

# Civil Rights in the USA

## Black people and WWII

WWII highlighted the racism and discrimination in the military. Black Americans served in segregated units. Black soldiers were given lower status jobs and excluded from the Marines and the Air Force. In the Navy, black soldiers were given the most dangerous jobs. Some progress was made, though – by 1944 there were integrated units, hundreds of black officers and fighter squadrons of black pilots – by 1945 600 black pilots had been trained (although they were not allowed to fly in the same groups as white pilots). The US military was desegregated between 1946 and 1948.

WWII was a time of some progress in employment opportunities and the military. Many black Americans became more involved in campaigning for civil rights and membership to groups like NAACP grew massively during WWII.

## The issue of education

Many US states had segregated school systems based on a 'separate but equal' doctrine. The reality was the black schools often received only 1/3 of the funding of white schools. Landmark cases aimed to challenge segregated schools:

- Brown v. Topeka: NAACP challenged the Topeka govt in the Supreme Court on the basis that segregated schools were psychologically harmful.
- Little Rock: 9 black students were allowed to enrol at the Little Rock High School. The black students suffered significant abuse from the white crowd. Federal troops had to escort the students. The governor closed all schools to prevent any black children attending.
- James Meredith was prevented from enrolling at Mississippi Uni, in response JFK sent 320 federal marshals to escort him. There were violent riots and 2000 troops needed to restore order.

## Rosa Parks, the Bus Boycott and the Montgomery Improvement Association

On 1<sup>st</sup> Dec 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to move to the 'black section' of the bus. Initially, a 1 day trial was organised for the day of her trial (5<sup>th</sup> Dec). Local activists became involved (including MLK) and established the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) to oversee the continuation of the bus boycott. The MIA took the case to federal law, who ruled that segregation was unconstitutional. This was upheld by the Supreme Court. This allowed the boycott to end on 20<sup>th</sup> Dec 1956 when MIA leaders travelled on an integrated bus.

## Martin Luther King

MLK was a Baptist minister who became a leader of the Civil Rights Movement. He led the MIA in the Bus Boycott and helped found the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) after this. He believed that boycotts and other forms of non-violent protests should be used in the struggle for equality.

Key dates:

- 1955 - MIA established with MLK as leader.
- 1957 - Formed and led the SCLC.
- 1963 – Birmingham March, imprisoned and wrote 'Letter from Birmingham Jail'. March on Washington. 'I have a dream speech' and voted Time magazine's 'Man of the Year'.
- 1964 – Civil Rights Act passed. Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.
- 1965 – Selma March. Voting Rights Act passed.
- 1968 – assassinated in Memphis.

## Malcolm X

Malcolm X was high profile member of the Nation of Islam – a group who never accepted MLK's approach and openly sought separatism. Malcolm X was an excellent orator and organiser.

He helped to set up education and social programmes for black youths. He is credited with connecting young black Americans with their African heritage and was influential in the spread of Islam in the Black community in the USA. Malcolm X strongly criticised events such as the March on Washington.

Malcolm X initially believed that violence could be used both as a form of self-defence, but also as a means to achieve a separate black nation.

However, this view changed after he visited Mecca (1964), prompting him to leave the Black Muslims and establish the Muslim Mosque, Inc. and the Organisation of Afro-American Unity. He came to believe that Muslims from different races could interact as equals. This created enemies, especially from the Black Muslims – he was assassinated by 3 black Muslims on 21<sup>st</sup> Feb 1965.

## Civil Rights Legislation

**1964 – Civil Rights Act:** segregation banned. Businesses who worked with the government were monitored for evidence of discrimination. Black students were given equal rights to enter all public places funded by government (places of education). Fair Employment Practices Commission made permanent. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission established to implement the law.

**1965 – Voting Rights Act:** ended literacy tests as a qualification for being allowed to vote. Ensured federal agents could monitor voting registration and step in if they felt that discrimination was evident (looking for at least 50% of all voting – age citizens registered as a guide to indicate less racial discrimination).

**1967 – Supreme Court** declared that state laws forbidding inter-racial marriage were unconstitutional.

**1968 – Fair Housing Act:** discrimination in housing based on race, colour, gender, national origin, or religion was outlawed.