Civil Rights Movement

Martin Luther King, Jr. (centre), with other civil-rights supporters at a march on Washington, D.C.

In the United States, mass movement starting in the late 1950s that, through the application of nonviolent protest action, broke the pattern of racially segregated public facilities in the South and achieved the most important breakthrough in equal-rights legislation for blacks since the Reconstruction period (1865-77).

Denied constitutional guarantees (1787) because of their mainly slave status at the founding of the republic, black Americans were first promised fundamental citizenship rights in the 13th-15th constitutional amendments (1865-70; see Reconstruction). The Civil Rights Act of 1875 required equal accommodations for blacks with whites in public facilities (other than schools), but this legislation was effectively voided by the Supreme Court in 1883. By 1900, 18 states of the North and West had legislated public policies against racial discrimination, but in the South new laws eroded the franchise (see grandfather clause) and reinforced segregation practices (see Jim Crow Law), while the U.S. Supreme Court upheld "separate but equal" facilities for the races in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), thus legitimizing the segregation of blacks from whites.

During World War II, progress was made in outlawing discrimination in defense industries (1941) and after the war in desegregating the armed forces (1948). During the late 1940s and early 1950s, lawyers for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) pressed a series of important cases before the Supreme Court in which they argued that segregation meant inherently unequal (and inadequate) educational and other public facilities for blacks. These cases culminated in the Court's landmark decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kan. (May 17, 1954), in which it declared that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional. This historic decision was to stimulate a mass movement on the part of blacks and white sympathizers to try to end the segregationist practices and racial inequalities that were firmly entrenched across the nation and particularly in the South. The movement was strongly resisted by many whites in the South and elsewhere.

After a black woman, Rosa Parks, was arrested for refusing to move to the Negro section of a bus in Montgomery, Ala. (Dec. 1, 1955), blacks staged a one-day local boycott of the bus system to protest her arrest. Fusing these protest elements with the historic force of the Negro churches, a local Baptist minister, Martin Luther King, Jr., succeeded in transforming a spontaneous racial protest into a massive resistance movement, led from 1957 by his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). After a protracted boycott of the Montgomery bus company forced it to desegregate its facilities, picketing and boycotting spread rapidly to other communities. During the period from 1955 to 1960, some progress was made toward integrating schools and other public facilities in the upper South and the border states, but the Deep South remained adamant in its opposition to most desegregation measures.

In 1960 the sit-in movement (largely under the auspices of the newly formed Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; SNCC) was launched at Greensboro, N.C., when black college students insisted on service at a local segregated lunch counter. Patterning its techniques on the nonviolent methods of Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi, the movement spread across the nation, forcing the desegregation of department stores, supermarkets, libraries, and movie theatres. In May 1961 the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) sent "Freedom Riders" of both races through the South and elsewhere to test and break down segregated accommodations in interstate transportation. By September it was estimated that more than 70,000 students had participated in the movement, with approximately 3,600 arrested; more than 100 cities in 20 states had been affected. The movement reached its climax in August 1963 with a massive march on Washington, D.C., to protest racial discrimination and demonstrate support for major civil-rights legislation that was pending in Congress.

The federal government under presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-61) and John F. Kennedy had been reluctant to vigorously enforce the Brown decision when this entailed directly confronting the resistance of
Southern whites. In 1961-63 President Kennedy won a following in the black community by encouraging the movement's leaders, but Kennedy's administration lacked the political capacity to persuade Congress to pass new legislation guaranteeing integration and equal rights. After President Kennedy's assassination (November 1963), Congress, under the prodding of President Lyndon B. Johnson, in 1964 passed the Civil Rights Act. This was the most far-reaching civil rights bill in the nation's history (indeed, in world history), forbidding discrimination in public accommodations and threatening to withhold federal funds from communities that persisted in maintaining segregated schools. It was followed in 1965 by the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the enforcement of which eradicated the tactics previously used in the South to disenfranchise black voters. This act led to drastic increases in the numbers of black registered voters in the South, with a comparable increase in the numbers of blacks holding elective offices there.

Up until 1966 the Civil Rights Movement had united widely disparate elements in the black community along with their white supporters and sympathizers, but in that year signs of radicalism began to appear in the movement as younger blacks became impatient with the rate of change and dissatisfied with purely nonviolent methods of protest. This new militancy split the ranks of the movement's leaders and also alienated some white sympathizers, a process that was accelerated by a wave of rioting in the black ghettos of several major cities in 1965-67. After the assassination of King (April 1968) and further black rioting in the cities, the movement as a cohesive effort disintegrated, with a broad spectrum of leadership advocating different approaches and varying degrees of militancy.

In the years that followed, many civil rights leaders sought to achieve greater direct political power through elective office, and they sought to achieve more substantive economic and educational gains through affirmative-action programs that compensated for past discrimination in job hiring and college admissions. During the later 1970s and the '80s the civil rights movement was less militant but still persevering.

RACIAL SEGREGATION

the practice of restricting people to certain circumscribed areas of residence or to separate institutions (e.g., schools, churches) and facilities (parks, playgrounds, restaurants, restrooms) on the basis of race or alleged race. Racial segregation provides a means of maintaining the economic advantages and superior social status of the politically dominant group, and in recent times it has been employed primarily by white populations to maintain their ascendancy over other groups by means of legal and social colour bars. Historically, however, various conquerors—among them Asian Mongols, African Bantus, and American Aztecs—have practiced discrimination involving the segregation of subject races.

Racial segregation has appeared in all parts of the world where there are multiracial communities, except where racial amalgamation has occurred on a large scale, as in Hawaii and Brazil. In such countries there has been occasional social discrimination but not legal segregation. In the Southern states of the United States, on the other hand, legal segregation in public facilities was current from the late 19th century into the 1950s. (See Jim Crow Law.) The Civil Rights Movement was initiated by Southern blacks in the 1950s and '60s to break the prevailing pattern of racial segregation. This movement spurred the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which contained strong provisions against discrimination and segregation in voting, education, and the use of public facilities.

Elsewhere, racial segregation was practiced with the greatest rigour in South Africa, where, under the apartheid system, it was an official government policy from 1950 until the early 1990s.

Copyright © 1994-2000 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

N.A.A.C.P.[ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People ]

(naacp), interracial American organization created to work for the abolition of segregation and discrimination in housing, education, employment, voting, and transportation; to oppose racism; and to ensure blacks their
constitutional rights. The NAACP was created in 1909 with the merging of the Niagara Movement, a group of young blacks led by W.E.B. Du Bois, and a group of concerned whites.

Since its founding, the NAACP has been most successful in the areas of legal redress. Other areas of activity have included political action to secure enactment of civil-rights laws, programs of education and public information to win popular support, and direct action to achieve specific goals. In 1939 the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund was established independently of the NAACP to act as the legal arm of the Civil Rights Movement, and it was the NAACP’s legal council that carried to the Supreme Court the case (Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka) that resulted in the high court’s landmark 1954 school-desegregation decision. The organization moved its headquarters from New York City to Baltimore in 1986.

Copyright © 1994-2000 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Boycott

collective and organized ostracism applied in labour, economic, political, or social relations to protest practices that are regarded as unfair. The boycott was popularized by Charles Stewart Parnell during the Irish land agitation of 1880 to protest high rents and land evictions. The term boycott was coined after Irish tenants followed Parnell's suggested code of conduct and effectively ostracized a British estate manager, Charles Cunningham Boycott. The boycott is used most frequently by labour organizations as a tactic to win improved wages and working conditions from management. U.S. law distinguishes between primary and secondary labour boycotts: a primary boycott is the refusal of employees to purchase the goods or services of their employers, and a secondary boycott involves an attempt to induce third parties to refuse to patronize the employer. In most U.S. states, primary boycotts are legal if they involve no physical violence, coercion, or intimidation. Secondary boycotts, however, are illegal in most states. Boycotts were also used during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and ’60s as a social and political tool. Stores and businesses that discriminated against blacks were boycotted, in the expectation that falling revenues would influence a company to change its policy. The term boycott may also signify a refusal to participate in given proceedings. Representatives of a nation may boycott international conferences or convocations, for example, as a means of indicating disapproval of another nation’s political policy or conduct. Boycotts have also been employed by a nation or a group of nations, or by an international organization to influence or protest the policies or actions of another country. The United States, for example, called for a boycott of the summer Olympics of 1980 in Moscow in protest over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the previous year. In an instance of a boycott called by an international organization, the United Nations in 1965 asked all member states to break off economic relations with Rhodesia, which had illegally declared its independence from Great Britain earlier that year; the boycott remained in effect until 1979.

Copyright © 1994-2000 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.