoop.com/civil-rights-desegregation/citations.html#18)

In March of 1956, South Carolina Senator [Strom Thurmond](http://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/06/26/thurmond.obit/index.html) and Virginia Senator Harry Byrd drafted a document on behalf of segregationist leaders in the South. ["The Southern Manifesto"](http://www.strom.clemson.edu/strom/manifesto.html) declared the southern white elites' opposition to the Supreme Court decision. "We commend the motives of those States," they wrote, "which have declared the intention to resist forced integration by any lawful means." These leaders managed to successfully resist integration for several years following the Court's ruling.[19](http://www.shmoop.com/civil-rights-desegregation/citations.html#19)

Without All Deliberate Speed

In its original ruling, the Supreme Court stated no specific plan of action, no timeline, and no instructions for implementing integration in schools. It merely informed [Jim Crow states](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/themap/map.html) that desegregation should be carried out "with all deliberate speed," which for black citizens and civil rights workers amounted to little more than an empty promise. As Charles Houston remarked, ["Nobody needs to explain to a Negro the difference between the law in books and the law in action."](http://www.npr.org/news/specials/brown50/)[20](http://www.shmoop.com/civil-rights-desegregation/citations.html#20) Because implementation was in the hands of each school district, and because many southern school districts and local governments remained controlled by segregationist whites, most schools in the South continued to practice segregation well into the 1960s. Nearly a decade after the [*Brown v. Board* decision](http://www.nationalcenter.org/brown.html), a mere 8% of southern schools had been fully integrated.

Despite these limitations, the *Brown v. Board* decision did have far-reaching effects in that it proved to civil rights leaders and to all of black America that legal battles against [Jim Crow](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/jim-crow-in-america.html) could be waged and won. Implementation would be difficult, but with the support of the federal government, the American public, and local citizens, these victories could be enjoyed.

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