

Historical Moments

Brown v. Board of Education



A teacher enrolls children in newly integrated classes at a school in Springer, Oklahoma, August 29, 1958. (© AP Images)

This landmark decision declared unconstitutional state statutes that required the segregation of public schools by race.

The Brown case was filed in 1951 on behalf of the Reverend Oliver Brown, a Topeka, Kansas, welder whose daughter was required to attend a black school 21 blocks from her house when a white school was only 7 blocks away. The lawsuit was later consolidated with similar cases from other states, and argued before the Supreme Court by Thurgood Marshall in 1952 and 1953.

that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore we hold that the plaintiffs... [have been] deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the 14th Amendment."

The Supreme Court on May 17, 1954 issued a unanimous opinion written by Chief Justice Earl Warren. "We conclude

Related articles: [50th Anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education](#)
[Brown v. Board of Education: The Law, the Legacy](#)

The Civil Rights Act of 1964



U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson reaches to shake hands with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (© AP Images)

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on July 2 of that year. It declared illegal certain long-practiced forms of discrimination, authorized the government to act against others and, perhaps most significantly, demonstrated a political consensus to wield federal authority against legal inequity "on the ground of race, color, religion, or national origin."

In a [nationally televised address](#) that evening, Johnson declared:

"We believe that all men are created equal. Yet many are denied equal treatment.
"We believe that all men have certain unalienable rights. Yet many Americans do not enjoy those rights.

"We believe that all men are entitled to the blessings of liberty. Yet millions are being deprived of those blessings--not because of their own failures, but because of the color of their skin.

"The reasons are deeply imbedded in history and tradition and the nature of man. We can understand -- without rancor or hatred -- how all this happened.

"But it cannot continue. Our Constitution, the foundation of our Republic, forbids it. Morality forbids it. And the law I will sign tonight forbids it."

Related article: [Nation Celebrates Anniversary Of Landmark Civil Rights Law](#)

1963 March on Washington



Martin Luther King Jr. at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, August 28, 1963. (© AP Images)

The 1963 march was the brainchild of civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph, the legendary president of the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first black labor union in the United States.

After President Kennedy submitted a comprehensive civil rights bill to Congress in June 1963, Randolph, King and other civil rights leaders agreed in July that a march was necessary to build support for the bill and other needed reforms. Kennedy at first opposed the march, fearing violence, but later embraced it.

The march took place two months later on August 28. "Freedom trains," and "freedom buses," brought more than 250,000 people to Washington from all parts of the United States. In addition to civil rights leaders and U.S. Senators and Representatives, major celebrities attended the event, including Jackie Robinson (who had broken the race barrier in major league baseball 16 years earlier), James Baldwin, Burt Lancaster, Paul Newman, Marlon Brando, Sidney Poitier, Lena Horne, Harry Belafonte, Charlton Heston, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Josephine Baker (who flew in from Paris).

Related article: [Rally Held To Commemorate 40th Anniversary of March on Washington](#)

Voting Rights Act



U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act of 1965. (© AP Images)

The Voting Rights Act authorized the federal government to assume control of the voter registration process in any state or voting district that in 1964 had employed a literacy or other qualifying test and in which fewer than half of voting age residents had either registered or voted.

Six entire southern states were thus "covered," as were a number of counties in several other states. Covered jurisdictions were prohibited from modifying their voting rules and regulations without first affording federal officials the opportunity to review the change for discriminatory intent or effect. Other provisions barred the future use of literacy tests and directed the Attorney General to commence legal action to end the use of poll taxes in state elections.

The Voting Rights Act was originally enacted for a 5-year period but it has been both extended and expanded to introduce new requirements, such as the provision of bilingual election materials. In 1982, President Ronald Reagan signed a 25-year extension of the act. "The right to vote is the crown jewel of American liberties," he said, "and we will not see its luster diminished."

Related article: [Americans Celebrate 40th Anniversary of Voting Rights Act](#)

Montgomery Bus Boycott



Civil rights activist Rosa Parks, June 22, 1988 (© AP Images)

The successful African American boycott of segregated Montgomery, Alabama, buses, which began with the arrest of Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955, transformed the civil rights cause into a mass political movement. It demonstrated that African Americans could unite and engage in disciplined political action, and marked the emergence of Martin Luther King Jr.—the indispensable leader who inspired millions, held them to the high moral standard of nonviolent resistance, and built bridges between Americans of all races, creeds and colors.

When Rosa Parks rode home from work on the afternoon of December 1, 1955, she sat in the first row of the “colored section” of seats between the “white” and “black rows.” When the white seats filled, the driver required Parks to give up her seat when another white boarded the bus. Parks refused, and was thereupon arrested, jailed, and ultimately fined \$10, plus \$4 in court costs. Parks was 42 years old; she had crossed the line into direct political action.

Related article: [Civil Rights Catalyst Rosa Parks Dead at 92](#)