

# RACE RELATIONS IN THE USA 1955–1968

## Segregation

Black people in America were subjected to racial discrimination, to racial prejudice and to persecution. This happened in spite of the fact that the US Constitution guarantees that all people were treated equally and that all citizens of the USA enjoy the same civil rights. In the southern states there had been systematic racial discrimination. The 'Jim Crow' laws in the southern states made black people outsiders and second class citizens.

- Public facilities, such as parks, buses, school and universities were segregated.
- Black people were excluded from the political process; they had no voice in Congress or in local government. Voter registration was made impossible for black people e.g. In Mississippi only 5% of black people were registered to vote.
- Black people were not protected by the law, Judges, all-white juries and the police force discriminated against black people.
- Black people suffered economically, earning half the wages of white people doing the same job.
- Black people suffered violence, including lynching's, at the hands of racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.
- In the North and West of the USA black people could vote and have their children educated, 7 million blacks migrated from the southern states.
- In the 1920s-30s 'Scientific racism' were used to justify the mistreatment of black people
- The NAACP was set up in 1911 to campaign for black rights. They had some success before WWII challenging the right for black people to sit on juries. By WWII they had 450,000 members.

## The Ku Klux Klan

Many independent groups opposed to the civil rights movement could be labelled the Ku Klux Klan. Many groups operated with impunity from the law and often it was alleged, in connection with police departments. Bombing campaigns were used to drive blacks out of neighbourhoods; Birmingham, Alabama was nicknamed 'bombingham.' Klan members cooperated with Mayors and Governors to resist social change. Physical violence, intimidation and murder were used against Civil Rights activists.

The 1963 the bombing of a Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, which killed four girls, was by members of the KKK. In 1963 Medgar Evers, the NAACP organiser in Mississippi was murdered by the Klan. The 1964 murders of three civil rights workers in Mississippi was the work of the Klan.

## The impact of the Second World War

CORE (Congress for Racial Equality) was formed by James Farmer. More and more black workers supported the war effort by working in factories (2m by the end of the war) but were resented by white workers. There were also race riots in Detroit in 1943.

After the war many black Americans resented racism at home and having fought the Nazis thought they deserved better treatment. One ex-corporal said "I went in the army a nigger; I'm coming out a man" Despite hopes for better treatment many blacks were still treated as second class citizens and were beaten or even murdered if they did not accept their place in society.

## Truman and Eisenhower

Truman had been a member of the KKK but, as President, he spoke out for civil rights (especially for returning soldiers). He set up the civil rights committee in 1946 which recommended anti-lynching laws and an end to discrimination on interstate travel. Despite these actions little changed for black people.

Eisenhower seemed less concerned with civil rights and only employed one black campaign worker. He did however pass civil rights bills in 1957 and 1960. These bills made it illegal to obstruct desegregation of schools and to block black voters however black voters numbers only increased by 3%

## Brown versus Topeka Board of Education

Schools in the southern states were segregated by law. They were deemed to be "separate but equal", there was no discrimination if black and whites had the same facilities and equipment. Invariably schools for blacks were underfunded and inferior. Protests by black pupils against the segregation of schools were taken up by the NAACP. In 1954 the Supreme Court decided that segregated education could not be considered to be equal. The NAACP had argued that black children had been put at a disadvantage by the school system and that they were not being prepared to live in a mixed race society and would be disadvantaged in later life.

## BvT backlash

The KKK were very active in the South after BvT, led by Robert Shelton and the 'White knights of the KKK'. He declared desegregation communist and led a campaign against Southern blacks.

Many southern whites supported the Klan and there was an increase in bombings and murders. Klansmen were often protected by the police and many whites were reluctant to stand up to the Klan.

In 1955 Emmitt Till was brutally murdered for wolf whistling at a white girl. The killer, Roy Bryant' was identified and tried however the jury took only an hour to free him.

## Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955–1956

To some people Rosa Parks is 'the mother of the Civil Rights Movement'. She refused to give up her seat on a public bus to a white passenger. She was a member of the NAACP, after her arrest a bus boycott was organised. The boycott lasted for 381 days, 90% of black people took part and greatly cut the bus company revenues. A federal court ordered the buses in Montgomery to be desegregated and the boycott ended.

The boycott had been organised by Martin Luther King Jr. His speeches made him a national figure. The organisers faced a great deal of hostility, King was arrested twice, car pools were declared illegal by local judges, churches and houses were set alight and shots were fired at integrated buses. The boycott showed that non-violent direct action could work, that by refusing to cooperate with the system it could be changed.

## Little Rock High School, 1957

However the decision of the Supreme Court was met by bitter hostility in some states. In 1957 nine black students (known as the **Little Rock Nine**) sued for the right to attend Little Rock High School in Arkansas. The Governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, made a stand against integration and the decision of the Supreme Court. He called out the National Guard to prevent the nine students entering the school. President Eisenhower intervened. He ordered the National Guard back to barracks and sent in the 101st Airborne Division to protect the students. The soldiers protected the students, escorting them between lessons.

Only one student graduated. At the end of the year the school system closed rather than continue to integrate. Central High was not integrated until 1960; Little Rock's schools were not fully integrated until 1972. Local authorities did not enforce the decisions of the High Court.

## Progress by 1960

YES-Legal success of BvT, Bus Boycott success, New negro attitude

NO-Little actual change (only 3% more voters), opposition from KKK (Tillmurder)

## Martin Luther King

Is Martin Luther King, Jr, the central figure in the struggle for civil rights, is he the only significant figure? He stood for non-violence, integration, American and Christian ideals and civil rights for the black Southerners. What about the riots in the northern cities, the calls for separatism, Anti-Americanism and the Nation of Islam?

## Civil Rights Movement- Groups

The Civil Rights Movement is an 'umbrella term' for the organisations who sought to end racial discrimination and gain the vote for black people in the southern states. Groups involved included the **National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP)**, the **Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)**, the **Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC)** and **Southern Christian Leadership Conference, (SCLC)**. There was a change in tactics from using a gradualist legalistic approach that is bringing about changes in the law, to using mass action, direct action, non-violent resistance and civil disobedience.

## **The Freedom Rides, 1961**

In 1960 the Supreme Court had ended segregated for passengers travelling on inter-state buses. However not all states obeyed the ruling. Civil Rights activists travelled on inter-state buses seeking to end segregation not only on the buses but also the bus stations, waiting rooms and at drink fountains. They were met with violent mobs, in Anniston, Alabama, a bus was firebombed. Passengers were beaten by gangs of opponents. Freedom riders were arrested for 'breaching the peace' by using "white only" facilities. More than 300 were jailed in Mississippi. President Kennedy had to intervene and a new desegregation order was issued. Passengers were allowed to sit where they chose to; all facilities were desegregated.

## **Freedom Marches 1963**

In 1963 there was a more focused campaign in Birmingham, Alabama. The campaign aimed to end segregation in the town centre. The campaign was met by brutality from Eugene 'Bull' Connor. The authorities claimed all protests were illegal and so the campaigners planned a mass arrest. King was arrested. As the campaign faltered one thousand students joined in, the Children's Crusade. More than 600 were arrested. The next day fire hoses and dogs were set on the children. Pictures shown on television outraged the public and President Kennedy had to intervene, he proposed to introduce a Civil Rights Bill. Governor Wallace officially ended segregation but the campaigners were subjected to violence. Four young girls were killed when opponents of the changes firebombed a church in Birmingham.

## **The Washington March, 1963**

In August 1963 a 'March on Washington' was planned by all the major civil rights organisations. It called for civil rights legislation, job creation, an end to discrimination at work, decent housing, the right to vote and integrated education. 250,000 people took part with 75,000 white people, it was shown on national television. King made his 'I have a dream speech' which had a huge impact on public opinion. After the march the leaders met President Kennedy who was committed to passing a Civil Rights Bill but lacked enough support in Congress. After his assassination in November 1963 it was the new President, Lyndon Johnson, who used his influence to secure its passage.

## **The Civil Rights Act, 1964**

In 1964 the Civil Rights campaign gathered momentum. Thousands of activists set up 'Freedom Schools' in Mississippi to help black voters to register. They were met with arrests, beatings, arson and violence as the white residents of the state objected to outsiders trying to change their lifestyles. In June 1964 three civil rights workers disappeared, their bodies were discovered weeks later, victims of the Ku Klux Klan. The public outrage helped the passage of the Civil Rights Bill and turned the media spotlight onto the persecution of blacks in the southern states.

On 2 July 1964 the Civil Rights Act was passed. It banned discrimination based on "race, colour, religion or national origin" in jobs and housing.

## **MLK- His Role as a protest organiser**

King began work as a Pastor in a church in Montgomery, Alabama in 1954. In 1955 he was asked to be leader of the bus boycott sparked off by the Rosa Parks incident. He was the head of the Montgomery Improvement Association. He stressed the protest was 'non-violent protest'. His house was bombed and he was the first boycott leader to be put on trial. He chose jail rather than pay a \$10 fine. King preferred mass action, direct protests. The NAACP preferred to use the courts. His speaking pushed him to the forefront of the movement and in 1957 he set up a new organisation, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In 1960 he moved to Atlanta, Georgia. The SCLC concentrated on the situation in the South, as it was a Church led organisation, preaching non-violence, it did not draw the hostility that other groups did. King's aim was to attract national attention to racial inequality. Marches did gain publicity but the SCLC lacked organisation and mass support and did little to encourage Southern blacks to vote. King himself admitted that the SCLC had achieved little after the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

King believed that black people lacked the political power to bring about change. He organised campaigns and demonstrations to gain publicity for the lack of black voter registration. His frequent arrests gained publicity at home and abroad. The Civil Rights Movement was boosted by the Sit-ins by students in Greensboro', North Carolina. King had nothing to do with this at the start. Up to 70,000 students joined in the protests and King was swept along by the direct action.

In 1963 King turned his attention to segregation and inequality in Birmingham, Alabama. King was determined to make an impact, he expected there to be white violence which he hoped would gain national sympathy.

'Letter from Birmingham Jail', written on toilet paper and smuggled out by his wife saw King released by the intervention of President Kennedy. The Children's Crusade saw the SCLC recruit schoolchildren to protest and was met with police violence. King gained the publicity he wanted, it persuaded President Kennedy to push through a Civil Rights Bill. It was in support of that Civil Rights Bill that King organised the March on Washington in August, 1963.

## **Winning the Nobel Peace Prize, 1964**

In December 1964 King won the Nobel Peace Prize, at 35 years of age, he was the youngest man to ever receive the award. However King's leadership was still coming under fire from within the civil rights movement. He was concerned about the conservatism of some of his colleagues; he recognised that what he was proposing was a social revolution which would bring about big changes in American society. There had been little change in Birmingham; four black school girls were killed by a bomb at a Sunday School in September 1963. The leaders of Birmingham no longer wanted outside help in their struggle. He began to recognise problems in the ghettos in the northern cities.

In 1965 Selma, Alabama was chosen as the new focus of the struggle. Half the population was black, segregation was strictly enforced, economic differences between black and white were marked. The SCLC would campaign to increase black voter registration. A march was organised from Selma to Montgomery. State troopers attacked the march with clubs and tear gas, it was called 'Bloody Sunday'. However it led to increasing bitterness amongst the civil rights movement when the SCLC withdrew and the people of Selma were left to pick up the pieces.

## The Black Power movement in the 1960's

The Black Power movement was a Black Nationalist movement, it did not want integration, it wanted separation. The Civil Rights Movement is seen as being personified by Martin Luther King, Jr. He is seen as its figurehead and representative of the movement. His appeal for nonviolence, for integration, appealing to Christian and American ideals, and his call for civil rights for southern blacks are how the struggle for civil rights is viewed. However this approach was rejected by some groups, they called for separatism not integration, they were anti-American in their appeal, the Nation of Islam called for separation not equality. Its Black Power movement had wider aims; it called for racial dignity, for economic and political self-sufficiency and freedom from white oppression. The Black Power movement challenged two of MLK's main ideals, integration and non-violence. King described the Nation of Islam as a 'hate group'.

The Black Power movement was urban based. After the Second World War more than half of America's black population lived in the north and west's industrial cities. As the industries in these cities went into decline the job market collapsed. Poor blacks became concentrated in neighbourhoods with poor quality housing, poor quality education and high crime rates. Relationships with the mainly white police forces were fragile. Blacks felt they were not treated the same as the white people in the neighbourhood. Blacks were attracted to the messages of racial pride, of economic self-help, of separatism and self-defence. The cities experienced race riots between 1965 and 1967.

It was against this background that the 'Black Power' movement emerged. One of its early spokesmen was Stokely Carmichael the SNCC leader in 1966. He spoke of black communities arming themselves and confronting the Ku Klux Klan. People in the movement referred to themselves as 'Afro-Americans' rather than 'negroes'. They spoke of black pride and identity.

## Nation of Islam

Malcolm X aimed to improve the lives of Black Americans. Malcolm X joined the NOI. He wanted black Americans to rise up and create their own separate black state in America, by force if necessary. He was accused of encouraging racial hatred and violence.

Malcolm X raised awareness of the hardships in the ghettos. Those born in poverty could not break out from the ghetto. Only 32% of ghetto pupils finished High School. Low skilled jobs were in decline, 46% of those unemployed were black. The ghettos were places of unemployment, poor housing, poverty, poor education and violence. They exploded into violence each summer between 1964-68. The civil rights campaigners such as King seemed to offer the people of the ghetto nothing. So they looked to new leaders such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael.

## The Black Panther Party

The Black Panther Party was formed by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California. They followed the ideas of Malcolm X; they aimed to achieve equality "by any means necessary". They sought to confront police brutality. They wore black leather jackets, berets, and light blue shirts. They wore 'afros'. They never amounted to more than 5000 members. They gained admiration for their work in the ghettos; they aimed to expose police brutality. However they had no coherent plan or strategy and were targeted by the police, by 1970 they had disappeared.

## **Race Riots, 1965–1967**

The riots in the ghettos of the cities in the North and West saw King change direction. King began to define freedom in terms of economic equality not political equality; the vote was no longer enough. He called for a 'better distribution of the wealth of the USA.' He focussed on social and political equality, he chose Chicago as the battle ground. However he had no real programme and attempted to concentrate on housing issues. He failed to gain much support; the black population splintered and supported various other groups. King received little support from the Federal Government. The President turned against King after he criticised the Vietnam War.

The Meredith March, 1966, planned by James Meredith, the first black student at the University of Mississippi, was to be a non-violent protest. It was a march from Memphis to Jackson (220 miles) calling for blacks to vote. Meredith was shot on the second day. Black groups vowed to continue the protest, King arrived to join the march. The march split between King and his followers who urged peaceful protest and younger leaders like Stokely Carmichael who demanded 'Black Power' and rejected passive resistance. King felt he had lost his way; the civil rights coalition was collapsing. King called for an improvement in economic conditions, aware that the gaining of votes had cost little, but what he was now proposing was a redistribution of wealth, he planned to broaden his appeal and make it a war on poverty. However his Poor People's Campaign failed to take off.

## **Black Power protests at the Mexico Olympics, 1968**

Black Power achieved a stage, live on international television at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. Tommy Smith and John Carlos, who won Gold and Bronze medals, gave the black-gloved Black Power salute during the medal ceremony. They were thrown out of the Games and were given a life time ban by the IOC.

## **The Assassination of MLK**

After the problems of the march King decided that he needed to return to Memphis and show that a non-violent approach could work. He arrived on 3rd April and made his last speech. He said that he hoped to live a long life, but was not concerned about that as he saw a bright future for Black Americans. He felt he had seen what he described as the Promised Land- where everyone is free.

The next day King was on the balcony of his motel room talking to friends when a shot was fired. He was hit in the jaw and died after emergency surgery.

Following his funeral there were further race riots in over 100 cities. A further Civil Rights Act was passed a week later. Many felt that it was passed as a result of King's assassination.

## **MLK and Black Power Leaders**

VERY DIFFERENT- MLK non-violent whereas Black Power leaders advocated violence

VERY DIFFERENT-Black Power had no white members, MLK wanted striped power

VERY DIFFERENT- Black power leaders wanted social change/MLK focused on legal change

SIMILAR- MLK spent time in the ghetto in Chicago

SIMILAR-MLK did provoke violence using Project C

SIMILAR- MLK and Black Power leaders both opposed the Vietnam War

## **MLK . A major contributor**

YES- A figurehead for the movement. Set up the SCLC which organised protest. Several high profile successes such as Montgomery, Birmingham and Selma, set the principles of the CR movement- non-violence, mass protest and direct action.

NO- Other events organised by CORE, SNCC. Also legal breakthroughs of NAACP. King's principles not suitable for the ghetto. Only achieved political rather than social success.