# The Freedom Movement's March on Liberty

## 1954-1966

# UNIT 13

**Unit Summary**—The 1950s and 1960s saw people of every color coming together to protest against racism and segregation. Many new organizations joined the NAACP's fight to create an American society marked by equality for all. In 1954, the Supreme Court handed down a landmark legal decision that decreed that segregation of public facilities was illegal. This decision affected every aspect of public and social life in America. (Chapter 43)

The 1960s also saw a rise in student activism. Many student organizations were created which favored nonviolent protest as a means of initiating change. This student movement infused a contagious energy into the struggle for civil rights. (Chapter 44)

During the 1960s, a coalition of leaders from all areas of society banded together in the fight for civil rights. Union leaders, religious leaders, political leaders, and civil rights leaders pooled their resources to create a vast community of activists. The result of this coalition was a historic march on the nation's capital in 1963. (Chapter 45)

While many civil rights organizations of the 1960s favored nonviolent protest, some groups believed another tactic—militancy—was needed to make the dream of equality a reality. These militant groups urged African Americans to defend themselves by fighting violence with violence. Their cries of "Black Power" sought to demonstrate that African Americans should not fear whites. The theme that "Black is Beautiful" became the battle cry of such groups. (Chapter 46)

### BEFORE YOU READ

Think about the person you are today as compared to the person you were five years ago. A lot has changed about you in that time. You have experienced new things and learned from those experiences. You have grown into the person you want to be.

Change is part of the human existence. It is through change that we grow. Some changes are self-directed; others are forced upon us.

In this unit, you will learn how American society has changed in the past 50 years. You will discover that change was difficult for many, yet necessary for all. What was the most difficult change you ever went through? How did you cope? How did the change help you to grow as a person?

**1964**
Civil rights volunteers, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney are killed by racists on June 21.

**1964**
"Freedom Summer," a massive voter registration project, is launched in Mississippi in August.

**1964**
Fannie Lou Hamer serves as a delegate of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the Democratic National Convention in August.

**1965**
Civil Rights demonstrators savagely beaten while crossing Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on March 7.

**1965**
The Watts Rebellion in Los Angeles begins, leaving 30 people dead after six days of rioting in August.

**1966**
Stokely Carmichael urges demonstrators on during a rally in Mississippi, screaming "Black Power!"

1964 | 1965 | 1966

**1965**
Ferdinand Marcos is elected in the Philippines.

Chapter

# 43

# Contesting the Meaning of Democracy

ASANTE

## Chapter Outline



**Vocabulary**

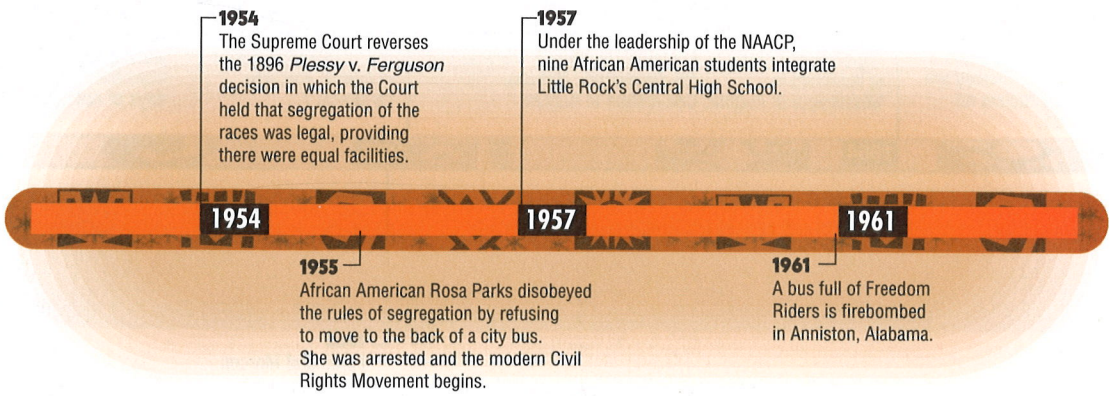
- *Brown* v. *Board of Education*
- civil rights
- Civil Rights Movement
- Montgomery Bus Boycott
- Montgomery Improvement Association
- desegregation
- nonviolent protest
- sit-ins
- spirituals
- Freedom Riders

**AS YOU READ**

- Why did the struggle for equality intensify in the 1950s and 1960s?
- Why is the court case discussed in this chapter important?
- How did the battle for civil rights begin?
- What effect did the court decision in *Brown* v. *Board of Education* have on the events in Little Rock?
- What role did CORE play in ending segregation?

## Organized Struggle for Equality

In the 1950s and 1960s, thousands of African Americans and white Americans were courageous participants in the struggle against racism and segregation. While the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been the leading organization in the early 20th-century phase of the journey to liberation, many new organizations were formed to expand and intensify the struggle. By the early 1950s, African Americans were less willing than ever to accept second-class citizenship. They wanted quality education and equal justice under the law in all areas of American life. The 1950s saw African Americans actively working toward breaking down the barriers of racism, segregation, and discrimination.



## Brown v. Board of Education

By the early 1950s, African Americans wanted equal justice under the law in all fields of American life, especially in the area of education. The father of an elementary school student sued the Topeka, Kansas, Board of Education for his daughter's right to attend the all-white school near their home. The NAACP took up the case and fought it all the way to the highest court in the nation.

On May 17, 1954, the nine justices of the Supreme Court made a decision that toppled the foundation of segregation. The issue before them in ***Brown v. Board of Education*** was whether a state or the District of Columbia had the constitutional power to operate segregated schools on the elementary and secondary levels.

The unanimous decision by the Court reversed the 1896 *Plessy* v. *Ferguson* decision, in which the Court had held that segregation of the races was legal provided there were equal facilities. The 1954 decision declared that separate facilities were inherently unequal and, therefore, deprived the segregated person of equal protection of the law as guaranteed by the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

This landmark decision, which was a breakthrough for justice, had an immediate impact on every aspect of public and social life in the country. Segregated public libraries, universities, restaurants, transportation companies, museums, zoos, public parks, hotels, and more were now required to integrate all facilities. Unquestionably, the arguments of Thurgood Marshall, chief lawyer for the NAACP, who later became a Supreme Court justice, had given the African Americans' call for fairness its clearest voice since the founding of the nation. The legal basis for segregation had been torn away, exposing the raw racism of the Southern social structure. The war had just begun, and other battles remained to be fought.

## The Battle Begins for Civil Rights

**Civil rights** are the rights of a citizen to participate in all aspects of society—fully, equally, and fairly under the laws of a nation.

In the American South during the 1950s, by force of habit and threat of law, African Americans were relegated to the worst restrooms, the poorest sections of towns, dirty water fountains, and outdated schoolbooks cast off by white children. As they rode to work, often to domestic jobs in white homes, it was routine for African Americans to be restricted to sitting in the back on city buses. It was almost unthinkable that an African American would decide where to sit. That is why a woman's refusal to change her seat on a segregated bus set the stage for the **Civil Rights Movement**.

### A HAUNTING PAST

The Civil Rights Museum in Birmingham, Alabama, is a place haunted by history. Each room is a part of the past, which is difficult to imagine even for those who were on the battlelines. Those who were there still remember the brutal attacks on innocent people by police dogs, the high-powered water hoses mowing down human beings marching for what was right, the beatings, the imprisonments. The years of suffering, resistance, and resilience are forever captured in the photographs and videos displayed in the museum. It is a monument to the most powerful justice movement in American history.

## Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

There were several attempts to defy the segregationist policies in Montgomery, Alabama. Eleven months after the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in public schools, Claudette Colvin, a 15-year-old student, was physically removed from a bus. Eight months later, 18-year-old Mary Louise Smith was ejected from another bus. Both had been sitting in the whites-only section.

On December l, 1955, American history changed forever and the South would never be the same. Rosa Parks, a department store seamstress and secretary to the NAACP in Montgomery, refused to move to the back of a city bus. It has been often reported that Parks, 42, refused to change her seat because she was tired after a day's work. In her autobiography, however, Parks said:

> "But that isn't true, I was not tired physically, or no more tired that I usually was at the end of a working day. . . . No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."

In fact, Parks's actions were planned and engineered by E. D. Nixon, president of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP. She was selected to be the test case against segregation. She was arrested, and the modern Civil Rights Movement began.

The community protested Rosa Parks's arrest and began a boycott (known as the **Montgomery Bus Boycott**) of the city's buses, which lasted nearly a year and brought the bus company to its knees. African Americans walked past empty buses on their way to work. Television was in its infancy, and the boycott provided the young industry with dynamic material—images of African Americans boycotting a white bus company—for broadcast across the nation.

The same year as the boycott, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a 26-year-old preacher, had come to Montgomery as the new pastor for the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Because he was new to the community, with no friends or enemies, King was elected president of the **Montgomery Improvement Association** (MIA), which had organized the boycott of the bus company. The MIA took charge of organizing the committees, transporting the boycotters from home to work, and presenting the case for bus **desegregation** to the federal courts.

**Nonviolent protest** was used by the Civil Rights Movement to bring attention to injustice. This method was considered more powerful than violent resistance because violence disrupts the business life of a community and causes hatred toward the perpetrators. Nevertheless, white racists often viciously attacked the nonviolent demonstrators who would not fight back when kicked, slapped, clubbed, spat upon, punched, or attacked by vicious dogs.

In Montgomery, more than 100 people were jailed along with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and charged under a 1921 antiboycott law. White supremacists bombed the homes of numerous African American leaders, including Dr. King. Domestic workers lost their jobs and whites

Vice President Al Gore and Rosa Parks, the focus of a civil rights action of 1955, display the Congressional Gold Medal she received on November 28, 1999.

**DID YOU KNOW ?**

Prior to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, African Americans made up 75 percent of the bus passengers in Montgomery.

threatened to fire employees if they continued with the boycott. The spirit of the African American community was kept alive and strong through church rallies, daily demonstrations, and singing spirituals. For the people who were jailed, the possibility of justice gave them hope and comfort.

Fred Gray, a brilliant young lawyer just out of Western Reserve University law school, became skilled at keeping the demonstrators out of jail or getting them out on bail almost as soon as they entered. Gray became Dr. King's attorney.

The boycott was successful. One year after it began, the bus company was nearly bankrupt and, reinforcing its *Brown* v. *Board of Education* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregation in public transportation was unconstitutional.

On January 10, 1957, two months after the Supreme Court's Montgomery decision, ministers from 11 Southern states met at Ebenezer Baptist Church to discuss how they could sustain the movement. They formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Dr. King was elected president and Ella Jo Baker, a veteran activist in the NAACP, was selected as executive director. Bus boycotts spread rapidly across the South, members of the SCLC played a major role in successful boycotts in Tallahassee, Tennessee; Tampa, Florida; and Atlanta, Georgia.

## School Integration in Little Rock

The next dramatic episode in the struggle against segregation occurred in Little Rock, Arkansas. In 1957, under the leadership of the local NAACP, nine African American students—Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Melba Pattillo, Gloria Ray, Carlotta Walls, Minnijean Brown, Terrence Roberts, Jefferson Thomas, and Thelma Mothershed—demonstrated enormous courage. They walked through a canyon of angry, violent white protesters to enroll in the all-white Central High School in Little Rock. Daisy Bates, the leader of the Little Rock NAACP, had prepared the students for their heroic assault against segregated schools, knowing full well that she was putting her life at risk. She had received a firm indication of the danger she faced when, two weeks before the teenagers were to enter the school, a rock was thrown through her living room window. In her autobiography, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock*, she recalled:

> "Instinctively, I threw myself to the floor. I was covered with shattered glass . . . reached for the rock lying in the middle of the floor. A note was tied to it. I broke the string and unfolded a soiled piece of paper. Scrawled in bold print were the words: 'Stone this time. Dynamite the next.'"

Despite the threats and intimidation, Bates remained steadfast. She was determined to send an example of strength to the students.

For the next two weeks there would be sharp exchanges between the governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, and President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Governor Faubus refused to obey the federal government's call for integration, citing States' Rights. As the South had done before the Civil War, Faubus declared that his state had the right to determine what went on under its jurisdiction. The Justice Department filed a petition against Faubus to force him to comply with the Supreme Court's desegregation order. The governor had defied the order and refused to remove the National Guard he had placed in front of the school to block the African American students from entering.

Eisenhower nationalized the Arkansas National Guard and ordered them to protect, not intimidate, the students. When he nationalized the Guard, he took the power over them away

from the governor and put it in his hands as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces of the United States.

The States' Rights tactic had failed, and Faubus had to back down. On September 23, 1957, the "Little Rock Nine" arrived at Daisy Bates' home to see how the police were going to deal with the hostile situation. The police decided the best way to reduce the possibility of harm to the students was to escort them through the school's side door. They entered unnoticed while the white mob vented its anger on a group of African American reporters they had mistaken for the parents of the students. The next day, as the size of the mob grew to outnumber the police, it became clear that federal troops would have to be assigned. Little Rock's Mayor, Woodrow Mann, felt he had no other recourse; he pleaded for the president to dispatch the troops.

President Eisenhower supported the *Brown* v. *Board of Education* decision, but he had hoped to enforce it without violence or confrontation. Finally, he issued an executive order to protect the children and to carry out federal law. He told a national television audience:

> "Mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decisions of our courts."

On their next day at school, 300 paratroopers escorted the students inside, and each student was assigned a federal bodyguard.

Three days later the troops were withdrawn and calm returned to Central High School. Even the white students who had opposed the integration came back, though the tension between them and the new students remained. Melba Pattillo Beals recalled those hectic days in her autobiography, *Warriors Don't Cry*:

> "It's Thursday, September 26, 1957. Now I have a bodyguard. I know very well that the President didn't send these soldiers just to protect me but to show support for the idea—the idea that a governor can't ignore federal laws. Still, I feel specially cared about because the guard is there. If he wasn't there, I'd hear more of the voices of those people who say I'm a nigger . . . that I'm not valuable, that I have no right to be alive."

Not only were the Little Rock Nine alive, they became enshrined in the history of freedom movements.

## The Congress for Racial Equality (CORE)

Although school desegregation was a key concern among African Americans, they were also determined to end segregation in public facilities. Freedom rides and **sit-ins**, launched throughout the South by the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), focused the nation's attention on the problems of racial discrimination in public places. Since 1942, the organization, under the leadership of James Farmer, one of its founders, had based its methods of integration on the nonviolent tactics of the great Indian activist, Mahatma Gandhi. Beginning in Chicago, CORE's first project was to desegregate an all-white roller-skating rink. By 1944, CORE chapters existed in nearly all major cities in the North. In the 1960s, the organization turned its attention the South to support the sit-ins and lead the Freedom Rides.

### The Sit-Ins

On February 1, 1960, four students from the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro, who were members of the NAACP Youth Council, decided to challenge the segregation of public eating facilities by employing a tactic that came to be known as a sit-in. They sat at a whites-only lunch counter in a Woolworth's store. They planned to remain seated until they were served or arrested. When the white waitress told them she could not serve them, the four sat in protest until the store closed. Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, David Richmond, and Ezell Blair, Jr., had no intention of making history, but, not sure what to do next, they sought the advice of some local African American civic leaders who advised them to

contact CORE. With a CORE official as their guide, the next sit-ins were well planned.

Soon, with the assistance of veteran activist Ella Jo Baker, the sit-ins were arranged so that when one group ended its sit-in, another group would take its place. In this way, protesters kept the seats filled at Woolworth's and S. H. Kress, five and ten cent stores. The tactic drew national attention and before long, sit-ins became a common occurrence across the South.

This action created a new wave of protests against segregated establishments, and thousands of African American and white students joined the protests against segregated facilities. White segregationists became very angry and often beat and jailed these protesters. The demonstrators sang Freedom Songs, or **spirituals**, to keep their spirits up and to hold on to their courage. When they sang together they became more closely bonded.

Diane Nash, a leader of the Nashville Student Movement who became a major figure in the Civil Rights Movement, told reporter Juan Williams:

> "When the students in Greensboro sat in on February 1, we simply made plans to join their effort by sitting in at the same chains . . . We were surprised and delighted to hear reports of other cities joining in the sit-ins. We started feeling the power of the idea whose time had come. We had no inkling that the movement would become so widespread."

"Freedom Riders" protest segregation in a sit-in at a whites-only waiting room in Montgomery, Alabama, May 28, 1961.

## The Freedom Riders

Organized by CORE, whites and African Americans, young and old, participated in daring rides through the South, attempting to integrate transportation facilities such as waiting rooms, restaurants, and public restrooms. The **Freedom Riders** rode on interstate buses and trains because they wanted to end segregation. Being a Freedom Rider was dangerous because of the threat of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacists. Angry white mobs attacked them and sometimes blew up the buses on which they rode.

On May 14, 1961, Freedom Riders faced the worst trouble yet. On that day a bus was stopped and firebombed in Anniston, Alabama. Then, a second bus that was passing, was stopped by Klansmen who beat the Freedom Riders with lead pipes. Badly beaten, the Riders flew to New Orleans by plane. Still the movement was undeterred, and the Freedom Rides continued.

The Freedom Rides and the sit-ins were just the beginning of the students' involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. As the demonstrations gathered energy, more and more young people hurried to the South to fight against injustice.

This period in African American history is often called the Second Reconstruction because so many forces were working to bring about change in the South. White merchants often came to the support of African Americans, especially in communities where they were the majority. The tide of change was pushing the country into a new day when

"all of God's children would be free."

# Chapter 43 After You Read

**Read each section carefully, then write your answers on a separate sheet of paper.**

## Comprehension Review

1. What issue was brought before the Supreme Court in the case of *Brown* v. *Board of Education*?
2. How did the court rule in the case of *Brown* v. *Board of Education*?
3. Why did African Americans boycott city buses in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955 and 1956?
4. Why did organizers of the Civil Rights Movement use nonviolent protest to bring attention to injustice?
5. What caused the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference?
6. How did President Eisenhower support the *Brown* v. *Board of Education* decision?
7. What occurred during the nation's first sit-in?
8. How did protesters use music during their nonviolent tactics?
9. Why are the beginning years of the Civil Rights Movement referred to as the Second Reconstruction?

### Center Your Thinking

10. Suppose you were organizing a sit-in to be held in your community. Write an essay identifying three songs that you would urge the demonstrators to sing and provide reasons for each selection.

## Vocabulary and Concept Development

1. What is the meaning of this sentence: "On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court made a decision which toppled the foundation of segregation"?
2. What did Rosa Parks mean when she said, "I was not tired physically . . . I was tired of giving in"?
3. How can violent protest serve to increase hostilities?
4. Identify the metaphor in the following sentence: In 1957, nine African American students demonstrated enormous courage when they walked through a canyon of angry white protestors to enroll in an all-white high school. What is being compared? What similar traits do the items possess?

## Reading a Timeline

**Use Unit 13 and Chapter 43 timelines to complete the following:**

1. Look at the unit timeline. How much time is covered? What kind of events are shown—in the African American community, in the United States at large, and in the world? Was this a time of momentous events as in the previous unit?
2. What kind of progress, or lack of progress, was made in the African American community? What about the white community, or the United States at large? Can you tell from the timeline?
3. Look at the chapter timeline. How important were the events listed for 1954 and 1957 to the African American community? Give reasons for your answer.