

TRACING

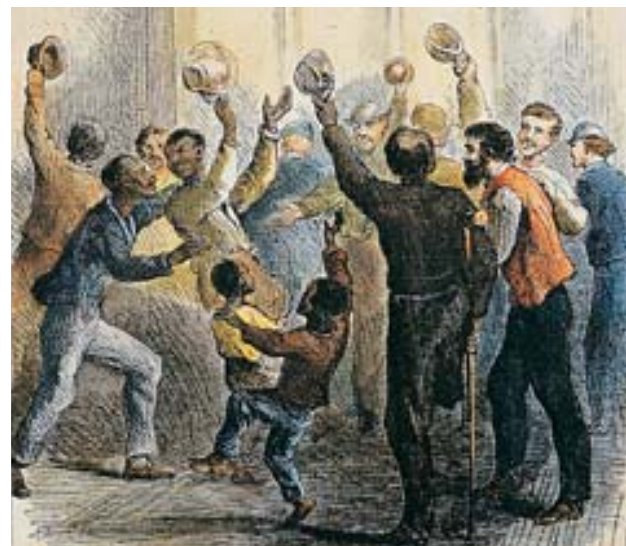
THEMES

Civil Rights

Thomas Jefferson asserted in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” and are endowed with the “unalienable rights” of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” With these words, a new nation was founded on the principle that citizens have certain fundamental civil rights. These include the right to vote, the right to enjoy freedom of speech and religion, and others. For more than 200 years, the United States has stood as a worldwide example of a country committed to securing the rights of its people.

However, throughout the nation’s history, some Americans have had to struggle to obtain even the most basic civil rights. Laws or customs prevented certain people from voting freely, from speaking their minds on political issues, and from living and going where they wish. Over time, many of these barriers have been torn down.

In recent years, the United States has tried to promote human rights in other countries through its foreign policy. Even as it does so, the United States continues to struggle to fulfill for all Americans the lofty ideals established by the nation’s founders.



1791

▼ BILL OF RIGHTS

During the Constitutional Convention, the question of a bill of rights arose, but none was included. During the process of ratification, many people argued that the Constitution needed to list the basic civil rights and liberties that the federal government could not take away from the people.

Accordingly, the nation ratified ten amendments to the Constitution—the Bill of Rights. It establishes such rights as freedom of speech, religion, and assembly, freedom of the press, and the right to a trial by jury. While these rights have been subject to interpretation over the nation’s history, the Bill of Rights serves as the cornerstone of American democracy.



1868

THE FOURTEENTH AMENDMENT ▲

In the engraving above, a crowd of black and white Americans celebrates the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1866. This act recognized the citizenship of African Americans and granted the same civil rights to all people born in the United States except Native Americans.

The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified two years later, made these changes part of the Constitution. The Amendment declared that states cannot deny anyone “equal protection of the laws” and extended the right to vote to all 21-year-old males, including former slaves.

Despite these provisions, African Americans and other groups would still struggle to claim their full rights as U.S. citizens.

1950s & 1960s

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT ►

Despite the Fourteenth Amendment and later the Fifteenth Amendment, which forbade states from denying anyone the right to vote on account of race, African Americans continued to live as second-class citizens, especially in the South.

During the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans and other Americans led a powerful movement to fight for racial equality. The movement often met with strong resistance, such as in Birmingham, Alabama, where police sprayed demonstrators with high-pressure fire hoses (*right*). Nevertheless, it succeeded in securing for African Americans the civil rights promised by the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. The civil rights movement has also been the basis for other groups gaining equal rights, including other minorities, women, and people with disabilities.



1970s

HUMAN RIGHTS ►

President Jimmy Carter considered human rights an important foreign policy issue. Human rights are what Americans think of as their civil rights, including the right to vote and to receive a fair trial. The Carter administration tried to encourage greater freedom abroad by taking such steps as cutting off military aid to countries with poor human rights records.


While these efforts met with mixed results, the issue of human rights has continued to influence U.S. foreign policy. In the 1990s, for example, the U.S. government tried to push China toward increasing human rights while keeping alive its trade ties with that country.

As a private citizen, Jimmy Carter has also continued to champion human rights causes. In 1982, he and his wife, Rosalynn, founded the Carter Center, whose programs seek to end human rights abuses and promote democracy worldwide.

THINKING CRITICALLY

CONNECT TO HISTORY

- Analyzing Issues** The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments both provided for the voting rights of African Americans. Based on what you have read in the chapter, how were these rights denied African Americans? How were they finally secured?

 **SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R14.**

CONNECT TO TODAY

- Writing About Rights** Have you or anyone you've known had their civil rights denied them in any way? Research a current-day instance of an alleged civil rights injustice. Write an account of the issue and share it with your class.



RESEARCH LINKS

CLASSZONE.COM