

Then: The Civil Rights Movement

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the period from the 1950s and 1960s -- about 100 years after the Civil War -- when African Americans fought to end Jim Crow segregation laws so they could more fully be included in American society. The Civil Rights Movement was generally successful in ending legal segregation and legal injustices. However full inclusion in society has been slow and injustices have continued to today. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. The Civil Rights Movement
 - a. Martin Luther King, Jr.
 - b. Malcolm X



BEFORE YOU START

What are the similarities and differences between the strategies used by Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X?

1. The Civil Rights Movement

In the 20th century, there were many social changes that presented openings for African Americans to fight for equality. The New Deal, which we covered in Unit 1, created economic opportunities that were available to both Black and white Americans -- even if they greatly benefited whites more than Blacks. When the United States fought in World War I from 1917 to 1918 and in World War II from 1941 to 1945, African Americans served bravely in a military that remained segregated. Their service would later strengthen arguments for civil rights and integration.

While African Americans were able to serve in segregated units during WWI and WWII, their economic and political opportunities remained limited. One venue that was open to them at the time was artistic expression. The 20th century also brought an explosion of creativity, from the art and literature of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance to the jazz and blues that would form the basis of rock 'n' roll.

In 1954, the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* brought the struggle for civil rights to a tipping point. The Court ruled that segregation and "separate but equal" Jim Crow laws were unconstitutional. With this decision, a wave of new civil rights activism pushed the fight for equality further. Grassroots activists used new tactics to resist unjust laws, ranging from sit-ins at segregated lunch counters to the large-scale Montgomery bus boycott. With the new technology of television, the nightly news was

suddenly bringing stories—and images—of protest marches and violent police responses into living rooms across the country.



Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X briefly meet while in Washington, DC, to hear the Senate discuss the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Two of the best-known civil rights leaders of the 1960s were Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Although both sought justice for African Americans, they had different perspectives and often argued for the use of different tactics. Let's compare and contrast primary sources from both men.

1a. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr. King was a pastor and civil rights activist who advocated nonviolent confrontation to achieve racial equality. At the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963, King gave the memorable "I Have a Dream" speech in which—like Frederick Douglass and many others before him—he demanded that the country live up to its founding ideals. In the years immediately following King's speech, some parts of his dream were realized with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Let's look at an excerpt from this speech, which is his most famous address (King, 1963):

Primary Source Excerpt

Type: Speech

Author: Martin Luther King, Jr.

Date: 1963

There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: in the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

1b. Malcolm X

Malcolm X was a leader in the Black nationalist movement who believed that equality for African Americans would not be achieved through cooperation or working toward integration. In 1964, a year before he was assassinated, he made his views plain in this speech at the founding rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (BlackPast, 2007):

Primary Source Excerpt

Type: Speech

Author: Malcolm X

Date: 1964

We want freedom by any means necessary. We want justice by any means necessary. We want equality by any means necessary. We don't feel that in 1964, living in a country that is supposedly based upon freedom, and supposedly the leader of the free world, we don't think that we should have to sit around and wait for some segregationist congressmen and senators and a President from Texas in Washington, D.C., to make up their minds that our people are due now some degree of civil rights. No, we want it now or we don't think anybody should have it.

Throughout this long struggle for civil rights, we find recurring themes of African Americans focusing on making legal and political progress while keeping their communication focused on demanding a transformation of the collective mindset about issues of race. In a changing social and legal landscape, African American activists relied on their **communication skill**, **agility skill**, and, above all, persistence to fight for equality. Our takeaway from these historical narratives is that these are the skills that we will need to use to further the cause of civil rights now and in the future.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **Civil Rights movement**, which sought to end legal discrimination and segregation that had been practiced since the end of Reconstruction. As with earlier periods of Black activism, movement leaders like **Martin Luther King, Jr.** and **Malcolm X** held different opinions about the best strategy to achieve the movement's goals.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.

REFERENCES

(1964) *Malcolm X's Speech at the Founding Rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity* (2007, October 15). BlackPast. www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1964-malcolm-x-s-speech-founding-rally-organization-afro-american-unity

King, Martin Luther, Jr. (1963, August 28). *"I Have a Dream," Address Delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University. kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X briefly meet while in Washington, DC, to hear the Senate discuss the Civil Rights Act of 1964.](#) | Author: Marion S. Trikosko / Library of Congress | License: Public Domain