

PASSAGE

SOCIAL SCIENCES: Adapted from the essay *Civil Rights: A Struggle for Justice* by Delma Porter (©2023 Delma Porter)

The Civil Rights Movement was a struggle for social justice that consumed the 1950s and 1960s. Even though the 13th Amendment abolished slavery in 1864, the 14th Amendment gave Black people the right to citizenship and equal protection under law in 1868, and the 15th Amendment gave Black men the right to vote in 1870, many white Americans refused to accept these changes. During the Reconstruction years (1865-1877), newly enfranchised citizens were entitled to a voice in the government and to successful, peaceful lives in general. However, before people could acclimate to a new way of thinking and living, a series of laws known as “black codes” were created to restrict the rights of people of color. These codes prohibited Black people’s access to meaningful work, the right to vote, the right to an education, and essentially made it impossible for them to lift themselves out of the poverty that was the legacy of slavery.

Many white Americans were unhappy with the sweeping changes brought about by the new Constitutional Amendments, and they did all they could to prevent Black people’s actually integrating into “white” society despite what the law said. Black people were subjected to segregation, discrimination at work, unequal treatment when they tried to buy homes, and limited access to education. The Plessy v. Ferguson case in 1896 lent an official tone to the situation by imposing separate, but “equal” facilities for blacks and whites. It wasn’t until 1954 when the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka case was passed that it was determined that the “separate-but-equal” education and other services were not equal at all. Judge Thurgood Marshall wrote that “in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place because segregated schools were “inherently unequal.” By 1960, all major US cities had sizable black populations. By this time, the Second Great Migration had brought five million Black men and women from the segregated agrarian South to the

urban and manufacturing centers in Northern and Western cities. Better opportunities during the post-war economic boom made it possible for blacks to settle in formerly white neighborhoods. And schools gradually integrated black students into the classroom.

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 changed the political climate dramatically. His successor Lyndon B. Johnson added his voice to supporting the Civil Rights Act. Johnson’s support of Brown v. Board of Education was a kick starter to the civil rights movement. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination based on race, religion, sex, and national origin, began the deliberate desegregation of schools. The intentional desegregation of schools required forced busing to ensure that racial quotas were observed. The purpose of busing was to ensure that an equal number of students of color attended what had been predominantly white schools. Abhorred by both black and white students and families, busing resulted in “white flight,” a phenomenon in which white families moved to the suburbs or enrolled their children in private or parochial schools. Because the Supreme Court had not set a time limit for states to desegregate their school systems and instead merely called for desegregation “with all deliberate speed,” the stage was set for years of conflicts over public school desegregation and other discriminatory practices.

The turning point that shocked the nation about the horrors of racial injustice was the planned peaceful march in Selma, Alabama. John Lewis and Hosea Williams led a march from Selma to Montgomery to protest the killing of a young Black civil rights activist who had been killed trying to protect his mother who was being beaten by police. The peaceful march turned into bloodshed. 600 peaceful protestors were viciously beaten and tear-gassed by police when they attempted to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge

between the two cities. Television cameras captured the confrontation that became known as “Bloody Sunday.” Outraged activists wanted to retaliate with violence, but Martin Luther King, Jr. insisted on a nonviolent response. By the time the protestors received permits to march, their numbers had swelled to 25,000 participants. The reaction to the protest, voting rights legislation, continued urban racial violence, and white resentment created an increased determination among African Americans to achieve political and

economic power. Martin Luther King, Jr. was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 for his work to achieve racial equality through nonviolent resistance. His goal was to promote peace and equality. He focused on economic power for people of color and was committed to lead marches in support of economic strikes. His “Poor People’s Campaign” was designed to illustrate the vast differences between blacks and whites and their earning capacities. Tragically, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated by James Earl Ray in 1968.

Source:

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