

Brief Timeline of the American Civil Rights Movement (1954 - 1965)

1954 - Brown v. Board of Education: In the 1950's, school segregation was widely accepted throughout the nation. In fact, law in most Southern states required it. In 1952, the Supreme Court heard a number of school-segregation cases, including Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. This case decided unanimously in 1954 that segregation was unconstitutional, overthrowing the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson ruling that had set the "separate but equal" precedent.

1955 - Mississippi and the Emmett Till Case: The Supreme Court decision fueled violent segregationist backlash against black citizens by gangs of whites who committed beatings, burnings, and lynchings, usually with impunity, since all-white juries notoriously refused to convict whites for killing blacks. "The usual reasons for murder ranged from stealing food to talking back to a white person" (Williams 39). However, in 1955, two black men were murdered for trying to register black voters. But the case that drew the most national publicity was the murder of 14 year old Emmett Till, a teenager from Chicago who was visiting relatives in Mississippi that summer. On a dare from his pals, Emmett spoke flirtatiously to a white woman, saying "Bye, Baby" as he left a local store. Several nights later the woman's husband and her brother forced Emmett into their car and drove away. Till's body was found three days later in the Tallhatchie River. There was barbed wire around his neck, a bullet in his skull, one eye gouged out, and his forehead was crushed on one side. Despite overwhelming evidence of guilt based on eye-witness testimony, Bryant and Milan were found "not guilty" by an all-white, all-male jury. "The murder of Emmett Till had a powerful impact on a new generation of blacks. It was this generation, those who were adolescents when Till was killed, that would soon demand justice and freedom in a way unknown in America before" (Williams 57).

1955 - Montgomery Bus Boycott: Rosa Parks, a 43-year-old black seamstress, was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to give up her seat near the front of a bus to a white man. The following night, fifty leaders of the Negro community met at Dexter Ave. Baptist Church to discuss the issue. Among them was the young minister, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The leaders organized the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which would deprive the bus company of 65% of its income, and cost Dr. King a \$500 fine or 386 days in jail. He paid the fine, and eight months later, the Supreme Court decided, based on the school segregation cases, that bus segregation violated the constitution.

1957 - Desegregation at Little Rock: Little Rock Central High School was to begin the 1957 school year desegregated. On September 2, the night before the first day of school, Governor Faubus announced that he had ordered the Arkansas National Guard to monitor the school the next day. When a group of nine black students arrived at Central High on September 3, they were kept from entering by the National Guardsmen. On September 20, judge Davies granted an injunction against Governor Faubus and three days later the group of nine students returned to Central High School. Although the students were not physically injured, a mob of 1,000 townspeople prevented them from remaining at school. Finally, President Eisenhower ordered 1,000 paratroopers and 10,000 National Guardsmen to Little Rock, and on September 25, Central High School was desegregated.

1960 - Sit-in Campaign: After having been refused service at the lunch counter of a Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina, Joseph McNeill, a Negro college student, returned the next day with three classmates to sit at the counter until they were served. They were not served. The four students returned to the lunch counter each day. When an article in the New York Times drew attention to the students' protest, more students, both black and white, joined them, and students across the nation were inspired to launch similar protests. "In a span of two weeks, there were sit-ins in eleven cities" (Williams 129). Despite beatings, being doused with ammonia, heavy court

fines, arrest and imprisonment, new waves of students appeared at lunch counters to continue the movement through February and March. "By late March, the police had orders not to arrest the demonstrators because of the national publicity the sit-ins were attracting" (Williams 133). Senator John F. Kennedy, one of the candidates in the presidential election that year, sent a statement to the sit-in students in Atlanta expressing the sentiment that "they have shown that the new way for Americans to stand up for their rights is to sit down" (qtd in Williams 135). This represented one of the few times that either presidential candidate addressed a civil rights issue during the campaign.

1961 – Freedom Rides: In 1961, busloads of volunteers of mixed races waged a cross-country campaign to try to end the segregation of bus terminals. Their plan was to test the Supreme Court's ruling that segregated seating on interstate buses and trains was unconstitutional. Their legal action, however, was met with violence at many stops along the way. Local segregation laws were frequently used to arrest and try the freedom riders. But as one group was arrested, more arrived to take their place. Throughout the summer, more than 300 Freedom Riders traveled through the deep south in an effort to integrate the bus terminals. When freedom riders were savagely beaten in Montgomery, Alabama, one of President Kennedy's representatives was also knocked unconscious and left lying in the street for half an hour. Kennedy felt this gave him justification to send in 600 federal marshals in a showdown between the state of Alabama and the federal government. After this confrontation, Kennedy made a deal with Democratic governors and congressmen who held power in the South. He would not send in federal troops as long as they made sure there was no mob violence against the riders.

1962 – Mississippi Riot: President Kennedy ordered Federal Marshals to escort James Meredith, the first black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi, to campus. A riot broke out and before the National Guard could arrive to reinforce the marshals, two students were killed.

1963 – Birmingham: Birmingham, Alabama was one of the most severely segregated cities in the 1960s. Black men and women held sit-ins at lunch counters where they were refused service, and "kneel-ins" on church steps where they were denied entrance. Hundreds of demonstrators were fined and imprisoned.

Birmingham: April 12, 1963: "Public Statement by Eight Alabama Clergymen."

Birmingham: In May 1963, Dr. King, the Reverend Abernathy and the Reverend Shuttlesworth lead a protest march in Birmingham. The protestors were met with policemen and dogs. The three ministers were arrested and taken to Southside Jail. Dr. King was held in solitary confinement for three days, during which he wrote, smuggled out of jail, and had printed his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," a profoundly moving justification for the moral necessity of non-violent resistance to unjust laws.

Birmingham: In September 1963, the Ku Klux Klan bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, killing four little girls who, dressed in the "Youth Sunday" best, were preparing to lead the 11:00 am adult service. The bombing came without warning. Since 1911, this church had served as the center of life for Birmingham's African American community. By the end of the day, riots and fires had broken out throughout Birmingham and another 2 teenagers were dead. This murderous act shocked the nation and galvanized the civil rights movement.

1963 – August 28th March on Washington: Despite worries that few people would attend and that violence could erupt, civil rights organizers proceeded with this historic event that would come to symbolize the civil rights movement. A reporter from the Times wrote, "no one could ever remember an invading army quite as gentle as the two hundred thousand civil rights marchers who occupied Washington." Here, Dr. King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech.

1963 – November 22nd Assassination of President Kennedy. Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson, a Texan, became the next President of the United States.

1964 – April 3rd: Malcolm X gives his speech "The Ballot or the Bullet" at the Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio. The Cleveland chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) sponsored the event.

1964 – April 8th: Malcolm X gives his speech, "The Black Revolution," at a meeting sponsored by the Militant Labor Forum at Palm Gardens in New York.

1964 – July 2nd The Civil Rights Act of 1964: In his first address to Congress and the nation as president, Johnson called for passage of the civil rights bill as a monument to the fallen Kennedy. While the House of Representatives passed the measure by a lopsided 290–130 vote, every one knew that the real battle would be in the Senate, whose rules had allowed southerners in the past to mount filibusters that had effectively killed nearly all civil rights legislation. But Johnson had the civil rights leaders mount a massive lobbying campaign, including inundating the Capitol with religious leaders of all faiths and colors. The strategy paid off, and in June the Senate voted to close debate; a few weeks later, it passed the most important piece of civil rights legislation in the nation's history, and on July 2, 1964, President Johnson signed it into law. The heart of the law deals with public accommodations, so that African Americans could no longer be excluded from restaurants, hotels and other public facilities.

1965 -- February 21 Assassination of Malcolm X at a rally in New York.

1965 Selma: Outraged over the killing of a demonstrator by a state trooper in Marion, Alabama, the black community of Marion decided to hold a march. Martin Luther King agreed to lead the marchers on Sunday, March 7, from Selma to Montgomery, the state capital, where they would appeal directly to governor Wallace to stop police brutality and call attention to their struggle for suffrage. When Governor Wallace refused to allow the march, Dr. King went to Washington to speak with President Johnson, delaying the demonstration until March 8. However, the people of Selma could not wait and they began the march on Sunday. When the marchers reached the city line, they found a posse of state troopers waiting for them. As the demonstrators crossed the bridge leading out of Selma, they were ordered to disperse, but the troopers did not wait for their warning to be headed. They immediately attacked the crowd of people who had bowed their heads in prayer. Using tear gas and batons, the troopers chased the demonstrators to a black housing project, where they continued to beat the demonstrators as well as residents of the project who had not been at the march.

Bloody Sunday received national attention, and numerous marches were organized in response. Martin Luther King led a march to the Selma Bridge that Tuesday, during which one protestor was killed. Finally, with President Johnson's permission, Dr. King led a successful march from Selma to Montgomery on March 25. President Johnson gave a rousing speech to congress concerning civil rights as a result of Bloody Sunday, and passed the Voting Rights Act within that same year. John Lewis, former freedom rider and voting rights registration organizer, and one of the young men

beaten on the Selma Bridge that Sunday, currently serves as a U.S. Congressman for the State of Georgia.

1965 -- Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibits literacy tests and poll taxes which had been used to prevent blacks from voting. According to a report of the Bureau of the Census from 1982, in 1960 there were 22,000 African-Americans registered to vote in Mississippi, but in 1966 the number had risen to 175,000. Alabama went from 66,000 African-American registered voters in 1960 to 250,000 in 1966. South Carolina's African-American registered voters went from 58,000 to 191,000 in the same time period.

1968 - April 4 Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee.

1968 - June 5th Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. Robert Kennedy had inherited the hopes of civil rights advocates after the loss of Martin Luther King, Jr. Presidential candidate Kennedy was shot at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, California, just minutes after claiming victory in that state's crucial Democratic primary.