

Civil Rights Unit Overview

1. **Brown v. Board of Education (1954)**

- a. Segregation
- b. Previous law: **Plessy vs. Ferguson**: Separate but Equal
 - a. Can have separate facilities for different races as long as those facilities are equal.
- c. These institutions were rarely actually equal.
- d. **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** argued that even if these facilities had equal accommodations, the act of separating people by race made them “inherently unequal”.
- e. Several cases across US launched and/or aided by NAACP combined into one set of arguments for Supreme Court: **Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS, et al.**
- f. Originally argued before Chief Justice **John Vinson**’s court, later reheard by Chief Justice **Earl Warren**’s court.
 - a. Court goes from a possible 5-4 decision reaffirming Plessy under Vinson, to a unanimous decision striking down “separate but equal” in public education under Warren. Warren wrote the court’s decision.

2. **Little Rock 9 (1958)**

- a. Brown decision had an early test in Little Rock, Arkansas.
- b. Desegregation plan called for admittance of 9 African American students to **Central High School** in the fall of 1958
- c. **Governor Orville Faubus** called upon Arkansas national Guard units to prevent African American students from entering the school.
- d. Student **Elizabeth Eckford** encountered an angry mob of fellow students and towns folk by herself, was threatened, and left.
- e. National Guard ordered to stand down, but mob prevented students from attending.
- f. **President Dwight D. Eisenhower** had 101st Airborne unit of the US Army take control of the situation and escort the 9 students to class.
- g. Some of the first use of Confederate Battle flag since Civil War began after this in southern states, including adding that flag to several state flags.
- h. Eisenhower’s decision upheld that federal laws will be obeyed by states, regardless of personal opinion of executive branch.

3. **Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-56)**

- a. Despite Brown decision, many public facilities remained segregated both by custom (*de facto segregation*) and by law (*de jure segregation*) across the country, especially in the South.
- b. In Montgomery, Alabama, several arrests of African Americans had been made for violating bus segregation. Including 15 year old **Claudette Colvin**.
- c. Critical mass of the outrage came with the arrest of local leader **Rosa Parks** in December 1955.
- d. Parks’ arrest caused local leaders to launch the **Montgomery Bus Boycott**, and choosing young minister **Martin Luther King, Jr.** as their leader.
- e. African Americans were 90% obedient to the boycott, and organized ride sharing to get where they needed to go, in addition to walking.
- f. After over a year, the city agreed to desegregate the busses. This was a victory for **non-violent** protest.

4. **Freedom Rides (1961)**

- a. **Boynton v. Virginia** - Supreme Court declares segregation in interstate bus and rail stations unconstitutional
- b. May 4, 1961 - Left from Washington D.C.. 7 African-American, 6 caucasian.
- c. Set out to test compliance with Court’s decision
- d. Sponsored by **Congress on Racial Equality (CORE)**.

- e. Riders encountered arrests and violence, including an attack outside Aniston Alabama, where one of their busses was set on fire, and a mob attack in Birmingham, Alabama. Those riders were flown from Birmingham to New Orleans, the end point of the rides.
- f. Other riders continued, coming from across the country. One group was put in the state penitentiary in Mississippi, **Parchman Farm**. These prisoners were denied access to mail or telephones, had their clothing and bedding taken from them,. Along with their toothbrushes.
- g. **President Kennedy** (and **Attorney General Robert Kennedy**) eventually intervened to ensure the safety of future riders. National Guard was called up to ensure orders' and busses were followed by **FBI and Federal Marshalls**.

5. **Integration of University of Mississippi (Ol' Miss) (1961-1962)**

- a. Southern Universities remained segregated, using bureaucratic intransigence to prevent entrance of African Americans.
- b. **James Meredith**, an African American Air Force Veteran, applied to the **University of Mississippi**, receiving encouraging words from University officials, until he admitted that he was black.
- c. Eventually **Robert Kennedy** intervenes, and sends **Federal Marshalls** to escort Meredith to registration and classes. Military units were called in to restore order after riots broke out. Meredith graduated from **Ol' Miss** in 1963.

6. **Birmingham Movement and Bull Connor (1963)**

- a. Birmingham was, according to Martin Luther King, Jr. "The most thoroughly segregated city in America".
- b. The city's stringent segregation ordinances were enforced by Public Safety Commissioner **Eugene "Bull" Connor**.
- c. King decided to make Birmingham a center of the movement, after a series of racially motivated bombings (three bombings continue during the movement in Birmingham, including destroying the hotel where king was staying).
- d. Connor used fire hoses to try to subdue demonstrators, and attacked them with police dogs. Images of these attacks were broadcast and printed across the country, turning many Americans away from segregation.
- e. Bull Connor, via his egregious actions, did a great deal to further the cause of civil rights.
- f. King was arrested during the Birmingham movement, and during his time wrote a series of letters, later published as a book called *Letters from a Birmingham Jail*.
- g. After the Birmingham movement, King will be awarded the Nobel peace prize for his commitment to non-violence.

7. **March on Washington (August 1963)**

- a. The Kennedy Brothers had initially been cool toward the Civil Rights movement, not wanting to alienate southern voters, a major base of support for the Democratic Party. But slowly the Kennedy's embraced the movement, and President Kennedy submitted a comprehensive civil rights bill for Congressional consideration.
- b. Movement leaders organized a march in Washington to pressure Congress to act on the bill.
- c. This was the site of the famous "I Have a Dream" speech by Dr. King, which made him the central figure of the movement.

8. **Assassination of Malcolm X (1965)**

- a. Born Malcolm Little, **Malcolm X** served time in prison for crimes. In prison he was exposed to the **Nation of Islam** and the teachings of its founder **Elijah Muhammad**.
- b. Upon his release in 1952 he went to work for the Nation of Islam, and quickly became their major national spokesperson.
- c. The Nation preached black power, and separation from white society.
- d. By the early 1960s, X was beginning to question the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, and he left the Nation of Islam in 1964.

- e. X formed his own group, **Muslim Mosque Inc.**, and converted to **Sunni Islam**. The teachings of the Nation of Islam included the belief that white people could not enter Mecca or be Muslims. On a pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca, X encountered Muslims of all races, and realized that much of what Elijah Muhammad had taught him was skewed.
- f. Upon his return X moderated his tone and began to speak of racial integration.
- g. He was killed by followers of Elijah Muhammad in 1965 before a speech in New York City.

9. Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. (April 4, 1968)

- a. By 1968, King was focusing on Economic justice issues' and not only on racial equality.
- b. In Memphis, Tennessee, organizing a Poor Persons' March on Washington, King was shot while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.
- c. His assassin was **James Earl Ray**, an escaped convict who had been stalking King for months.
- d. News of King's assassination touched off riots in African American communities across the country.
- e. One city that did not see a riot was Indianapolis, Indiana, where the news of King's death was broken to the African American community by Senator and Presidential Candidate Robert F. Kennedy.

10. Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy (June 5, 1968)

- a. Two months after King's death, **Robert F. Kennedy** was assassinated in Los Angeles' Ambassador Hotel.
- b. Kennedy had just won the California Democratic Primary, and was the likely nominee of the Democratic Party in 1968 against the Republican candidate Richard Nixon.
- c. Kennedy's assassin was **Sirhan Sirhan**, a Palestinian immigrant upset over Kennedy's support for Israel.