

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Myths and Misconceptions

MISSION US: "No Turning Back"

1. The struggle for civil rights started in the 1950s.

The struggle for Black freedom started much earlier than the 1950s. From the moment the first enslaved Africans were brought to the Americas, resistance developed in the form of rebellions, sabotage, and escape. After the Civil War, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments ended slavery, extended citizenship rights and voting rights, giving African Americans new ways to fight continued racism and inequalities. While many Americans have been taught that the May 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown versus Board of Education* was the start of the modern civil rights movement, it would be a mistake to place the start of the movement with this case rather than the work of the people who made it happen. This work included the NAACP's earlier legal work, CORE's experiments with nonviolent direct action, and efforts for voting rights. It is also important to pay attention to earlier forms of Black protest including the New Negro movement of the 1920s, the store boycotts of the 1930s, and the Double Victory campaign of the 1940s. This campaign advocated for the victory against fascism abroad and for the victory against racism at home. African American veterans challenged Jim Crow laws and customs after they returned home from World War II and soon after, a civil rights movement emerged across the country.

2. The civil rights movement was only active in the South.

It is often wrongly assumed that civil rights activism was only necessary in the South since de jure segregation (segregation enforced by law) explicitly existed there. However, de facto segregation (segregation that exists outside the law) and other forms of inequality were prominent throughout the rest of the country. To challenge unequal housing, education, and employment, activists organized powerful demonstrations and actions all across the North and West throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. For example, in 1964, nearly half a million New York City students and teachers staged a one-day school boycott to protest the Board of Education's refusal to make a plan to desegregate the city's schools. Additionally, volunteers from the North traveled to the South to participate in various civil rights actions, such as the Freedom Rides and voter registration

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION US: "No Turning Back"

efforts. From the beginning, the civil rights movement consisted of local actions throughout all regions of the United States.

3. The movement was primarily driven by religious leaders, particularly Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

While King's leadership was significant to the movement, it is important to recognize that he was mentored by many individuals who had been involved in freedom struggles for decades. Two of his most prominent mentors were A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin. Randolph was the first person to propose a march on Washington in 1941 and the founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Rustin organized the first freedom ride in 1947 called the Journey of Reconciliation. Randolph and Rustin were the primary architects of the 1963 March on Washington.

There were two main approaches to the movement: one was mobilization efforts led by figures including King. The other, which was the heart of the movement, was truly driven by grassroots, local efforts led by ordinary people. Women and young people were at the forefront of this work. College students organized sit-ins and other forms of nonviolent protest. Ella Baker, the executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, recognized the power of youth activism and encouraged students to establish their own civil rights organization, which became the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Youth also played important roles in the movement. They attended youth NAACP meetings, marched, and staged school walkouts.

4. Women played a minimal role in the movement.

Women played critical roles as leaders, strategists, and grassroots organizers throughout the country, but their contributions have been obscured or minimized. Even Rosa Parks, one of the most popularly remembered figures, has not had the scope of her activism recognized. Parks was a seasoned activist, a longtime NAACP member who advocated on behalf of working-class Black women. Women including organizer Ella Baker and educator Septima Poinsette Clark both utilized community-driven collective organizing strategies to engage

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local people. Mississippi sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer and Gloria Richardson, leader of the Cambridge, Maryland Nonviolent Action committee, advocated on behalf of their specific communities' needs. Jo Ann Gibson Robinson was a key organizer in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and had already been organizing against abuses on buses since 1950. In every voter registration drive, boycott, sit-in, and march, women were present and active.

5. **The movement was exclusively nonviolent.**

Two forms of nonviolence guided many civil rights actions and protests: philosophical and tactical. Martin Luther King Jr., for example, was known for his philosophy of nonviolence, while organizations of SNCC embraced tactical nonviolence in their early demonstrations. It is also important to recognize that many tactics did not involve or require nonviolence. Nonviolence was key in challenging segregation, but it was not as relevant for voter registration efforts. Civil rights leaders also knew that even if African Americans adopted nonviolent strategies, it would not stop violent retaliation from racist white citizens and police. Black Americans, particularly those involved in the movement, lived under constant threat of violence. In numerous cases, members of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist organizations attacked or murdered civil rights organizers and volunteers. This violence was often met with no justice. Black Americans also had to constantly protect their churches and homes from threats of bombings. In response, many Black individuals recognized the need for self-defense and armed themselves to protect their families and communities against these violent attacks.