



## THE USA, 1954–75

Conflict at home  
and abroad

Steve Waugh • John Wright

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## KEY TOPIC 1

# The development of the civil rights movement, 1954–60

This key topic examines the major developments in the civil rights movement from 1954 to 1960. The chapters cover vital issues such as education, segregation on transport, growth of civil rights organisations and opposition to progress, especially in the South.

Each chapter within this key topic explains a key issue and examines important lines of enquiry, as outlined below.

There will also be guidance on how to answer the following question types:

- Understanding interpretations (pages 13)
- How to answer the first question on interpretations – what is the main difference between the views (pages 22).

### CHAPTER 1 THE POSITION OF BLACK AMERICANS IN THE EARLY 1950S

- Segregation, discrimination and voting rights in the Southern states.
- The work of civil rights organisations, including the NAACP and CORE.

### CHAPTER 2 PROGRESS IN EDUCATION IN THE 1950S

- The key features of the *Brown v Topeka* case (1954).
- The immediate and long-term significance of the case.
- The significance of the events at Little Rock High School, 1957.

### CHAPTER 3 THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT AND ITS IMPACT, 1955–60

- Causes and events of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The significance of Rosa Parks.
- Reasons for the success and importance of the boycott. The Supreme Court ruling. The Civil Rights Act 1957.
- The significance of the leadership of Martin Luther King. The setting up of the SCLC.

### CHAPTER 4 OPPOSITION TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

- The Ku Klux Klan and violence, including the murder of Emmet Till in 1955.
- Opposition to desegregation in the South. The setting up of White Citizens' Councils.
- Congress and the 'Dixiecrats'.

### TIMELINE 1954–60

<b>1954</b>	<i>Brown v Topeka</i> case	<b>1957 January</b>	Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) formed by Martin Luther King, who also becomes president
<b>1955 August</b>	Emmett Till murdered	<b>1957 September</b>	Little Rock High School
<b>1955 December</b>	Beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott	<b>1957 September</b>	Civil Rights Act passed
<b>1956</b>	Bus Boycott successful, segregation on buses ends		



# 1 The position of black Americans in the early 1950s

Racial discrimination was a common feature of everyday life in the USA in the early 1950s. There were laws which permitted segregation and there was discrimination in all walks of life denying African Americans equality with their fellow white citizens. The Second World War had provided some opportunities for African Americans and, as a result, a few aspects of life improved. The mobilisation of US industry in the 1940s created employment, and hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved from the South to the North where there were higher wages. Better jobs and higher pay continued into the early 1950s but this was not so in the South. Despite some advances, African Americans received poor education, had poor housing, had the worst paid jobs and healthcare was not as good as their white counterparts. Though African Americans could vote, there were many restrictions to prevent them voting. Civil rights organisations such as NAACP and CORE followed policies to put right these issues.

## 1.1 Segregation, discrimination and voting rights in the Southern States

At the time the Second World War ended, there were a host of state laws which segregated African Americans from whites in daily life, known as the 'Jim Crow' laws. The worst cases were in the Southern states where the majority of African Americans lived (see Source A). Inter-marriage was against the law in most Southern states and Southern towns were segregated into black and white areas. Not only were residential areas segregated but public places such as hospitals, cinemas, shops, hotels, parks, libraries and theatres were too. Transport was also segregated but it was in education that this policy caused greatest concern.

African American children could legally be educated in separate schools (see page 10), provided that the schools provided an education which was equal to that of white children. This was following the *Plessey v Ferguson* case in 1896 when the Supreme Court had judged that if separate conditions for blacks and whites were equal, then **segregation** was constitutional. The idea of 'separate but equal' grew and this gave the policy of segregation a clear basis.

### Discrimination

Racial **discrimination** is the practice of treating a person less fairly because of their race or skin colour. As a result of segregation, there developed widespread discrimination which meant African Americans experienced problems in housing, jobs and educational opportunity. Poor opportunities and discrimination led to jobs of lower status for African Americans, with large numbers being restricted to menial and unskilled positions. Economic discrimination meant that African Americans received lower wages and they were therefore unable to afford houses in better neighbourhoods. Discrimination and segregation produced a vicious circle which resulted in continued oppression.



▲ **Source A** Segregated drinking fountains in the American South

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## Voting rights

In addition to segregation and discrimination, African Americans had to endure being disenfranchised in a number of ways. The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution granted African American men the right to vote by declaring that the ‘right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, colour, or previous condition of servitude.’ However, many states introduced poll taxes and literacy tests which were designed to prevent African Americans from voting. Most African Americans were unable to pay the poll tax because they were too poor.

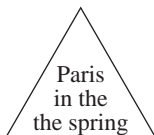
The literacy tests required voters to prove that they could read (see Source B). Many could not read or write because

there were few schools and those that existed were of very poor quality. In the case of those African Americans who had basic literacy skills, particularly difficult extracts would be selected. In Alabama, in order to register to vote, a person had to read out loud to the registrar a section of the constitution (and in some cases verbally interpret it to his satisfaction). Then the applicant had to write out a section of the constitution. After that, there were written questions that were impossible to answer, such as ‘How many bubbles in a bar of soap?’ Even if the literacy tests were passed, African Americans would then be subjected to violence and intimidation to prevent them casting their vote.

▼ **Source B** Part of a literacy test from the state of Louisiana, circa 1964

24. Print a word that looks the same whether it is printed frontwards or backwards.

25. Write down on the line provided, what you read in the triangle below.



26. In the third square below, write the second letter of the fourth word.

--	--	--

27. Write right from the left to the right as you see it spelled here.

28. Divide a vertical line in two equal parts by bisecting it with a curved horizontal line that is only straight at its spot bisection of the vertical.

29. Write every other word in this first line and print every third word in same line (original type smaller and first line ended at coma) but capitalize the fifth word that you write.

30. Draw five circles that one common inter-locking part.

### ACTIVITIES

- 1 Explain what is meant by the term ‘Jim Crow Laws’.
- 2 Which do you consider to be the most damaging feature of segregation? Explain your answer.
- 3 Study Source B.
  - a) Complete the questions and check the answers with your teacher. See how many in the class scored full marks.
  - b) Construct an argument saying why literacy tests should be banned.

### Practice questions

- 1 How useful are Sources A (page 7) and B for an enquiry into the position of black Americans? Explain your answer, using Sources A and B and your knowledge of the historical context. (*For guidance, see pages 71–73.*)
- 2 Give two things you can infer from Source C about the leaders of the NAACP. (*For guidance, see page 79.*)
- 3 Explain why black Americans were treated as inferior in the early 1950s.

You may use the following in your answer:

- Segregation
- Voting rights

You **must** also use information of your own.

(*For guidance, see pages 94–95.*)

## 1.2 The work of civil rights organisations

Despite the issues facing African Americans before 1954, there were many activists who tried to improve civil rights. The **Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)** and the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** were two prominent pressure groups which both sought to end discriminatory practices. There were some successes. In 1948, the NAACP pressured President Truman into signing the Executive Order that banned discrimination by the **Federal Government**. Two years later, the head of the NAACP's legal department, Thurgood Marshall, won his case in the Supreme Court for state universities to provide equal facilities for all students. However, the two groups lacked political influence and people with charisma to push civil rights to the forefront of US politics.

### Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)

The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was founded by James Farmer, a young black American activist (see Source C). CORE was inspired by the non-violent tactics of Mahatma Gandhi in India. It employed the idea of **sit-ins** (see page 28) at cinemas and restaurants to highlight the issue of segregation, which led to the end of this practice in some cities in northern states in the late 1940s. CORE also began to demand the end of segregation on transport. Though quiet in the later 1950s, CORE became more prominent in the 1960s during the Freedom Rides (page 30) and the Freedom Summer (see page 42).

### National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

The NAACP had been founded in 1909 by a group of leading black intellectuals. The organisation was multi-racial and W.E.B. du Bois was a leading member. Du Bois was one of the most important figures in the campaign for civil rights in the first half of the twentieth century. He was an intellectual and an activist. The main aim of the NAACP was 'to ensure the political, educational, social and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination'. The NAACP sought to use all legal means to achieve equality. However, it was often criticised for working within the system by some of its own members, who wanted a more robust approach to protest.

Growing awareness of discrimination and its injustice led to a growth in membership of the NAACP – from 50,000 in 1940 to 600,000 by 1946. Many of the new members were professional people, but there were also many new urban workers. The NAACP played an important part in the civil rights movement because it raised the profile of issues not only within the black community but also the white one.

Moreover, it encouraged many black Americans to become active in the quest for civil rights.

### The extent of change by the 1950s

By the end of the 1940s, those seeking improved civil rights had made only modest gains. There had been some progress in employment and the armed forces, and many blacks had become more active in campaigning for civil rights. On the other hand, discrimination and segregation remained a way of life in the Southern states, while the migration of many black Americans to the industrial cities of the North had created greater racial tension.

In the 1950s, the NAACP became involved in the *Brown v Topeka* case (see page 10) and the Montgomery Bus Boycott (see pages 14–19). In 1957, a third African American civil rights group was founded, the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)** (see page 20), adding momentum to the demand for change in the USA.

#### ACTIVITY

Carry out your own research about Mahatma Gandhi and his tactics.



▲ **Source C** Leaders of the NAACP in 1956, from left to right: Henry L. Moon, Director of Public Relations, Roy Wilkins, General Secretary, Herbert Hill, Labour Secretary and Thurgood Marshall, Special Legal Counsel

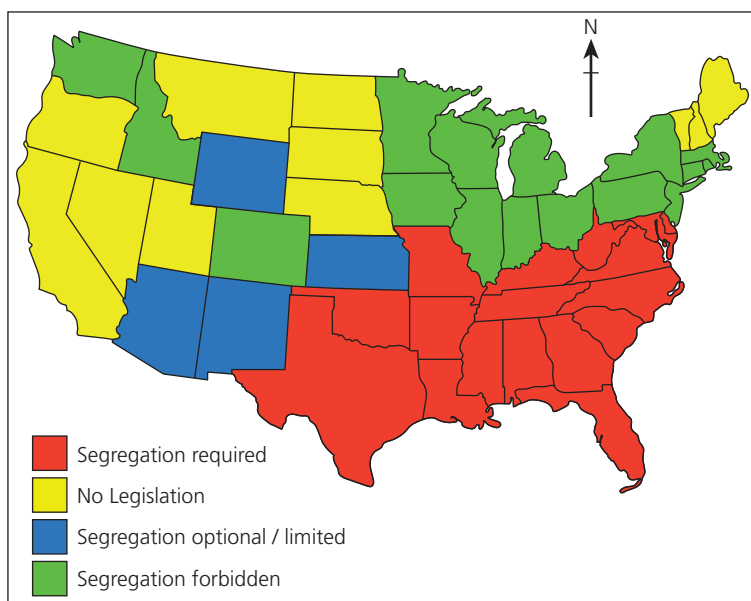
## 2 Progress in education

The 1950s saw significant developments in the civil rights movement, more especially in education. The *Brown v Topeka* case not only challenged segregation in education, particularly in the Southern States of the USA, but also highlighted the importance of the Supreme Court in improving the position of black Americans. However, the case also encouraged opposition in the South and led to events at Little Rock High School in 1957, which in turn, brought direct intervention from President Eisenhower.

### 2.1 The *Brown v Topeka* case, 1954

One of the main reasons for the lack of progress for black Americans in the South was due to **segregation** and **discrimination** limiting educational opportunities for black Americans. Segregation meant that black Americans were not allowed to attend white schools, and in the black schools the facilities and resources were far inferior to those provided for white Americans. South Carolina, for example, spent three times more on white-only schools than black-only schools. Figure 2.1 shows the areas where segregation of schools was a matter of state legislation before 1957.

The first case to challenge segregation did not originate in the South, but in the Midwest state of Kansas. Linda Brown's parents wanted her to attend a neighbourhood school rather than the school for black Americans, which was some distance away. Lawyers from the NAACP (led by Thurgood Marshall) presented evidence to the Supreme Court, stating that separate education created low self-esteem and was psychologically harmful. Moreover, the evidence also pointed out that educational achievement was restricted because of this policy. The process took 18 months and the decision to ban school segregation was announced on 17 May 1954. Chief Justice Warren of the Supreme Court gave a closing judgement (see Source A).



▲ **Figure 2.1** Educational segregation in the USA before the *Brown v Topeka* case

**Source A** From the closing judgment of Chief Justice Warren of the Supreme Court at the end of the *Brown v Topeka* case

Separating white and colored children in schools had a detrimental effect upon colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law; for the separating of the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group ... We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.

#### The significance of *Brown v Topeka*

Despite the judgement ruling against segregated education, it did not specify how integration should be carried out – apart from a vague notion of 'at the earliest possible speed'. Some areas began to desegregate and by 1957, more than 300,000 black children were attending schools that had formerly been segregated. Nevertheless, there were 2.4 million black Southern children who were still being educated in 'Jim Crow' schools.



Moreover, there were many states, especially in the South, that took deliberate measures to keep separate schools. President Eisenhower did not step in to enforce integration because he did not want to cause further opposition in the South. He said it would be 'just plain nuts' if he used force to carry out the Brown decision.

The **Ku Klux Klan** (see page 23) had been extremely popular in the 1920s and now began to re-emerge. Some parents joined **White Citizens' Councils** (see page 25), which aimed to maintain segregation. More than 100 Southern **senators** and **congressmen** signed the **Southern Manifesto**, a document that opposed racial integration in education. Over the next two years, Southern state legislatures passed more than 450 laws and resolutions aimed at preventing the Brown decision being enforced.

Some of the Southern states acted as they did because they saw the **Federal Government** as acting in a dictatorial manner, over-ruling their independence. In this way, they were able to say their actions were political not racist.

Despite the decision of the Supreme Court and the open hostility to the *Brown v Topeka* case, President Eisenhower did little to encourage integration. He was forced into action in 1957 by events at Little Rock High School in Arkansas.

## THE AUTHERINE LUCY CASE

In 1956, the University of Alabama accepted a black student, Autherine Lucy, under a government court order that had been secured by the **NAACP**. Many white students rioted and the university authorities removed her. She was forbidden to re-enter the university. It was 1963 before black Americans were finally allowed to study there.



▲ **Source B** The front page of the Topeka State Journal following the Supreme Court's Decision

## ACTIVITIES

- 1 Study Figure 2.1 (page 10). What does this map show you about segregation in education in the USA before the Brown decision?
- 2 What reasons did Chief Justice Warren give in his dismissal of the Jim Crow laws in Source A?
- 3 Study Source C. Working in pairs add two captions for the photograph:
  - One for a black civil rights newspaper
  - The other for a Southern white newspaper
- 4 Did the *Brown v Topeka* case bring progress for the civil rights movement? Copy the table below and complete the boxes, explaining your answers.

Yes, because:	No, because:

## Practice questions

- 1 Give two things you can infer from Source A about the *Brown v Topeka* case. (For guidance, see page 79.)
- 2 How useful are Sources A and B for an enquiry into the *Brown v Topeka* case? Explain your answer, using Sources A and B and your knowledge of the historical context. (For guidance, see pages 71–73.)



▲ **Source C** Three NAACP lawyers, (from left) George E.C. Hayes, Thurgood Marshall and James Nabrit Jr, celebrating after the *Brown v Topeka* verdict



## 2.2 Little Rock High School, 1957

After the *Brown v Topeka* decision, Little Rock High School, Arkansas, decided to allow nine black students to enrol there. On 3 September 1957, the nine – led by Elizabeth Eckford – tried to enrol but were prevented by the State governor, Orval Faubus, who ordered Arkansas State National Guardsmen to block the students’ entry. Faubus said there were threats of public disorder if black students tried to enrol. The following day, 4 September, the National Guard was removed by order of Faubus, and the nine students ran the gauntlet of a vicious white crowd which numbered almost 1,000. At midday, the students went home under police guard because their safety could not be guaranteed.

President Eisenhower had to act. He took control of the National Guard and used them and federal troops to protect the black students for the rest of the school year. Despite the president’s intervention, Governor Faubus closed all Arkansas schools the following year, to prevent integration. Many white and most black students had no schooling for a year. Schools in Arkansas only reopened in 1959 following a Supreme Court ruling.



▲ **Source D** Black American students arriving at Little Rock High School in a US army car, 1957



▲ **Source E** Demonstrators against integration in schools in Arkansas, 1959

### Why was Little Rock significant?

The events at Little Rock were significant for a number of reasons:

- It involved the president, thus demonstrating that civil rights was an issue that could no longer be ignored.
- It demonstrated that states would be overruled by the Federal Government when necessary.
- The demonstrations were seen on television and in newspapers across the world. The USA was embarrassed to be seen as an oppressive nation when it was criticising communist countries for not allowing their citizens basic human rights.
- It came at a time when the Soviet Union had launched its sputnik satellite and gave the Soviet media the opportunity to claim not only technological superiority but also moral superiority over the USA.
- Many US citizens saw, for the first time, the racial hatred that existed in the Southern states.
- It did help to moderate some of the views held by white Americans at the time because Little Rock had highlighted the continued racism, especially in the Southern states.
- Events like those at Little Rock High School led black activists to realise that reliance on the federal courts was not enough to secure change. The issue of civil rights was now at the heart of US politics.

### ACTIVITIES

- 1 Why do you think that education played such an important part in the struggle for civil rights in the 1950s?
- 2 Did events at Little Rock High School bring progress for the civil rights movement? Copy the table below and complete the boxes, explaining your answers.

Yes, because:	No, because:

- 3 What can you learn from Source E about attitudes to integration in the USA in 1959?

### Practice question

Explain why there was progress in education for black Americans in the 1950s.

You may use the following in your answer:

- *Brown v Topeka*
- Little Rock High School

You **must** also use information of your own.

(For guidance, see pages 94–95.)



## 2.3 What are interpretations of history?

You will have to answer three questions about interpretations in the examination. These are:

- What is the main difference between these interpretations?
- Why are these interpretations different?
- How far do you agree with the view given by one of the interpretations?

An interpretation of history is a view given of the past – an event, movement, role of an individual and so on, written at a later date. It could be a view given by a historian, from a textbook or a history website. The writer has the benefit of hindsight and is able to consult a variety of sources of evidence to give their view of what took place.

There are different interpretations about a past event or person because the writer could focus on or give emphasis to a different aspect of a past event or person, or they may have consulted different sources from the past. The writer will carefully choose words and select or omit certain details to emphasise this view. The fact that there are different interpretations of the past does not necessarily mean that one of them is wrong. The two writers might simply have used different sources but they might also have used the same sources and reached different conclusions.

Your first task is to identify the view that is given by the interpretation of the event or person. Here is an interpretation of the passing of the Civil Rights Bill:

### Interpretation 1 From The History Learning website

The Civil Rights Bill's success in passing Congress owed much to the murder of Kennedy. The mood of the public in general would not have allowed any obvious deliberate attempts to damage 'Kennedy's Bill'. Johnson played the obvious card – how could anybody vote against an issue so dear to the late president's heart? How could anybody be so unpatriotic? Johnson simply appealed to the nation – still traumatised by Kennedy's murder.

The view that is given here is:

**This interpretation gives the view that the passing of the Bill was because of the death of Kennedy. It uses phrases such as 'owed much' and 'damage Kennedy's Bill' to show this view. It also focuses on the idea of 'patriotism' and 'appealing to the nation'.**

Here is a second interpretation of the passing of the Civil Rights Bill:

### Interpretation 2 Adapted from the Youth for Human Rights website

In 1963, King guided peaceful mass demonstrations that the white police force countered with police dogs and fire hoses and this generated newspaper headlines throughout the world. Subsequent mass demonstrations ... culminated in a march that attracted more than 250,000 protestors to Washington, DC, where King delivered his famous 'I have a dream' speech ... So powerful was the movement he inspired, that Congress enacted the Civil Rights Act in 1964. That same year King himself was honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize.

And here is an interpretation of the effects of the desegregation campaign of the 1950s:

### Interpretation 3 From *The Twentieth Century World* by John Martell, published in 1985

The desegregation campaign did not result in many immediate benefits for African Americans. It was important in another way: it marked the start of the civil rights movement that was to grow in importance during the 1960s and 1970s. Their often bitter experiences during the desegregation events of the 1950s brought African Americans together in a way never achieved before.

## ACTIVITIES

Read Interpretation 1 and the information underneath it. This outlines the view it gives of the passing of the Civil rights Act and the evidence it uses. Now try answering the questions below on Interpretations 2 and 3 in a similar way.

### Interpretation 2

- 1 What view does it give of the passing of the Civil Rights Bill?
- 2 What evidence from the interpretation supports this view?

### Interpretation 3

- 3 What view does it give of the effects of the desegregation campaign?
- 4 What evidence from the interpretation supports this view?

You will be given advice in the following chapters as to how to answer these questions.