What mobilized African Americans to fight for civil rights in the 1950s?

Building on the civil rights initiatives begun during World War II, African Americans posed the most dramatic challenge to the status quo of the 1950s as they sought to topple discrimination and segregation. At the opening of the decade, every southern state mandated rigid segregation in public settings, ranging from schools to cemeteries. Segregation in practice, if not by law, was also commonplace in the North. Voting laws and practices in the South disfranchised the vast majority of African Americans, and blacks faced systematic employment discrimination throughout the country.

Although black protest was as old as American racism, in the 1950s grassroots movements arose that attracted national attention and the support of white liberals. Pressed by civil rights groups, the Supreme Court delivered significant institutional reforms, but some of the most important changes occurred among blacks themselves. Ordinary African Americans in substantial numbers sought their own liberation, building a movement that would transform race relations in the United States.

African Americans Challenge the Supreme Court and the President

Several factors galvanized black protest in the 1950s. Between 1940 and 1960, more than three million African Americans migrated from the South to areas where they had a political voice. Black leaders highlighted how racist practices at home tarnished the U.S. image abroad and handicapped the United States in its competition with the Soviet Union. The very fact of segregation meant that African Americans controlled certain organizational resources, such as black churches, colleges, and newspapers, where leadership skills could be honed and networks developed.

The legal strategy of the major civil rights organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), reached its crowning achievement with the Supreme Court's ruling in ***Brown v. Board of Education*** in 1954, which consolidated five separate suits. Oliver Brown, a World War II veteran in Topeka, Kansas, filed suit because his daughter had to pass by a white school near their home to attend a black school more than a mile away. In Virginia, sixteen-year-old Barbara Johns initiated a student strike over wretched conditions in her all-black high school, leading to

another of the suits joined in *Brown*. The NAACP's lead lawyer, future Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall, urged the Court to overturn the "separate but equal" precedent established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 (see chapter 21). A unanimous Court, headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren, agreed, declaring that "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" and thus violated the Fourteenth Amendment.

Ultimate responsibility for enforcement of the decision lay with President Eisenhower, but he refused to endorse *Brown*. He also kept silent in 1955 when whites murdered Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy who had allegedly whistled at a white woman in Mississippi. Reflecting his own prejudice, his preference for limited federal intervention in the states, and a leadership style favoring consensus and gradual progress, Eisenhower distanced the White House from civil rights issues. Such inaction fortified southern resistance.

In September 1957, Governor Orval Faubus sent Arkansas National Guard troops to block the enrollment of nine black students at Little Rock's Central High School. He later allowed the students to enter but withdrew the National Guard, leaving the "Little Rock Nine" to face an angry white mob. "During those years when we desperately needed approval from our peers," Melba Patillo Beals remembered,

“we were victims of the most harsh rejection imaginable.” As television cameras transmitted the ugly scene, Eisenhower was forced to send regular army troops to Little Rock, the first federal military intervention in the South since Reconstruction. Paratroopers escorted the Little Rock Nine into Central High, staying for the remainder of the school year. Faubus, however, closed the public schools the next fall in order to prevent integration, provoking no further response from the president. White resistance to integration, whether via mob violence or school closings, continued across the South.

School segregation outside the South was not usually sanctioned by law, but northern school districts found ways to separate black and white students by manipulating neighborhood boundaries. Even before *Brown*, black parents in dozens of northern cities challenged the assignment of their children to inferior “colored” schools. While they had some successes, residential segregation, often supported by official action, made school segregation a reality for African Americans in both the North and South.

Civil rights agitation resulted in some congressional and presidential action. Eisenhower ordered the integration of public facilities in Washington, D.C., and on military bases, and he supported the first federal civil rights legislation since Reconstruction. Yet the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and

1960 were little more than symbolic. Baseball star Jackie Robinson spoke for many African Americans when he wired Eisenhower in 1957, “We disagree that half a loaf is better than none. Have waited this long for a bill with meaning — can wait a little longer.” Eisenhower appointed the first black professional to his White House staff, but E. Frederick Morrow confided in his diary, “I feel ridiculous … trying to defend the administration’s record on civil rights.”

Montgomery and Mass Protest

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s drew on earlier acts of black resistance. What set it apart was its widespread presence in the South, the large number of people involved, their willingness to confront white institutions directly, and the use of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience to bring about change. The Congress of Racial Equality and other groups had experimented with these tactics in the 1940s, organizing to integrate movie theaters, restaurants, and swimming pools in northern cities. In the South, the first sustained protest to claim national attention began in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 1, 1955.

FPG/Getty Images.

Civil Rights Activism in the North Black protest had a long history in the North, where African Americans and their allies battled job discrimination and segregation in schools, housing, and public accommodations. Here, demonstrators march outside the Stork Club in New York City in 1951, protesting its refusal to serve the world-famous dancer, singer, and actress Josephine Baker. Note how one of the signs capitalizes on Cold War rhetoric.

Description

The signs read, We protest, Humiliation of Josephine Baker, N A A C P; We protest Discrimination in service of negroes, N A A C P; Stork Club color discrimination Un-American, N A A C P; Famous Nite Spot Just a White spot, N A A C P.

That day, police arrested Rosa Parks for violating a local segregation ordinance. Riding a crowded bus home from work, she refused to give up her seat in the white section so that a man could sit down. She resisted not because she was physically tired, she recalled; rather she was “tired of giving in.” The bus driver called the police, who promptly arrested her. Parks had long been active in the local NAACP, headed by E. D. Nixon, and had sought an opportunity to challenge bus segregation. So had the Women’s Political Council (WPC), led by Jo Ann Robinson, an English professor at Alabama State, who had once been humiliated by a bus driver when she accidentally sat in the white section.

When word came that Parks would fight her arrest, WPC leaders mobilized teachers and students to distribute fliers urging blacks to boycott the buses. E. D. Nixon called a mass meeting at a black church, where those assembled founded the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). The MIA arranged volunteer car pools and marshaled most of the black community to sustain what became the yearlong **Montgomery bus boycott**.

Elected to head the MIA was twenty-six-year-old Martin Luther King Jr., a young Baptist pastor with a doctorate in theology from Boston University. A captivating speaker, King addressed mass meetings at black churches throughout the bus boycott, inspiring courage and commitment by linking

racial justice to Christianity. He promised, “If you will protest courageously and yet with dignity and Christian love … historians will have to pause and say, ‘There lived a great people — a black people — who injected a new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.’”

Montgomery blacks summoned their courage and determination. Boycotters walked miles or carpooled to get to work, contributed their meager financial resources to the cause, and stood up to intimidation and police harassment. One older woman declared, “I’m not walking for myself, I’m walking for my children and my grandchildren.” Authorities arrested several leaders, and whites firebombed King’s house. Yet the boycott persisted until November 1956, when the Supreme Court declared Alabama’s laws requiring bus segregation unconstitutional.

King’s appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine in February 1957 marked his rapid rise to national and international fame. Black clergy from across the South chose King to head the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), newly established to coordinate local protests against segregation and disfranchisement. The prominence of King and other ministers tended to overshadow the substantial numbers of black women whose grassroots action would be critical to the movement. King’s fame and the media’s focus on the South also obscured the

national scope of racial injustice. Yet the push for racial equality would dramatically transform both the North and the South in the years to come.

REVIEW

What were the goals and strategies of civil rights activists in the 1950s?

Conclusion: What challenges did peace and prosperity mask?

At the American exhibit in Moscow in 1959, the consumer goods that Nixon proudly displayed to Khrushchev spoke to two related postwar themes: American prosperity and superpower rivalry. The era’s tremendous economic growth, raising the standard of living for most Americans, was often celebrated as the product of a free enterprise system. But it rested on federal Cold War defense spending as well. The large military outlays that began under Truman helped jump-start postwar prosperity. Eisenhower’s continued defense spending, along with housing, highway, and education subsidies, sustained the economic boom.

Prosperity changed the very landscape of the United States. Suburban housing developments sprang up, interstate highways cut up cities and connected the country, farms declined in number but grew in size, and people and industry moved south and west. Not all Americans welcomed these changes, some decrying consumerism and its environmental costs. Nor did all Americans benefit from economic growth. At the height of the affluent society, a shocking forty million people lived in poverty. Material abundance masked other developments as well: persistent

racial injustice and rising resistance to it, married women’s movement into the labor force, and the emergence of a youth rebellion.

Compared to the vigorous federal activity of the New Deal years, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations — focused on the Cold War crisis — enacted little in the way of landmark legislation. The most important domestic development of the postwar era would come not from elected leaders but from the assertion of citizenship rights by those who had been left outside the affluent society’s promise, whether Mexican Americans in Los Angeles or African Americans in Montgomery and Little Rock. In the 1960s, new leaders would take up the struggle against communism. They would also grapple with unaddressed domestic challenges of racism, poverty, and urban decay. As a new decade dawned, the stage was set for turbulence and conflict.