

1 Civil rights

The 1964 Civil Rights Act gave the **federal government** the legal tools to end *de jure* segregation in the South. Racial discrimination was no longer enshrined in law and public transport, universities, hospitals, playgrounds, libraries, museums, privately owned theatres, movie houses, restaurants, gas stations and hotels were to be desegregated by 1965. The Act forbade discrimination in employment on grounds of race, religion and sex and established an Equal Employment Commission.

Congress passed the Act because of:

- the activism of civil rights organisations such as the NAACP, the SCLC, the CORE and the SNCC (see page 373)
- the sympathetic response of Northern whites to the civil rights movement
- the feeling that it would be a suitable tribute to the assassinated President Kennedy, who had introduced the bill
- President Johnson's commitment to civil rights and his persuasion of Congress.

The Act helped revolutionise the South in that many public places were desegregated. However, racism could not be legislated out of existence; although the Act supported the **Supreme Court's** ruling that schools should be desegregated, 68 per cent of Southern black schoolchildren still attended segregated schools in 1968. Although that statistic improved dramatically by 1973, when nearly half of black children attended majority white schools, a process of re-segregation began after that year.

The greatest weakness of the 1964 Civil Rights Act was that it did little to facilitate black voting in the **Deep South**. The problems faced by would-be black voters were demonstrated during Martin Luther King's Selma campaign.

The Selma campaign, March 1965

The situation of black Americans in the South was always worse in Deep South states (see map on page 367) such as Mississippi and Alabama, where white racists traditionally maintained even stricter control than in other Southern states.

Selma, Alabama had a population of 29,000, half of whom was black. However, despite an SNCC campaign, only 23 were registered voters. King therefore organised a campaign against **disfranchisement** in Selma, because he knew Sheriff Jim Clark would react violently to protest. As Birmingham had demonstrated (see page 373), King worked hard to ensure that black American protest should be non-violent but sought to elicit white violence in order to demonstrate white racism at its worst. King aimed to expose white brutality and black disfranchisement in Selma in the hope that it would force Congress to respond to President Johnson's request for voting rights legislation.

When King led would-be voters to try to register, whites threw venomous snakes at them, a trooper shot a youth trying to shield his mother from a beating and Sheriff Clark clubbed a black woman. When the Selma authorities jailed King for his demonstrations, he wrote a highly effective letter in which he said, 'This is Selma, Alabama. There are more Negroes in jail with me than there are on the voting rolls.' It was published in the *New York Times*.

The SCLC and the SNCC organised a march from Selma to the state capital Montgomery in order to further publicise their cause. When state troopers attacked the marchers with clubs and tear gas, black activists christened this 'Bloody Sunday'. 'Bloody Sunday' made worldwide headlines and prodded Congress into passing a Voting Rights Act (1965) that transformed the South.

The Voting Rights Act, 1965

The Voting Rights Act disallowed the literacy and constitutional interpretation tests that Southern white registrars traditionally used to stop black voter registration (see page 347). The power of Southern white registrars was decreased with the establishment of federal registrars.

The Voting Rights Act was a great success; by 1968 even Mississippi had 59 per cent of its black population registered to vote. Once registered, black people gained a voice in who represented them in local, state and federal government. As a result, the number of black Americans elected to office increased sixfold from 1965 to 1969, then doubled from 1969 to 1980. In 1969, Charles Evers became the first black man to be elected as mayor of Fayette, Mississippi. Fayette was a small town, but in 1973 two major Southern cities – Raleigh, North Carolina, and Atlanta, Georgia – elected black mayors. The Voting Rights Act ensured that from 1965 onwards, elected officials would pay more attention to the needs of the black population. King's campaign had contributed to great and positive change in the South.

King's changing priorities

Soon after Selma, the Watts ghetto in Los Angeles erupted. This caused King to change his priorities and to turn his attention to the ghettos.

Note it down

As you read this section, use a spider diagram (see page x) to make notes on the attempts of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam and the Black Power movement to improve ghetto life. Colour code each attempt to signify degree of success – for example, great success (green), some success (orange) and failure (red).

Ghetto problems

Ghetto residents faced many problems:

- Housing was invariably poor and white prejudice made it difficult for black Americans to move elsewhere. Furthermore, many were too poor to consider moving.
- Poor-quality education made it hard to break out of the poverty cycle. In the early 1960s, only 32 per cent of black students graduated from high school, compared to 56 per cent of whites. Black people constituted 11 per cent of Americans but 46 per cent of the unemployed. This was because of poor education and the decreased number of jobs for unskilled workers due to increased automation. Chicago had 50–70 per cent black youth unemployment.
- The vast majority of policemen were white and racist.

The problems of the ghettos led to ghetto riots and increased black radicalism in the years 1964–68.

The Watts riots, 1965

Black Americans rioted in some big city ghettos in the summer of 1964, but the first large-scale ghetto riot was in Watts in Los Angeles. In August 1965 black mobs crying 'Long live Malcolm X' (see page 390) set fire to several blocks of stores in Watts. The rioting had a great impact on Martin Luther King. He told the press this had been 'a class revolt of underprivileged against privileged ... the main issue is economic'. He began defining 'freedom' in terms of economic equality, called for 'a better distribution of the wealth' of America and planned his Chicago campaign.

Black Americans in the North, Midwest and West

Prior to the mid-1960s, most black Americans in the South considered it preferable to live in Northern cities such as New York, Midwestern cities such as Chicago and Western cities such as Los Angeles. Although white racism had led to *de facto* segregated housing and inferior ghetto schools that damaged employment opportunities, there were two main reasons why life in the North, Midwest or West seemed better. First, black people outside the South had the vote. As a result, there were two long-serving black Congressmen in the US House of Representatives. William Dawson represented a Chicago ghetto from 1943 to 1970, and Adam Clayton Powell represented New York City's Harlem ghetto from 1945 to 1971. Second, black Americans suffered less discrimination in public places. Rosa Parks said that she was attracted by the prospect of life in Detroit because black people could sit where they wanted on buses (see page 370).

The Chicago campaign, 1966

King staged a campaign in Chicago for two reasons. First, although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended *de jure* segregation in the South, *de facto* segregation and social and economic inequality continued in the ghettos. Second, many ghetto residents believed that the moderate civil rights leaders did not understand their problems and were no help in solving them. As a result, many were turning to radicalism and violence. Fearing that this would alienate whites and prevent further federal support, King hoped his Chicago campaign would encourage black ghetto residents to reject radicalism and violence and support the moderate wing of the civil rights movement.

Chicago's population of 3 million included 700,000 black Americans who suffered unemployment, housing and education problems in the ghetto. During the Chicago campaign, Martin Luther King's family became temporary ghetto residents from July to September 1966. His family found that their relationships deteriorated dramatically in the stifling heat of a small apartment without parks or pools in which to cool down.

King's campaign aimed to draw attention to the appalling living conditions in the ghetto and the difficulties facing any black family that tried to move out. In order to demonstrate and publicise the housing issues, King led reporters around rat-infested ghetto apartments that lacked heating for freezing winters or air conditioning for boiling summers, and led marches into white districts where black people could not buy or rent homes. The marchers were met with white abuse and violence. After two months of publicity, marches and protests, Mayor Daley made an agreement with King that the housing situation would be improved and King left Chicago in the belief that some progress had been made. However, Mayor Daley reneged on the agreement after King left Chicago.

The Chicago campaign's significance

Many Northern whites who had supported King's Southern campaign sympathised with Chicago whites who knew that if blacks moved into white working-class areas such as Cicero, property values would fall and schools would decline. Furthermore, helping the ghettos would cost taxpayers money and white Americans were unwilling to pay for improvements.

Not surprisingly, King's Chicago campaign achieved little. It alienated whites and despite a \$4 million federal government grant for Chicago housing and a legacy of community action, many black Chicagoans lapsed into apathy. Several SCLC workers remained in Chicago after King left, but one said, 'I have never seen such hopelessness ... A lot of people won't even talk to us.' Some turned

to the **Black Power movement** (see page 391), which contributed to King's increasing disillusionment and conviction that further progress was unlikely.

Nevertheless, King persisted. He sought to broaden the movement by uniting all the impoverished groups in his **Poor People's Campaign**. He wanted black Americans, **Hispanic Americans**, **Native Americans** and poor **Appalachian whites** to come together to camp out in Washington DC in a civil disobedience campaign that would draw national attention to their poverty. However, he soon admitted his idea 'just isn't working. People aren't responding'.

In March 1968 a white racist assassinated King in Memphis, Tennessee.

King's achievements

King's achievements were great. He played a vital role in the demise of *de jure* segregation in the South through his protests, inspiration and organisation. His exceptionally impressive rhetorical skills and ability to inspire helped to ensure the success of the Montgomery bus boycott (see page 370), after which he was recognised by many as the leading spokesman for black Americans. Although his SCLC was poorly organised and ineffective at first, other protesters recognised his publicity value and those involved in the sit-ins and **Freedom Rides** sought and gained his support. It is to King's credit that he was willing to be led as well as to lead. His belief in the effectiveness of mass protest and his manipulation of white violence switched the emphasis of black activism from the NAACP's litigation strategy to mass action and turned the antisegregation principles enshrined in *Brown* (see page 339) into reality. His influence peaked in 1963 with his speech at the March on Washington and his Birmingham campaign, both of which played a big part in encouraging Kennedy to support what became the 1964 Civil Rights Act. His Selma campaign was key in the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Obviously, King did not achieve the crucial legislation of 1964–65 alone. Protesters, other civil rights organisations, churches, local community organisations and thousands of unsung field workers also played a part. The federal government, especially the Supreme Court and President Johnson, played a vital role, as did the white extremists who aroused moderate white sympathy (President Kennedy joked that 'Bull' Connor was a hero of the civil rights movement). The other black organisations were frequently critical of King. After the Montgomery bus boycott, NAACP leader Roy Wilkins felt that King had taken too much credit, and the SNCC resented his 'top-down leadership', believing it more effective to empower ordinary people. Nevertheless, King's contribution to the transformation of the South was extremely important.

Source A Extract from Ella Baker's recorded interview with Gerda Lerner, December 1970. Baker worked for the SCLC but felt she was disregarded because she was neither male, nor a minister, nor a Ph.D. She encouraged the students to establish the SNCC and warned them against adults taking over their movement. Here, she explains why she preferred to empower the people rather than to rely upon a leader.

I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed people to depend so largely on a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. It usually means that the media made him, and the media may undo him. There is also the danger in our culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he IS the movement. Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time and they don't do the work of actually organising people.

How much weight would you give to the evidence of Source A for an enquiry into contemporary views about Martin Luther King? Explain your answer, using the source, the information given about it and your own knowledge of the historical context.

King failed to achieve anything significant in Chicago, but ghetto problems were great and long-standing. After 1965, Congress did little more to help black people, but Presidents Johnson and Nixon supported **affirmative action** programmes designed to remedy the effects of past discrimination and to combat current discrimination in employment and higher education. Under Nixon's Philadelphia Plan (1969), the federal government pressed companies with federal government contracts to ensure non-discriminatory employment practices, while universities gave ethnic minority students places even if their test scores were lower than those of white candidates.

Affirmative action proved to be of great significance and assistance to aspirational black Americans in the quarter-century after King's death. He had repeatedly called for affirmative action, so it could be argued that King played an important part in the introduction of such programmes.

In comparison to more radical activists such as Malcolm X and some of the advocates of Black Power (see page 391), Martin Luther King was a moderate. However, in his challenge to the nature and structure of American society, he had been a revolutionary – and, in the South, a successful one.

The impact of King's assassination

The impact of King's assassination was both positive and negative:

- Within weeks of King's assassination in 1968, Congress was shamed into passing a Fair Housing Act. The Act prohibited racial discrimination in the sale or rental of housing and required the Department of Housing and Urban Development 'affirmatively to further the purposes' of fair housing. However, white resistance made it difficult to enforce and discrimination in housing continued.
- The SNCC had always feared that King's 'top-down leadership' distracted from the need to empower black communities at grassroots level, but while the civil rights movement seemed leaderless at the national level without King, black activists continued to work effectively at local level.
- The **executive** and **judicial branches** of the federal government continued to aid black Americans, mostly through the promotion of affirmative action.
- The immediate aftermath of the assassination was terrifying. It provoked major riots in over 100 cities across America. Forty-six people died, 3,000 were injured and 27,000 arrested. A total of 21,000 federal troops and 34,000 National Guardsmen restored order following \$45 million worth of damage to property across the nation.
- It encouraged followers of Black Power (see page 391) in their belief that King's relative moderation was not the best way forward.

The significance of Malcolm X

Malcolm X was significant in that he drew national attention to the terrible problems of the ghettos of the North and encouraged the black militancy demonstrated in the rise of the Black Power movement and the ghetto riots of 1964–68.

Malcolm X's background

Malcolm Little was born to a struggling Midwestern family in 1925. Although a bright boy, he subsequently recalled his teacher telling him to forget his ambition to be a lawyer as it was unrealistic for a 'nigger'. He left school at 14 and moved from Nebraska to Boston. Like many black American males, he worked as a shoeshine boy and railroad porter. His more profitable career as a drug dealer, burglar and pimp resulted in his incarceration in 1946.

While in jail, Malcolm joined the Nation of Islam (NOI), a black American religion that became very popular in the ghettos.



▲ Malcolm X.

The Nation of Islam

The NOI was established in 1930 and led from 1934 to 1975 by Elijah Muhammad, a self-styled prophet of Allah. The NOI differed from orthodox Islam in believing that:

- Allah originally created people black
- the evil scientist Yakub created other races
- whites would rule the world for several thousand years until Allah returned and ended their supremacy.

With temples in black ghettos in cities such as Detroit, New York and Chicago, the NOI offered black Americans an alternative to the white man's Christianity. The NOI urged:

- the separation of blacks and whites
- black economic independence through growing food, producing manufactured goods and owning stores
- the development of an independent black nation
- pride in black culture and history in the schools it established in cities such as Detroit
- religious commitment and a puritanical lifestyle without alcohol or extramarital sex.

The religious teachings of the NOI impressed Malcolm. It taught him the white man was the devil – 'a perfect echo', he said, of his 'lifelong experience'. Its emphasis upon the importance of black culture and history gave him the sense of racial pride and identity that he needed. As he told the NOI's Philadelphia temple a few years after his release from jail, 'We are a lost people. We don't know our name, language, homeland, God, or religion.'

After his release, Malcolm became a minister in the NOI and by the 1950s, he was its most effective preacher and recruiter. He and the NOI first gained national attention through a television documentary, *The Hate that Hate*

Produced (1959), which introduced white Americans to Malcolm's bitter characterisation of them as the enemy.

The impact of the NOI

While estimates of committed members vary from 25,000 to 250,000, the NOI had widespread influence by 1969. The NOI:

- increased divisions between blacks and whites and among blacks (Malcolm attacked Martin Luther King for humiliatingly begging for access to the white-dominated world and urging helpless black Americans to 'turn the other cheek')
- contributed to the rise of the Black Power movement, the achievements of which are controversial (see page 393)
- often had a transformational impact (in 1975, the *Washington Post* praised its impact on 'thousands of black derelicts, bums and drug addicts, turning outlaws into useful, productive men and women').

The NOI certainly transformed Malcolm X, although he left in 1964 because of Elijah Muhammad's corruption and refusal to allow him to join the Birmingham campaign (see page 373). 'We spout our militant rhetoric', said Malcolm, but 'when our own brothers are ... killed, we do nothing.' It was probably a NOI gunman who assassinated Malcolm in 1965.

Malcolm X's aims, methods and achievements

Like Martin Luther King, Malcolm aimed to improve black lives through sermons, speeches and writings to advertise problems and encourage change. However, their methods were very different.

While King sought integration, Malcolm favoured separatism ('I'm not interested in being American, because America has never been interested in me'). Malcolm believed black people could regain their self-esteem through control of their own social, economic and political lives. As the NOI taught that whites were evil, it made sense to live separately from them.

Malcolm rejected King's advocacy of non-violence, arguing that it disarmed the oppressed. He mocked the Christian 'turn the other cheek' philosophy, saying only a fool would tell his followers to love the white enemy who treated the black population so badly. He felt such Christian teachings were 'criminal' in that they encouraged white violence against submissive blacks. If whites treated black protesters badly, 'the Negroes themselves should take whatever steps are necessary to defend themselves'.

Contemporary assessments of Malcolm's achievements varied. Newspapers and magazines such as the *New York Times* and *Time* printed critical obituaries describing him as a racist and a demagogue. Black integrationists were critical; the NAACP's leading lawyer Thurgood Marshall said Malcolm achieved nothing. Black baseball player Jackie Robinson pointed out that while Martin Luther King and others put their lives on the line in Birmingham, Malcolm stayed in safer places such as Harlem. The NOI derided him after his death. Future NOI leader Louis Farrakhan dismissed him as a 'cowardly hypocrite dog who is worthy of death'.

Malcolm was probably right in claiming that the fear he generated among whites helped the passage of the civil rights bill. However, his greatest significance lay in that he:

- drew early attention to Northern ghetto problems
- contributed to the growing pride in being black
- inspired a new, assertive generation of black Americans such as Stokely Carmichael and influenced the development of the Black Power movement.

Black Power and the Black Panthers

The Black Power movement developed in the mid-1960s. Black Power meant different things to different people. Cleveland Sellers of the SNCC said, 'There was a deliberate attempt to make it ambiguous ... [so that] it meant everything to everybody.' Most white people associated Black Power with violence, but for many black people it meant political and social independence and in particular racial pride. Martin Luther King said, 'The Negro is in dire need of a sense of dignity and a sense of pride, and I think black power is an attempt to develop pride.'

Black Power advocates

A Black Power advocate could believe in one or more of these:

- violence
- armed self-defence
- separatism
- alliance with victims of colonialist oppression in the less developed nations
- 'not ... black supremacy ... exclusion of whites ... advocacy of violence and riots' but 'political power, economic power, and a new self-image for Negroes' (the SNCC's Floyd McKissick)
- 'an attempt to develop pride' (Martin Luther King)
- black working-class revolution
- black capitalism.