

No Turning Back History to Know Before You Play

Before the class begins playing MISSION US: “No Turning Back” your students should be familiar with five important pieces of historical context. If you have not already taught this material in your class, introduce it to your students before they make their way through life in Greenwood as Verna Baker.

1. The Civil Rights Movement grew out of Black Americans’ long history of struggle against repression.

After the Civil War, African Americans gained new citizenship rights. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments outlawed slavery and granted civil rights to former slaves, including voting rights for African American men. But segregation persisted, with facilities like schools, transportation, and theaters separating Blacks and whites. By the late 1880s, Southern states had passed "Jim Crow" laws to require separation. In the 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the US Supreme Court affirmed these laws, enshrining the legality of “separate but equal” public facilities. Southern States also suppressed Black voting rights by subjecting African Americans to literacy tests, poll taxes, and intimidation. Many white Americans enforced this system of racial discrimination with terror and violence.

2. The modern civil rights movement began decades before Brown v. Board of Education and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the 1950s.

From its founding in 1909, the NAACP fought to end violence against African Americans and to eliminate segregation in education. With local chapters across the South, the organization mobilized ordinary citizens for civil rights. In the North, urban African Americans launched the “Don’t Shop Where You Can’t Work” campaign, boycotting businesses that excluded Black workers. Around the same time, groups like the United Negro Improvement Association emerged to foster Black economic self-sufficiency.

During World War II, millions of African Americans joined the military, many aiming to showcase their commitment to the nation and their demands for equal treatment. The 1942 Double V campaign sought victory against fascism abroad and victory against racism at home. Black war veterans challenged Jim Crow laws upon returning home, contributing to the groundwork for the transformative civil rights era.

3. African American gains led to organized resistance and violence from many whites.

After the Supreme Court ruled school segregation unconstitutional in 1954, white opposition to African Americans’ pursuit of civil rights intensified. State legislatures and officials led campaigns against school desegregation, even closing public schools to prevent 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

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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 used violence to enforce the racial hierarchy in the South. In 1955, fourteen year-old Emmett Till, a Black Chicagoan who was visiting relatives in the Mississippi Delta, was accused by a white woman of whistling at her in a country store. White residents savagely beat and murdered him. A photograph of Till's open casket was published in newspapers across the country, making his murder the subject of national outrage.

As African Americans organized protests—sit-ins, freedom rides, voter registration drives, boycotts, and more—they faced threats and violence throughout the 1960s. White supremacists bombed churches, shot into activists' homes, attacked demonstrators, and murdered leaders. All-white police and juries unjustly punished civil rights workers while shielding white perpetrators from criminal responsibility.

4. Despite the danger, ordinary citizens across the South became active in the struggle for equality. Young people became a driving force behind activism and built a national movement that resulted in new legislation.

In February 1960, Black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, began a series of nonviolent “sit-ins,” which swept through the South and captured national attention. By that spring, at least 70,000 participants in more than 100 Southern cities participated in sit-ins, enduring taunts and abuse from gangs of white people.

Activist Ella Baker organized students in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC – pronounced “snick”) in 1960. SNCC’s philosophy was that ordinary people had the power to effect slower, long-lasting change at the local level. The organization gave local people organizing skills to build political power in their communities.

In 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) organized “Freedom Rides” to challenge segregation in interstate transportation, including bus terminals. CORE recruited white and black students to be Freedom Riders. The first group leaving Washington D.C. was viciously attacked at multiple stops where mobs burned one of the buses and assaulted the riders. But other Freedom Rides continued, with SNCC bolstering the efforts with new volunteers.

The summer of 1963 saw 758 demonstrations in both the North and South, emphasizing not only civil rights but also economic justice and human rights. The 1963 “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” drew nearly a quarter-million people. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech in which he articulated a broad vision for the civil rights movement.

Scenes of civil rights activism and violent white resistance pointed to the need for federal laws to provide full citizenship rights to Black residents. The federal government finally took action. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended segregation in all public accommodations, including

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theaters, restaurants, and swimming pools. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 gave the Justice Department 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 Malcolm 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 Malcolm X, this sentiment was adopted by the Black Panther Party, which was formed in October 1966 in Oakland, CA. For a decade, the Black Panthers provided free breakfasts, schooling, and health care in many communities around the country. 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 subsequent decades, African American political representation increased, culminating in Barack Obama's 2008 election as the first Black president. Media representation and professional opportunities also improved, even as disparities in these areas persist.

New challenges have emerged, including the expansion of America's prison system, which has the world's highest incarceration rate, disproportionately affecting Black men. Systemic police violence and voting restrictions in Black communities have also persisted, hindering African Americans' rights. Despite progress, many disparities in access to education, healthcare, jobs, and housing continue to endure.

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.