

## 5. FROM THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT TO BARACK OBAMA, 1955-2008

### a) The Struggle for Equal Rights



The Brown decision energized other actions in the Southern civil rights movement. One critical effort began in Montgomery, Alabama, in December 1955, when a black activist named **Rosa Parks** was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man and move to the back of a city bus. Parks's actions were backed by the local NAACP, which organized a boycott of the city's buses. It asked a 26-year-old minister named **Martin Luther King, Jr.** to be the spokesperson for the boycott organization. The black community faced threats and violence but continued the boycott for more than a year until the Supreme Court demanded the integration of Alabama buses. In 1957 a group of ministers led by King formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)

to continue organizing nonviolent actions against Southern segregation.

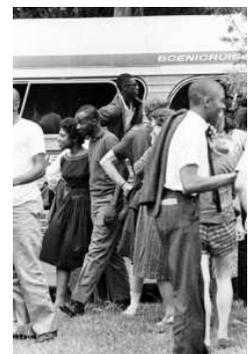
Inspired by the bravery of students integrating Central High School in Little Rock, in February 1960 four black college students in **Greensboro**, North Carolina took seats at the "whites-only" lunch counter in Woolworth's department store and waited to be served. They were refused service, but their sit-in continued. A few days later the number of students 'sitting-in' had grown to 150. Whites harassed and violently attacked the students, and the events were covered by newspapers and television. This coverage brought the demonstrators national attention, and protests spread quickly. During that year, 75,000 students—both black and white—staged sit-ins in 75 localities. Over 5,600 protesters were arrested, 2,000 of them for picketing outside Northern stores that had segregated Southern branches.



In April 1960 Ella Baker, the executive director of SCLC, convened a meeting of student leaders to try to coordinate these local spontaneous demonstrations and establish a relationship with the students. The students formed a separate organization called the **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)**, with its own leadership. SNCC adopted the commitment to nonviolence at the urging of King and other civil rights activists and worked with other civil rights organizations.

### b) Freedom Rides

In May 1961 SNCC and CORE (**Congress of Racial Equality**) decided to test conformity with a Supreme Court decision that prohibited segregation in facilities for interstate travel. To do so, they revived a protest strategy CORE had used in 1947. They organized what became known as the **Freedom Rides**—bus trips throughout the South that attempted to desegregate buses and bus stations. After informing federal authorities of their plans, the Freedom Riders—seven blacks and six whites—set out from Washington, D.C., aboard two buses. Along the way, the freedom riders encountered violent resistance from whites. In South Carolina, whites beat and kicked two riders. In Alabama, whites attacked and burned one bus and severely beat riders in both buses, leaving one man permanently paralyzed. The riders ended their protest in Birmingham, Alabama; they were unprotected by the police and were unable to find a bus driver willing to continue the trip.



Then **Diane Nash**, a SNCC member, recruited other freedom riders, eight blacks and two whites, to try to complete the ride. Again they met with violence. This time the riders attracted more attention from the media, and White House officials ordered their protection by federal marshals and national guardsmen. Riders were nevertheless arrested and imprisoned in Mississippi for entering a "whites-only" waiting room.

### c) Martin Luther King Jr.



**Martin Luther King, Jr.**, was born in Atlanta, Georgia, the eldest son of Martin Luther King, Sr., a Baptist minister, and Alberta Williams King. His father served as pastor of a large Atlanta church, Ebenezer Baptist, which had been founded by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, maternal grandfather. King, Jr., was ordained as a Baptist minister at age 18.

King attended local segregated public schools, where he excelled. He entered nearby Morehouse College at age 15 and graduated with a bachelor's degree in sociology in 1948. After graduating with honors from Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania in 1951, he went to Boston University where he earned a doctoral degree in systematic theology in 1955. King's public-speaking abilities—which would become renowned as his stature grew in the civil rights movement—developed slowly during his collegiate years

Throughout his education, King was exposed to influences that related Christian theology to the struggles of oppressed peoples. At Morehouse, Crozer, and Boston University, he studied the teachings on nonviolent protest of Indian leader **Mohandas Gandhi**. King also read and heard the sermons of white Protestant ministers who preached against American racism. Benjamin E. Mays, president of Morehouse and a leader in the national community of racially liberal clergymen, was especially important in shaping King's theological development.

In 1957 King helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization of black churches and ministers that aimed to challenge racial segregation. SCLC sought to complement the NAACP's legal efforts to dismantle segregation through the courts, with King and other SCLC leaders encouraging the use of nonviolent direct action to protest discrimination. These activities included marches, demonstrations, and boycotts. The violent responses that direct action provoked from some whites eventually forced the federal government to confront the issues of injustice and racism in the South.

In 1959 King visited India and worked out more clearly his understanding of Gandhi's principle of nonviolent persuasion, called *satyagraha*, which King had determined to use as his main instrument of social protest. The next year he gave up his pastorate in Montgomery to become copastor (with his father) of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

In the early 1960s King led SCLC in a series of protest campaigns that gained national attention. SCLC increased the size of the demonstrations in an effort to create so much dissent and disorder that local white officials would be forced to end segregation to restore normal business relations. The strategy did not work in Albany but it did work, however, in Birmingham, Alabama, when SCLC joined a local protest during the spring of 1963.

In May 1963 King and his SCLC staff escalated antisegregation marches in Birmingham by encouraging teenagers and school children to join. Hundreds of singing children filled the streets of downtown Birmingham, angering Connor, the local police official, who sent police officers with attack dogs and firefighters with high-pressure water hoses against the marchers.

During the demonstrations, King was arrested and sent to jail. He wrote a letter from his jail cell to local clergymen who had criticized him for creating disorder in the city. His "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which argued that individuals had the moral right and responsibility to disobey unjust laws, was widely read at the time and added to King's standing as a moral leader.



King and other black leaders organized the 1963 March on Washington, a massive protest in Washington, D.C., for jobs and civil rights. On August 28, 1963, King delivered a moving address to an audience of more than 200,000 civil rights supporters. His "**I Have a Dream**" speech expressed the hopes of the civil rights movement in oratory as moving as any in American history. The speech and the march built on the Birmingham demonstrations to create the political momentum that resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited segregation in public accommodations, as well as discrimination in education and employment. As a result of King's

effectiveness as a leader of the American civil rights movement and his highly visible moral stance he was awarded the 1964 Nobel Prize for peace.

In 1965 SCLC joined a voting-rights protest march that was planned to go from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital of Montgomery, more than 50 miles (80 km) away. The goal of the march was to draw national attention to the struggle for black voting rights in the state. The march created support for the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which President Lyndon Johnson signed in August. The act suspended the use of literacy tests and other voter qualification tests that often had been used to prevent blacks from registering to vote.

By the mid-1960s King's role as the unchallenged leader of the civil rights movement was questioned by many younger blacks. Activists argued that King's nonviolent protest strategies and appeals to moral idealism were useless in the face of sustained violence by whites.



With internal divisions beginning to divide the civil rights movement, King shifted his focus to racial injustice in the North. Realizing that the economic difficulties of blacks in Northern cities had largely been ignored, SCLC broadened its civil rights agenda by focusing on issues related to black poverty. King established a headquarters in a Chicago apartment in 1966, using that as a base to organize protests against housing and employment discrimination in the city. Black Baptist ministers who disagreed with many of SCLC's tactics, especially the confrontational act of sending black protesters into all-white neighborhoods, publicly opposed King's efforts.

Throughout 1966 and 1967 King increasingly turned the focus of his civil rights activism throughout the country to economic issues. He began to argue for redistribution of the nation's economic wealth to overcome entrenched black poverty. In 1967 he began planning a Poor People's Campaign to pressure national lawmakers to address the issue of economic justice.

This emphasis on economic rights took King to Memphis, Tennessee, to support striking black garbage workers in the spring of 1968. He was assassinated in Memphis by a sniper on April 4. News of the assassination resulted in an outpouring of shock and anger throughout the nation and the world, prompting riots in more than 100 United States cities in the days following his death.



#### d) Nonviolent Protests

Throughout the South, various types of nonviolent protests took place. Activists boycotted stores that refused to hire blacks, marched in protests against discrimination, and worked to change laws that enforced segregation. In 1963 more than a million demonstrators were involved in massive protests, and many demonstrators were attacked by whites determined to maintain racial dominance.

In the spring of 1963 SCLC began a campaign in Birmingham, Alabama to try to end segregation. The local police force responded with violence, turning fire hoses on demonstrators and attacking them with dogs. Federal troops were sent to quell the violence. In reaction to the attacks on the demonstrators, President John F. Kennedy introduced civil rights legislation designed to end segregation in public facilities.



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The growing power of the civil rights movement was demonstrated on August 28, 1963 when more than 200,000 peaceful demonstrators marched on Washington, D.C. Protest leaders called for congressional action in civil rights and employment legislation, and Martin Luther King, Jr., electrified listeners with his 'I Have A Dream' speech. In November, President Kennedy was assassinated, and in the aftermath of this tragedy, the civil rights bill that had languished in Congress was passed in June 1964. Six months later, Martin Luther King, Jr., became the youngest person ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

#### e) Voter Registration

Beginning in 1961 SNCC and CORE organizers undertook a dangerous campaign in Mississippi, attempting to register black voters despite intense white resistance. By 1962 Robert Moses, a black Harvard-educated schoolteacher, had assembled a staff of organizers to work with local residents. To bring attention, and perhaps some protection, to their efforts, the workers organized the Mississippi Summer Project, also known as the Freedom Summer project. They recruited and trained over 1000 Northern volunteers—including African American and white students. These volunteers helped people to register to vote and ran freedom schools providing basic education and African American history. Within the first two weeks, two whites, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, and one black, James Chaney, were murdered. Fear and danger followed the remaining volunteers that summer.

The Summer Project increased the number of black voters in Mississippi. It also led to the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), a political party open to all races. Voting registration efforts were helped by a series of marches to demand black voting rights in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. The protests and the violence that accompanied them prompted President Lyndon B. Johnson to introduce new voting-rights legislation. Passed that summer, its impact was dramatic: in Mississippi, the percentage of blacks registered to vote increased from 7% in 1964 to 59% in 1968.



## f) Malcolm X



**Malcolm Little** was born on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska. He was the son of Earl Little, a Baptist preacher, and his wife, Louise. The family moved to Lansing, Michigan, shortly after Malcolm's birth. Earl Little was an outspoken promoter of social and economic independence for blacks and a supporter of the 'Back to Africa' movement of black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey. In 1931 Earl Little was killed, probably murdered by white terrorists because of his political and social activism.

His father's death had a disastrous effect on Malcolm and his family. His mother suffered a nervous breakdown, and the welfare department took the eight little children away from her. Malcolm was placed in a foster home and then in reform school. In 1941 he went to live with his half-sister in Boston, Massachusetts. There he soon entered the fringes of the underworld, and at the age of 17 he moved to the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. Known as Detroit Red, Malcolm turned to a life of crime, including drug dealing and armed robbery. When he was 20, Malcolm received a sentence of ten years in prison for burglary.

While in prison, Malcolm read widely and developed an interest in the Nation of Islam, a black nationalist religious movement whose members were known as Black Muslims. Malcolm studied the teachings of the leader of the Black Muslims, **Elijah Muhammad**, who advocated an independent black state. The Nation of Islam was based on a theology adapted from several models: traditional Islamic teachings, Marcus Garvey's principles of black nationalism, and economic self-help programs that addressed the needs of African Americans living in urban ghettos.

Unlike traditional Islam, which rejects all forms of racism, the Nation of Islam declared that whites were the "devil by nature," and that God was black. The Black Muslims predicted that in the near future a great war would take place in which whites would be destroyed and black people would rule the world through the benevolence of Allah, their creator. The Black Muslims recruited heavily among the poorest of urban blacks and in prisons, where Malcolm Little was converted to the faith.

When Malcolm was released from prison in 1952, he went to Detroit, Michigan, and joined the Nation of Islam temple in that city. He dropped his last name—considered a "slave name" by Black Muslims—and became Malcolm X. In 1958 he married Betty Sanders, and they had six daughters.

Malcolm X rose rapidly in the Nation of Islam organization as a minister and recruiter of new members. Elijah Muhammad appointed him as the chief minister of Harlem's main temple in June 1954. Malcolm X also helped establish the movement's main information and propaganda newspaper, Muhammad Speaks. Within five years, Malcolm X had become a more prominent spokesperson for the Nation of Islam than Elijah Muhammad.

During the decade between 1955 and 1965, while most black leaders worked in the civil rights movement to integrate blacks into mainstream American life, Malcolm X preached the opposite. He maintained that Western culture, and the Judeo-Christian religious traditions on which it is based, was inherently racist. Constantly attacking mainstream civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X declared that nonviolence was the "philosophy of the fool." In response to King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, Malcolm X declared, "While King was having a dream, the rest of us Negroes are having a nightmare." Malcolm X believed that black people must develop their own society and ethical values, including the self-help, community-based enterprises that the Black Muslims supported. He also thought that African Americans should reject integration or cooperation with whites.

His fiery style and natural speaking ability made Malcolm X a popular public speaker, but his growing reputation caused tension with Elijah Muhammad and other Black Muslim leaders. While Muhammad actively tried to maintain the Nation of Islam as a religious self-help movement, Malcolm was increasingly moving towards a political response to racism. He called for a "black revolution," which he declared would be "bloody" and would renounce any sort of "compromise" with whites. In this way Malcolm X rejected the conservative values of the Nation of Islam in favor of a more radical, revolutionary approach to social change.

In 1963 Elijah Muhammad silenced Malcolm X for his statement on the assassination of U.S. president John F. Kennedy. In essence, Muhammad told his most prominent follower that he could not speak in public and remain within the Black Muslim organization. Rather than accept this silencing, Malcolm X publicly broke with the Nation of Islam on March 8, 1964, and formed his own movement, the Muslim Mosque, Inc. Even before the split, Malcolm X had already begun to part ways with the Black Muslims because he felt silenced by the authoritarian organization of the Nation of Islam. He was ready to be his own leader, rather than to follow the dictates of Muhammad or anyone else.



In 1964, shortly after his break with Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X made a pilgrimage to Mecca, the holy Muslim city in Saudi Arabia that was the birthplace of the founder of Islam. He also visited several other African and Arab nations. While on this trip, he wrote a highly publicized letter expressing his own faith as a follower of traditional Islam. He became an orthodox Sunni Muslim (Sunni Islam). He also adopted a religious name, El-Hajj Malik El-

Shabazz, meaning the Malcolm (or Malik) who is from the tribe or family of Shabazz and has made the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. However, most people in the United States continued to call him Malcolm X, a name he did not reject.

When Malcolm X returned to America, he held the first rally for a black nationalist group he had founded, the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU). This group, which had no direct religious ties, advocated racial solidarity and tried to unify all black organizations fighting white racism. At the same time, Malcolm X renounced his previous racism against whites, declaring that in Mecca he had realized that people of all colors were children of Allah. In contrast to his earlier views, he encouraged blacks to vote, to participate in the political system, and to work with each other and with sympathetic whites and Hispanics for an end to racial discrimination. As he told a group of African leaders, the problem of race was "not a Negro problem, nor an American problem. This is a world problem, a problem of humanity."

Malcolm X also began collaborating with writer Alex Haley on an account of his life. In the manuscript, later published as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), he predicted that he might not live to see the book published. That prophecy became a reality on February 21, 1965. Malcolm X was assassinated while addressing an OAAU meeting in New York City. At least two of the three men later convicted of the crime were connected with the Nation of Islam. Many scholars and supporters of Malcolm X believe that the Nation of Islam leadership may have ordered the assassination of Malcolm X.



## g) Black Power and Black Pride

Years of Southern civil rights activism had increased black pride and militancy throughout the nation. Under the tension of constant attacks, black leaders such as Stokely Carmichael began to question the vow to nonviolence and to argue for all-black leadership.

They were impressed by Malcolm X, the Northern leader of the Black Muslim organization who advocated black pride and armed self-defense. In 1966, the year after Malcolm's assassination, Carmichael raised the cry for black power. Many traditional civil rights leaders were shocked by the slogan. Martin Luther King, Jr., understood the slogan's appeal but feared its explosive potential. The slogan, however, resonated in the Northern inner cities. There housing discrimination restricted blacks' choices, and judging from poverty and unemployment rates, African Americans had never recovered from the Great Depression.



In August 1965 racial violence erupted in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in response to the lack of economic progress and conflicts with white police. In the summer and fall of 1966, 43 cities experienced racial violence. That October, two black college students, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, organized the **Black Panther Party** in Oakland, California to promote community service and armed self-defense for inner-city residents. One of its first actions was to establish patrols in black communities to monitor police activities and protect residents from police brutality.

The Black Panthers enjoyed wide appeal among young men in the Northern cities. The party quickly became a target for repression that included undercover informants and surveillance by the police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). As Martin Luther King, Jr., began to speak out against American involvement in the Vietnam War (1959-1975) and to emphasize the need for economic changes, he too became a target for government surveillance and harassment. In the summer of 1967, major race riots erupted in Newark, Detroit, and other American cities. Often this violence was attributed to tensions between black residents and white police accused of brutality. In February 1968 the presidentially appointed Kerner Commission reported that America was becoming 'two societies, one white, one black—separate and unequal.' In April, King was assassinated in Memphis, and the wave of racial violence that followed seemed to confirm those conclusions.

While black leaders were debating the effectiveness of nonviolent strategies, the nation was becoming more involved in the Vietnam War. In 1965, when President Johnson ordered air raids over North Vietnam, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party denounced the war and declared that black men should not submit to a war for freedom abroad when they did not have freedom at home. Many older civil rights leaders warned against turning away from the Johnson administration by opposing the war, since Johnson had supported civil rights. Younger, more militant blacks were more likely to oppose the war; they joined the public demonstrations that became more frequent as troop levels in Vietnam escalated and as the number of black soldiers and casualties became proportionately higher than for whites.



## h) The Struggle for Economic Equality



During the late 1960s and 1970s, civil rights activists began to concentrate on eliminating the remaining barriers to black freedom. Although segregation by law (de jure segregation) in the South had been defeated, segregation by custom (de facto segregation) still remained. In the South, legal segregation had been supplemented by customary racial segregation, but even in the North where there generally were no segregation laws, custom enforced racial segregation.

African Americans had been barred from many restaurants, movie theaters, nightclubs, and other public accommodations by customary practice. Generally, landlords in white neighborhoods would not rent to black tenants, forcing them to pay higher rents in the only housing available to them in black neighborhoods. Banks denied financing, and real estate agents refused to show houses in traditionally white areas to blacks even if they could afford them.

Discriminatory hiring practices confined most black workers to the least secure, lowest paying jobs regardless of their qualifications. Those few opportunities open to black professionals like doctors, lawyers, and teachers were in positions and institutions serving the black community. As a result of limited opportunities, by the beginning of the 1960s, more than half of African Americans had incomes below the poverty line.

## i) The Poor People's Campaign

**SCLC** leaders focused on the issues of poverty and discrimination, continuing the Poor People's Campaign that Martin Luther King, Jr., had begun. The Poor People's Campaign sought the passage of federal legislation that would provide full employment, establish a guaranteed income, and promote the construction of low-income housing.

In May 1968 Ralph Abernathy, who had been King's lieutenant, established an encampment called Resurrection City on the Mall in Washington, D.C. It drew 2,500 mostly black and Native American temporary residents, nearly twice the number that organizers had planned on. Within a month, mud and unsanitary conditions produced by heavy rains reduced the encampment to fewer than 300 people. In June 1968 an interracial group of 50,000 marched in Washington, D.C., to demonstrate their support for the Poor People's Campaign. They were ultimately unable to gain the sympathetic attention of Congress and the country. At the end of the month, the demonstrators were ordered to evacuate, and on June 24th the police evicted the 100 who refused to leave amid clouds of teargas.



## j) Busing

As civil rights leaders turned their attention to de facto segregation in the North, they developed a different strategy for improving educational opportunities for black students. Since schools were supported by property taxes, there were great differences in resources available for education between poorer inner cities and wealthier white suburbs.

Integrationists in some urban areas conceived temporary plans to bus children to schools outside of their neighborhoods as a way to integrate urban schools. Busing had been used for many years to maintain segregated school systems in the South, but whites opposed this new form of busing vehemently. They challenged the legality of busing in the courts, but these challenges were unsuccessful. The Supreme Court declared busing for educational integration unconstitutional, and many state and local courts ordered cities to develop busing plans.



These plans had their greatest effect on working class ethnic neighborhoods near inner cities. The newest, best-equipped schools, which were predominately in rich white suburbs, were less likely to be affected. Busing raised parents' concerns about having their children attend school far from home. Although they welcomed the opportunities better schools provided, black parents, whose children were most often bused, worried about a strange and often hostile school environment. These concerns and continued opposition from many whites ensured that busing remained controversial through the 1990s.

## k) Conservative Counterattack



Antipoverty programs and civil rights gains had positive effects: the black middle class grew and black unemployment fell to under 7% in 1968 and 1969. In the early 1970s, however, rising inflation and an economic recession caused widespread economic uncertainty among African Americans. To deal with difficult economic issues, a new generation of black leaders established new organizations. In 1971 **Jesse Jackson** founded Operation **PUSH** (People United to Save Humanity) in Chicago to work for the economic advancement of poor people, and in 1973 Marian Wright Edelman began the Children's Defense Fund, an organization that promotes children's rights and welfare.

The contracting economy also provoked white opposition to programs that had benefited African Americans. White reaction to expanded black economic and educational opportunities was often severe; white protestors burned buses, harassed black school children, and supported local politicians who opposed black equality. A surprising number of Northern voters supported the independent presidential candidacy of segregationist George Wallace in 1968 and 1972.

In response the campaign and then the presidency of Republican Richard M. Nixon turned away from civil rights. Nixon nominated people opposed to busing as judges on the Supreme Court, thereby beginning a shift to conservatism on the court. Yet, the nation's ambivalence was apparent in 1977 when 'Roots,' the serialization of Alex Haley's story of generations of his African and African-American family, became the most popular television program in history and transfixed 130 million viewers.

## l) The Carter Years

When Georgian **Jimmy Carter** was elected president in 1976, he appointed more blacks to influential positions in the federal government than any president before him, and he seemed to have a deep personal commitment to racial equality. However, the economic situation deteriorated under his presidency. The Congressional Black Caucus labeled Carter's federal budget favoring military spending over domestic funding for social relief programs 'an unmitigated disaster' for black people. Black unemployment had remained in double digits since the mid-1970s, twice the rate for whites.



## m) The Reagan Years

The hostile reaction among conservatives to social and economic black progress continued to grow during the 1980s. In the presidential election of 1980, most blacks saw little alternative to supporting Carter over the Republican Ronald Reagan. Reagan was a conservative whose tax cutting, anti-spending policies as governor of California had caused privation among the state's poorest citizens.

Reagan spoke to the racial and gender stereotypes of many conservative white Americans when he criticized those on welfare as taking advantage of taxpayer's money. On election day, 90% of the black vote went for Carter, but Reagan won by a comfortable margin, especially in the South, where only Carter's home state of Georgia went Democratic.



During the Reagan administration, defense spending increased, federal tax revenues declined, the national debt reached an all time high, and governmental support for social programs diminished. For African Americans, the consequences of these changes were alarming. To protest Reagan's policies, 300,000 members of labor and civil rights groups organized **Solidarity Day** in Washington, D.C., in 1981.

By the end of the decade, the after-tax income of the richest one percent of Americans had increased by 87%, while the income of those at the bottom of the economy diminished. Black unemployment also grew during the 1980s; by 1990, more than one in every four adult black men between the ages of 24 and 54 were out of work. The rate was much higher for young black men in the inner city, and overall black unemployment was two-and-a-half times higher than white unemployment. In 1983 black unemployment stood at a record high of almost 21%. Correspondingly, the overall black poverty rate rose so that by 1989 almost one-third of all black Americans were below the poverty line, more than three times the rate for whites.

Rising unemployment and increasing poverty had tragic consequences for many African Americans. The percentage of black families headed by single women increased, and single-parent black households were almost twice as likely to fall below the poverty line as those with two parents and thus two incomes. The crime rate in America rose, and the effect was magnified in poor black communities.

## n) Affirmative Action



During the 1960s the Kennedy administration developed a strategy to increase employment opportunities for minorities they called affirmative action. Originally affirmative action required contractors doing business with the federal government to take positive steps to insure that employees were not discriminated against because of race, religion, color, or national origin.

Later, President Johnson argued that fairness demanded affirmative action to compensate for past racial injustice and discrimination. His Executive Order 11246 signed in 1965 augmented the Civil Rights Act of 1964, committing the federal government to seek not 'just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result.' Two years later, Johnson broadened his order to embrace gender equality as well. During the late 1960s and 1970s, the public and private sectors devised plans to increase the racial and gender diversity in work places and classrooms to bring blacks into jobs and schools where they had previously been denied admission.

By the late 1970s, the concept of affirmative action in higher education was challenged in the Supreme Court by **Allan Bakke**, a white student who had been denied admission to Davis Medical School at the University of California. Bakke charged that he had been the subject of 'reverse discrimination' because black students with lower academic credentials had been admitted to the school. Advocates of affirmative action pointed to the number of white students with academic records inferior to Bakke's who had been admitted to the school. They argued that the university often considered factors other than grades in its admissions decisions. The Court ignored these arguments and ordered Bakke admitted. However, the Court upheld the concept of affirmative action, ruling that race could be considered in admissions in the interest of creating a racially diverse student body.



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One year later the Court ruled that labor unions and businesses could design special programs aimed at helping blacks get jobs and promotions where it was shown that there had been 'manifest racial imbalance.' In 1980 the Court approved Congress's right to impose goals for minority representation as a means for increasing the number of minority and female contractors doing business with the federal government and to counteract past discrimination.

In the more conservative political atmosphere of the 1980s, the federal government shifted its stand on affirmative action and the protection of civil rights won in the 1960s. Under the administration of President Ronald Reagan, the Justice Department announced in 1981 that it would no longer require federal contractors to maintain affirmative action programs, nor would it enforce busing as a means of correcting discrimination in public education.

The Supreme Court continued to send mixed signals. In 1985 it declared that affirmative action programs designed to bring more minorities and women into state employment were constitutional. But, by the end of the decade, it had ruled against Richmond, Virginia's 'set aside program' designed to reserve 30 percent of the city's public work for minority contractors. It had not, however, specifically outlawed affirmative action programs as a method to redress past racial inequities.

Throughout the 1990s, affirmative action remained one of the nation's most divisive racial issues. Some people continued to see it as reverse discrimination and used the language of the civil rights movement to condemn the use of racial or gender preferences. California voters rejected the affirmative action programs that had helped integrate the state's university system. The state of Washington passed a similar initiative. Affirmative action plans in other states and in private industry were also attacked severely.



Illustration by Taylor Jones for the Hoover Digest.

In 2003 the administration of President George W. Bush presented arguments before the Supreme Court in support of lawsuits that sought to end affirmative action programs at the University of Michigan. The Court, however, rejected the arguments and reaffirmed the goal of racial diversity in higher education. In its first major decision on affirmative action since the 1978 Bakke decision, the Court upheld an affirmative action program at the University of Michigan Law School, which considered race as one of many factors in selecting applicants. Although the ruling restated the diversity principle, the Court's majority opinion in **Grutter v. Bollinger** also noted that a permanent justification for racial preferences should not be enshrined. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who wrote the opinion, called for a reevaluation of the need for affirmative action in 25 years.

## o) Political and Social Gains

Despite obstacles, African Americans made political gains. By organizing at the state and local level, African Americans were able to increase black political representation. By 1968 nine African Americans, including the first black woman, **Shirley Chisholm**, had been elected to Congress, the largest number since 1875. Twelve were elected in 1970, and the following year they formed the Congressional Black Caucus for a stronger voice in federal affairs.

Coalitions of blacks, Hispanics, and whites in the Democratic Party brought an impressive number of African Americans to office in many major cities. In 1970 Kenneth Gibson was elected mayor of Newark; in 1973 Thomas Bradley was elected in Los Angeles, Maynard Jackson was elected in Atlanta, and Coleman Young was elected in Detroit. In 1983 Harold Washington was sworn in as the first black mayor of Chicago, and black victories continued in major and minor cities and in statewide elections in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

Meanwhile, the number of blacks in Congress also grew. By 1994 the membership of the Congressional Black Caucus stood at 40, including Carol Moseley-Braun of Illinois, the first black woman to be elected to the U.S. Senate. In 1989 General Colin Powell became the first African American chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and L. Douglas Wilder was elected governor of Virginia, the first elected black governor in American history. Powell later became the first black secretary of state in 2001 and was succeeded by another black, Condoleezza Rice. In 2004 African American Barack Obama of Illinois was elected to the U.S. Senate, and in 2006 Massachusetts elected its first black governor, Deval Patrick. The same year Minnesota voters sent the first black Muslim, Keith Ellison, to the U.S. House of Representatives.



One of the most hopeful signs of racial progress during the decade was civil rights leader **Jesse Jackson's** run for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1988. Jackson was the first black man to mount a serious campaign for a major party's presidential nomination. He won Virginia's Democratic primary and 6.6 million primary votes nationally. Jackson did not win the nomination, but he amassed 1,200 delegates at the Democratic convention and was recognized as a major power in the party.

In 1983 Vanessa Williams became the first African American to win the Miss America Contest, and *The Color Purple* (1982) by black author Alice Walker won the Pulitzer Prize for literature. In 1993 Toni Morrison became the first African American to win the Nobel Prize for literature. Such black performers and sports stars as Michael Jackson, Michael Jordan, and Bill Cosby became national icons.

## p) Race and Class

Developments in the last decades of the 20th century seemed to justify the title of one of the era's most influential books, "The Declining Significance of Race" (1978), by William Julius Wilson. It argued that economic class was beginning to replace race as the determinant of individual opportunity for African Americans. Falling incomes for many blacks accompanied rising financial and professional opportunities for others. At the same time that inner city residents were facing growing insecurity on the streets and in their homes, blacks were becoming more visible and influential in city halls, state houses, and the halls of Congress.

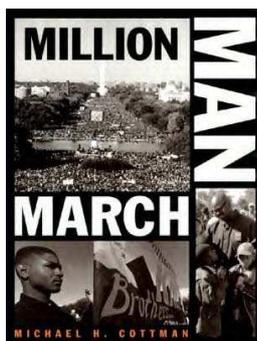


Yet, public racial intolerance and shocking acts of racial violence offered disturbing signs that race was still very significant. A young black man was killed in 1986 in Howard Beach, a white residential section of New York City. He was attempting to escape a mob that challenged his right to be there. In a similar incident three years later, a black teenager was killed by a white gang in Brooklyn. Another issue in the 1980s was white opposition to legislation making the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a national holiday. Then in 1991, video pictures of Los Angeles police beating **Rodney King**, a black motorist stopped for a traffic violation, were broadcast on national TV. For many, this was visual proof that police brutality continued against African Americans. The acquittal of the white officers involved by an all-white jury sparked national outrage and a race riot in Los Angeles.

## q) Differing Racial Perceptions

During the 1980s and 1990s a number of publications and public debates documented the divergent ways blacks and whites viewed race. They showed that blacks and whites saw the existence of racial partiality and the consequences of racial discrimination quite differently: many whites believed that racial discrimination had declined, while many blacks believed that more needed to be done to combat racial discrimination.

The extent of conflicting racial views was revealed by the differing reactions to the murder trial of black sports commentator and former football star O.J. Simpson in 1995. Simpson was accused of murdering his separated wife and her companion, and his lawyers presented a defense that charged the Los Angeles police with racial bias. The televised trial became a public spectacle dramatizing opposing perceptions of the legal system. The jury's not guilty verdict outraged most whites who saw it as a miscarriage of justice and satisfied many African Americans who considered it a justifiable indictment of police racism. Television recorded these contrasting reactions to the verdict: a white crowd stunned a euphoric black group.



The racial divide in America remained a critical issue in the late 1990s. In 1995, Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, perceived by many whites and some blacks to be a supporter of anti-Semitism, organized the **Million Man March** in Washington, D.C. Although many condemned Farrakhan as a black racist, the Million Man March brought hundreds of thousands of black men to Washington to show black pride and solidarity. Participants promised themselves to work for positive change in their communities. Two years later, a call for a Million Woman March brought tens of thousands of black women to Philadelphia in a similar show of concern.

Race remained one of America's most controversial issues. In 1997 President Bill Clinton asked Americans to come together in frank discussions of race and led some of the conversations personally. Suggestions that the president apologize for slavery received little public support. Congress refused to support proposals for an African American Museum on the Mall, in Washington, D.C. Such conflicting signs provided evidence that race was still America's unresolved dilemma.

In 2001 and 2002 two men were convicted on state charges for the bombing of a black church in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed four young girls attending Sunday school. Previously, no state charges had been filed in the case. In 2005 the United States Senate formally apologized to lynching victims and their descendants, most of whom were African American, acknowledging the Senate's failure to pass federal anti-lynching legislation. The same year a jury in Philadelphia, Mississippi, convicted Edgar Ray Killen, a former Ku Klux Klan member, of manslaughter in the 1964 murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. Previously, the men responsible for the murders had only faced charges of violating federal civil rights laws. Killen's trial represented the first time anyone involved in the abduction and murders of the three civil rights activists had faced state murder and manslaughter charges.

## r) The first African American President

Many commentators believed that the election in 2008 of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States represented a transformative event in U.S. race relations and in African American history. Obama's victory seemed to signal that race was no longer a major factor weighing against black candidates for high office. In becoming the first African American candidate of a major political party, Obama began his campaign for the Democratic Party nomination by winning in the caucus state of Iowa, where voters were overwhelmingly white. Although in the general election, a majority of whites, 55%, voted for the Republican Party candidate, John McCain. Obama still managed to win 43% of the white vote, and significantly narrowed the gap with white women by winning 46% of their vote. Obama also carried the Southern states of Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia, and his campaign threatened to end the so-called Southern Strategy that had guided the Republican Party since Richard Nixon. That strategy relied heavily on trying to create a white reaction against the gains of the civil rights movement in the nation's Southern states.

Obama fashioned a winning coalition among moderate and liberal white voters, Hispanics, and blacks. He won 66% of the Hispanic American vote and 95% of the black vote, and he was exceedingly popular among Native Americans. In addition, he won or was even among all income groups, and he carried every age group except those over the age of 65. Obama's rallies during the campaign attracted huge black and white audiences, and his historic inauguration on January 20, 2009, brought together the largest crowd ever assembled on the National Mall. Obama also appears to represent a bridge between the aging leadership of the civil rights movement and a new generation that acknowledged its debt to the struggles of the 1960s but seeks a new vocabulary and a new outlook on the fights that remain.

