

# TEACHER'S GUIDE

## Educator's Primer on the Historical Period

### MISSION US: "No Turning Back"

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**1. The Civil Rights Movement grew out of a long history of struggle against repression. After the Civil War, African Americans gained new citizenship rights through constitutional amendments. But after Reconstruction, a new system of white supremacy called Jim Crow emerged.**

During Reconstruction, U.S. Congress passed the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to outlaw slavery in the United States and provide certain civil rights and legal protections to many formerly enslaved individuals, including the right to vote for African American men. However, most African Americans lived in a society still segregated by social custom (known as de facto segregation). Schools, public transportation, poorhouses, cemeteries, and theaters were all segregated. In the late 1880s, Southern state and local laws codified these customs, legally mandating segregation. These Jim Crow laws formalized discrimination in the South, while a similar system of de facto segregation of schools, housing, and work also functioned in the North.

In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed segregation by upholding the Louisiana statute that mandated separate railroad cars for white and Black passengers in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This effectively enshrined in law the constitutionality of "separate but equal" public facilities and set the precedent for even more restrictive racial legislation. Voter suppression was another critical aspect of white supremacist control. Southern states manipulated loopholes in the Fifteenth Amendment and implemented literacy tests, poll taxes, and intimidation to inhibit African Americans' ability to vote. Many white Americans enforced this system of racial discrimination, segregation of public facilities, and political disfranchisement with terror, violence, and the ever-present threat of assaults, including lynching.

**2. The modern civil rights movement began decades earlier than the NAACP legal victory in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Montgomery Bus Boycott of the 1950s: there were numerous organized efforts throughout the twentieth century against discrimination in jobs and housing and violence against African Americans.**

Since its inception in 1909, the NAACP fought to end violence against African Americans with highly public anti-lynching campaigns and to eliminate segregation in education - challenging the many disparities of access and conditions that made African American schools unequal. They created local chapters across the South to engage ordinary citizens in the fight for civil rights. In the North, urban African Americans organized for greater access to jobs through the widespread "Don't Shop Where You Can't Work" campaign to boycott retailers who did not hire Black workers. And community and cultural organizations such as the United Negro Improvement Association emerged to support Black economic self-sufficiency.

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During World War II, millions of African Americans chose to serve in the American military, hoping to demonstrate their commitment to the nation and their demands for citizenship and equal treatment. In 1942, the Double V campaign advocated for the simultaneous victory against facism abroad and victory against racism at home. Many African American organizations adopted the Double V slogan to mobilize against second class citizenship. African American war veterans also challenged Jim Crow laws and customs after they returned home.

### **3. African American efforts to obtain equality and justice drew well-organized white resistance and violence.**

White resistance to African American civil rights escalated following the *Brown* ruling in 1954. State legislatures and elected officials mounted campaigns of massive resistance to school desegregation, in some cases closing public schools rather than allowing integration. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK), which first formed during Reconstruction, grew in size and visibility. The use of Confederate symbols surged at this time. White Southerners also formed white supremacist organizations called Citizens' Councils to fight against school integration, gaining tens of thousands of members throughout the 1950s and 1960s. They worked against Black voter registration efforts and the integration of other public facilities.

In some cases, white citizens took it upon themselves to enforce the racial hierarchy in the South through violence. In 1955, fourteen year-old Emmett Till, a Black Chicagoan who was visiting relatives in the Mississippi Delta, was falsely accused by a white woman of whistling at her in a country store. White residents savagely beat him, shot him in the head, and tied his body with barbed wire to a metal fan, which they dumped into the Tallahatchie River. Although Till was not the only Black person in Mississippi white racists murdered that summer, his murder soon became the subject of national outrage.

As African Americans organized sit-ins, freedom rides, voter registration campaigns, and business boycotts throughout the 1960s, their protests were met with threats and violence. White supremacists bombed churches that held civil rights meetings, shot into the homes of activists, attacked demonstrators with clubs and dogs, and murdered organizers and leaders. All-white police forces and juries dispensed unequal justice by criminalizing civil rights activism while making sure that white perpetrators of this violence were not held criminally responsible for the harm they caused.

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---

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**4. Despite the violent reprisals, ordinary citizens across the South became active in the struggle for equality. In many cities young people became a driving force behind activism and built a national movement that resulted in new legislation.**

In February 1960, Black college students initiated a series of nonviolent "sit-ins," which swept through the South and captured national attention. The protests started when four African American students from North Carolina A&T College violated a Greensboro segregation ordinance by taking seats at a Woolworth's lunch counter to demand service that had traditionally been denied to them. This sit-in motivated thousands of Black students to lead sit-ins throughout the upper South. Although gangs of young white people often taunted and abused the African American students, at least 70,000 people participated in sit-ins in more than one hundred cities in the Southern states during the winter and spring of 1960.

Longtime NAACP leader Ella Baker recognized the powerful potential of student activism during the sit-in movement. While working as Executive Secretary for the SCLC, she helped to organize the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC – pronounced "snick") in 1960. Baker advised the younger activists whose work was crucial to the vitality of the movement. SNCC prioritized grassroots participation, nurturing local people's organizing skills and leadership to increase African American political power in their communities. This strategy was fundamental to the "organizing tradition," with its central belief being that ordinary people had the power to effect slower, long-lasting change at the local level.

In May 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a civil rights group that was based primarily in the North, organized a series of "Freedom Rides" to test a Supreme Court decision mandating the integration of interstate transportation, including bus terminals. CORE sought to build on the momentum of student activism of the sit-ins and recruited students to take part in the Freedom Rides. The original integrated group of Freedom Riders departed from Washington D.C. on May 4, 1961. They were viciously attacked at multiple stops where mobs burned one of the buses and brutally assaulted the riders. But other Freedom Rides continued, with SNCC bolstering the efforts with new volunteers.

During the summer of 1963, there were 758 demonstrations and marches, more above the Mason-Dixon line than below it, representing a diverse movement across the country. Many of the protesters fought for economic justice and human rights as well as civil rights as they demanded more jobs, increased funding for inner-city schools, and an end to police brutality. The 1963 "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" drew a crowd of almost a quarter-million people. Dr. King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in which he articulated a broad vision for the civil rights movement.

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Persistent efforts across the Southern states highlighted the need for federal legislation to provide full citizenship rights to Black residents. Based on this pressure, the federal government finally took legislative action. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended segregation in all public accommodations, including theaters, restaurants, and swimming pools. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 gave the U.S. Department of Justice the right to intervene in counties where fewer than half of all eligible voters were registered. Within a decade, two million additional African Americans were on the voting rolls and an equally large number of white Southerners registered for the first time. As a result, the South underwent its greatest political transformation since the end of Reconstruction.

#### **5. The Civil Rights struggle was not only in the South and did not end in the 1960s.**

In the years after 1965, urban rebellions swept Los Angeles, Cleveland, Newark, Detroit, and other cities, usually directly sparked by cases of police brutality. With the assassinations of Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr. in 1965 and 1968, respectively, increasing numbers of African Americans began to question the nonviolent approaches of the civil rights movement and to call instead for "Black Power," inspired by the thinking of figures like Malcom X. This sentiment was adopted by the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, which was formed in October 1966 in Oakland, CA. For a decade, Black Panther Party chapters around the country provided free breakfasts, schooling, and health care in many communities. Throughout the mid-1960s and into the 1970s, the Black Power movement advocated for the creation of Black political and cultural institutions and economic empowerment, but their work and their leaders were targeted and undermined by the FBI.

In the decades since the civil rights movement, numerous African American politicians have been elected, including the 2008 election of Barack Obama as the nation's first African American president. Additionally, representation of African Americans in media and access to many professions has increased. However, equality has continually been denied to Black Americans and in most places, schools, healthcare, housing, and jobs still reflect segregation and economic disparities.

Other new, insidious forms of discrimination have emerged, specifically the expansion of the American prison system, which has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, disproportionately affecting African American men. Police violence against Black people remains a dangerous systemic problem. Various voting restrictions have also been enforced in predominantly Black constituencies, making it incredibly difficult for many African Americans to vote. By almost every measure, African Americans are denied equal access to education, healthcare, high paying jobs, and housing.

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Today, the struggle for Black freedom continues. Since its founding in 2013 in the wake of the murder of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and others, the Movement for Black Lives has galvanized national and international attention in the continued fight for the recognition of Black Americans' rights and dignity.