**Civil Rights Movement**

**Part I: The Movement Begins (1954-59)**

**Why it was needed**

Minorities were being denied their rights in all aspects of society. Politically, they were being kept from voting in the South through literacy tests, poll taxes and the fact they had to register at local elections offices, largely staffed by whites who were racist and make it very hard for them to register. Minorities also faced segregation in two forms: De Facto (lawful) and De Jure (traditional, know your place).

The focus of the CRM (Civil Rights Movement abbreviation) was in the South where legal segregation occurred, but discrimination and denial of legal rights were happening everywhere. This included all minorities (Hispanic, Asian, Native American) but was led mainly by African American activists.

The Cold War played a big part in white support for civil rights. We were supposedly the shining light for the rest of the world to follow, yet we still denied some of our citizens a good life based on their skin color? Communism didn’t discriminate based on race or color. So if we’re going to talk the talk about being the best society in the world, we needed to walk the walk.

**Origins of the CRM**

Recall that the 14th Amendment, passed during Reconstruction in 1868, said that all people born in the US are citizens and thus are provided equal protection under the law. However, the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)* legally established the “Separate but Equal Doctrine,” which said that segregation laws were legal as long as equal services were provided to both sides. In the 1950s, the NAACP begins to challenge, in court, segregation and discrimination laws based on equal protection clause of 14th Amendment.

Also at this time, blacks are becoming more politically powerful. The Great Migration after World War II meant more African Americans were concentrated in the North, where voter restriction laws (literacy test/poll taxes, etc) didn’t exist. So more politicians in national government were becoming more responsive to African American concerns. A majority of African American voters supported Democrats, which became the party of most minorities during FDR’s New Deal during the Great Depression in the 1930s.

**CORE**, or the Congress On Racial Equality, was an early civil rights group that organized the first protests for civil rights in the 50s, sponsoring **sit-ins**. These were where African Americans would go “sit-in” somewhere and refuse to leave. It was a peaceful, passive form of protest, known as civil disobedience. A majority of civil rights protests would be passive and peaceful on the African American end. The same cannot be said on the white side of these Southern protests.

***Brown v. Board of Education (of Topeka, Kansas)* and its impact**

*Brown v. Board* *of Education of Topeka, Kansas* was the landmark decision that opened the flood gate for legally striking down segregation in all areas of society. The case started in 1951 when a lawsuit was filed against the school board in Topeka, Kansas, saying the fact that an 11-year-old African America girl had to walk a mile to get to a bus stop to take her across town to the black elementary school was discrimination and violated the equal protection clause of 14th Amendment. This was a violation because she lived two blocks away from the white elementary school.

The case went to the Supreme Court and the court agreed that Separate but Equal does not apply to public schools. The Court said that segregated public schools do violate equal protection. In schools, “separate is inherently unequal,” the Court stated in its opinion. This is the first case that went against *Plessy v. Ferguson* and while it applied only to public schools, not society as a whole (restaurants, busses, hotels, parks, etc.), it set a legal precedent (or example) for future anti-segregation lawsuits to build upon.

The reaction in South is huge, and not in a positive way for African Americans. Southern Senators get together to produce the Southern Manifesto, a letter that encouraged southern whites to resist all attempts at integration. The resulting action would become known as **massive resistance**.

**Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott**

Soon after *Brown v. Board*, Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, as required by state law. Public transportation was segregated at the time with the front of busses reserved for whites, the back for African Americans and the middle as a kind of neutral zone: if a white wanted a seat there that an African American was sitting in, they had to move. Parks refused to give up her seat. This was a planned action, contrary to popular belief that she was “too tired” to get up and move. She was, indeed, tired – tired of living under segregation. Parks was arrested for violating the law. This sparks a year-long boycott by the black community of the bus system in Montgomery, Ala. Martin Luther King, Jr., emerges during this as the leader of the CRM. He promoted peaceful protest. He told protesters: Do not fight back, even if attacked because if you do, that’s what’s going to be reported – that African Americans were using violence. The fact they were attacked first would be ignored.

Meanwhile, Parks sued the City of Montgomery, based on 14th Amendment, and case came back just like *Brown v. Board* – segregation on public transportation was unconstitutional. The flood gates were fully opened for desegregation orders in all parts of society.

**Eisenhower and Civil Rights**

Ike didn’t want to take a stand for black rights when he was president. While he supported civil rights (he had helped integrate the military when he was still a General in the early 1950s), he didn’t feel you could FORCE whites to accept black rights. He believed it had to be the natural evolution of things. If you try to force people, that will make them resist it even more (very Booker T. Washington-like in his beliefs).

But, Eisenhower did have to take stand when Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas thought it was ready to follow the *Brown v. Board* decision in 1957. Nine black students, which would become known as the **Little Rock Nine**, enrolled at the previously all-white school. When they showed up for school, they were met by an angry crowd of whites and found the doors to the school blocked by the Arkansas National Guard, at the direction of the governor. Ike had to call in Army to enforce desegregation because he needed to show Southerners that federal law overruled state law. If he hadn’t, southern whites in power would have felt free to ignore national laws ordering desegregation (also called integration).

**Part II: Challenging Segregation Everywhere (1960-1966)**

**The SNCC is born**

One of the best know CRM organizations is the **Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)** that was formed in Greensboro, North Carolina, by a group of African American college students. It started with a sit-in protest at the lunch counter in a local Woolworth’s store. Woolworth’s used to be as common as Wal-Mart is today. It was a store where you could get just about anything, including food at a little lunch counter. Woolworth’s in the South had a white lunch counter in the main part of the store, and a separate one in the basement, or back of the store, for African American customers.

One day, four black students came in and sat down at the white lunch counter and refused to leave until they were served. They sat there all day until closing without being served. The next day they showed up with more of their friends and it grew each day. This sparked a nationwide sit-in movement, especially among college students. The protesters remained non-violent (remember, the organization is called the S**N**CC) even when some were attacked by whites.

**The Freedom Riders, May 1961**

The Freedom Riders were made up mostly of members of the SNCC. Their purpose was to ride interstate buses (think Greyhound) into the South and integrate bus terminal waiting rooms. One of the destinations was Birmingham, Ala. When the bus carrying the Freedom Riders arrived there, the Riders were beaten by a mob of angry whites, mostly KKK members, and the cops were nowhere to be found. Many of the Freedom Riders were white college kids who believed segregation was wrong. They were beaten very severely.

When asked, Birmingham Safety Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor, who was head of the police, said he’d given his police officers (all of them) the day off to spend with their mothers. It was, after all, Mother’s Day. In reality, he’d ordered them to stay home and had authorized the KKK to attack the Freedom Riders. The press (TV, newspapers, etc.) were on-hand to report on the events and the violence displayed didn’t sit well with a lot of whites across the country. The CRM was starting to gain white support.

**JFK and Civil Rights**

JFK was thought to be the Great White Hope for the black community. Without the black vote, JFK wouldn’t have won the election in 1960. But when he took office, he quickly backed off some of the promises he’d made because he knew a hard stance on civil rights would alienate Southern Senators and he’d need their support for other things he wanted to get done.

Yet he didn’t abandon the black community altogether. He did appoint 40 African Americas to high-ranking government jobs and created the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, which made it illegal to discriminate based on race for hiring and promotion when it came to GOVERNMENT jobs. Under Johnson (JFK’s VP and who would replace him after he is assassinated), this would be expanded to encompass all employers in the US.

JFK also took a stand to allow **James Meredith** to enroll and graduate from the University of Mississippi in 1962. JFK had to send in troops (reminiscent of Little Rock for Eisenhower) to get Meredith to class. He also had to have bodyguards for the entire year he attended, but he became the first African American graduate from the University of Mississippi (commonly known today as “Ole Miss”).

**Violence Returns in Birmingham in the spring of 1963**

Martin Luther King Jr. wasn’t happy with JFK’s progress toward civil rights in the spring of 1963, so he wanted to force him to take a harder stance. So he organized marches in Birmingham, knowing Bull Connor will overreact and order beatings like he did in 1961 with the Freedom Rides. MLK is thrown in jail in Birmingham before the first march on a charge of disturbing the peace. Connor thought if he locked MLK up, the protests would fall apart. But King pens his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” while incarcerated that lays out the reasoning for civil rights and appeals to whites to support them. The letter is published nationwide. Then when he is released and the march happens, Connor does allow beatings that end up on TV.

The beatings coupled with the “letter” galvanize lot of white support for civil rights and JFK begins to prep a civil rights bill that will outlaw all segregation and truly give blacks equal protection under the law. But there is still a long way to go before a bill goes before Congress, and people’s memories are short…

**Announcing the Civil Rights Act of 1964**

While the violence in Birmingham gives JFK the incentive needed to order a civil rights legislation to be written, but the time it is written, the violence is somewhat forgotten. Now JFK needs something else to happen to cause outrage against the mistreatment of blacks, and therefore get people to support his bill.

This “something” happens in June of ‘63 when the University of Alabama gets its first black student. White KKK members that night kidnap and kill Medgar Evers, a young leader of the local NAACP.

In the wake of Evers’ murder, JFK announces his Civil Rights Act, but needs Congress to approve it. To help pressure congressional leaders into passing it, the March on Washington is organized by the **SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference)**, headed by MLK. Over 200,000 people show up and that is where MLK gives his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

In 1964, the Civil Rights Act passes Congress and now-President Lyndon Johnson signs it into law. It outlaws segregation and discrimination and includes the **Equal Opportunity Employment Act**. This makes it illegal to discriminate against someone based on race for ANY job in the United States.

**The Struggle for Voting Rights Continues**

Despite CRA 1964, African Americans still have to fight for the right to vote in the South. Literacy tests are still in place, as are other local/state laws like property requirements that prevent a majority of African Americans from voting. The leaders of the SCLC decide another big protest march is needed.

MLK chooses Selma, Ala., as site for the march because African Americans make up 80% of the town’s residents, but only 3% of its voters. Not surprisingly, again, the protestors get beat. These televised beatings during the “Selma March” gives support for what would become the **Voting Rights Act of 1965**. The VRA of 1965 outlaws literacy tests and makes it the job of federal officials to register voters, not local officials who were probably members of the KKK and intimidated African Americans to keep them from even registering. You must be registered in order to vote.

**Part III: 1965-1969, Economic Issues**

**and Radical Leadership**

*Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery.*

*-- Malcolm X*

**Despite CRA ’64 and VRA ’65, challenges remain**

So the legal hurdles are down, but economic and some social issues can’t be solved by court cases. African Americans are still the poorest segment of U.S. society, with half of all African Americans in 1964 living in poverty. In the inner cities, black slums dominate and crime rates and juvenile delinquency rates are climbing. Desperate people do desperate things, even to other desperate people. And racism faced by many African Americans can’t be outlawed or stopped with more legislation. Those are personal feelings that people hold that can’t easily be changed just because they’re told all Americans are equal, regardless of color.

**The Black Power Movement**

This more radical approach to pursuing rights and a better life for African Americans had dynamic leaders, most notably Stokely Carmichael, a former follower of MLK’s non-violence approach and leader of the SNCC, and Malcolm X, a leader of the Nation of Islam, also known as the Black Muslims.

The Black Power Movement promoted African American control of the social, political and economic direction of the black struggle to gain equality in the U.S. It was very similar to Marcus Garvey’s belief in Black Nationalism in the 1920s in that it promoted pride in being black, rejection of white society and the idea of racial distinctiveness for African Americans (basically segregation at the choice of African Americans).

Inner city residents flock the idea of Black Power because they aren’t seeing benefits of MLK’s efforts, nor the whites who support black rights. Those people are about white and black society coming together to help each other. In the inner city, they don’t see white people. They don’t vote. They aren’t kept out of certain restaurants because all restaurants are black. So the things King is achieving don’t impact them. What does impact them is the fact that they don’t have any money, and what they do see of whites is on TV when they are beating blacks for protesting.

Black Power also rejected MLK’s idea that non-violence, even in the face of violence, was necessary. The Black Power Movement said that if you were attacked, you had the right and the responsibility to protect yourself by fighting back. MLK, obviously, did not approve of this approach. Carmichael, who had been a close follower of King in the early 1960s, got tired of seeing African Americans being beaten and just taking it. He did not believe that whites would ultimately accept black equality, leading him to split off and go down the road to helping start the Black Power Movement.

**Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam**

The Nation of Islam is the best-known Black Power organization and Malcolm X was the symbolic leader of the organization during early/mid 1960s before he left the organization. The true leader of the Nation of Islam was Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm X was a fiery speaker who brought a lot of support to the movement. He was clear about African Americans’ right to protect themselves when attacked (see quote at start of this third section).

The Black Muslims are not Muslims in the sense of how we think of Muslims today. They also don’t subscribe to belief that Muslims of all races work together. They promote separate black and white societies (much like Garvey did) even within the Islamic community.

Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam after visiting Mecca, the holy city of the Islamic religion, and seeing Muslims of all colors and races worshipping together and treating each other with respect. In fact, he toured the U.S. after returning, speaking out AGAINST the Nation of Islam for not following true tenants of the religion. In February of 1965 he is shot and killed by two members of the Nation of Islam. It’s suspected that the organization’s leader, Elijah Muhammad, ordered the killing, but that was never proven.

**The Black Panthers**

The Black Panthers are the flashy organization of the Black Power Movement. Created and based in Oakland, Calif., they dressed up in military-like dress and held press conferences saying armed revolution was necessary for whites to give rights to blacks. They scared the daylights out of whites. But other than a few shootouts with police, they never walked the talk. They were known for walking around neighborhoods, and at press conferences, carrying automatic weapons with bandoleers of ammunition strapped across their chests.

The Panthers did have a 10-Point Program that created and sustained a lot of good programs for inner-city residents in Oakland. Those programs included education, daycare, job and housing assistance.

**King’s assassination brings an end to the unified movement**

In April of 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was in Memphis, Tenn., to organize a protest march in support of the city’s sanitation workers. He wanted to launch a campaign to get billions of dollars of government support to help end African American poverty. But as he stood on the balcony of his hotel, a white supremacist named James Earl Ray fatally shot him with a high-powered rifle from across the street.

When James Earl Ray shot MLK, that was basically the end of the organized civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Without him, there was no unifying figure African Americans and whites could get behind. As a result, the movement fractured among people with different goals and tactics. And divided as it was, the movement died.

Still, the movement had seen an end to legal segregation and laws denying blacks the right to vote. It also saw the outlawing of workplace discrimination.