The Selma to Story

The Need for Change

The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country...But in the view of the Constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant ruling class of citizens...Our Constitution is color-blind... In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law... It is, therefore, to be regretted that this high tribunal... has reached the conclusion that it is competent for a State to regulate the enjoyment by citizens of their civil rights solely upon the basis of race...

We boast of the freedom enjoyed by our people above all other peoples. But it is difficult to reconcile that boast with a state of the law, which, practically, puts the brand of servitude and degradation upon a large class of our fellow-citizens, our equals before the law. The thin disguise of "equal" accommodations...will not mislead anyone, nor atone for the wrong this day done.


The "wrong this day done" to which Justice Harlan referred was the 1896 Supreme Court decision in Plessy v. Ferguson. Homer Adolph Plessy, an African American, had boarded a train in New Orleans and seated himself in a "whites-only" car. When he refused to move, he was arrested for violating the "Jim Crow Car Act of 1890." The incident led to the Supreme Court case in which all but Justice Harlan voted against Plessy, affirming the right of states to enact segregation laws. The "separate but equal" ruling set the stage for the rampant racial discrimination that followed in the Deep South. In many cities and towns, African-Americans were not allowed to share a taxi with whites or enter a building through the same entrance. They had to drink from separate water fountains, use separate restrooms, attend separate schools, and even swear on separate Bibles and be buried in separate cemeteries. They were excluded from restaurants and public libraries. Many parks barred them with signs that read "Negroes and dogs not allowed." One municipal zoo went so far as to list separate visiting hours.

African-Americans were expected to step aside to let a white person pass, and black men dared not look any white woman in the eye. Black men and women were addressed as "Tom" or "Jane," but rarely as "Mr." or "Miss" or "Mrs." A black man was referred to as "boy" and a black woman as "girl," both often endured insulting labels of "nigger" or "colored."
Voting rights discrimination was widespread. In Tennessee, as the Justice Department's John Doar discovered on a self-appointed tour of rural Haywood County, black sharecroppers were being evicted by white farmers for trying to vote. In Mississippi, names of new voter applicants had to be published in local newspapers for two weeks before acceptance, and voters had the right to object to an applicant's "moral character." Black applicants, many of whom were illiterate or poorly educated, were also required to pass literacy tests and to interpret sections of the State Constitution to the satisfaction of the registrars. These tests were not applied to illiterate whites. In Alabama, many registration centers were only open two days a month; voting registrars often arrived late and took long lunch hours. In 1957, the town of Tuskegee gerrymandered black residents outside the city limits to make them ineligible to vote. In nearby Macon County, voter registration boards used discriminatory practices such as these to limit the number of eligible black voters:

- holding black applicants to a higher standard of accuracy than whites;
- allowing white applicants to register in their cars and in their homes;
- processing black applicants last, even when they were first in line;
- establishing separate registration offices in different parts of the courthouse;
- offering assistance only to white applicants in completing the registration form;
- refusing to notify black applicants about the status of their applications.

Some counties in the Deep South resorted to harsher means of preventing local blacks from voting. They jailed black applicants and firebombed places where voter education classes had been conducted, such as Mt. Olive Baptist Church in Terrell County, Georgia. They threatened, beat, and in some cases, murdered black applicants.

Southern blacks who resisted segregation, particularly those in rural areas, lived in constant fear — fear of their employers who vowed to fire them; fear of white "citizens' councils" who adopted policies of economic reprisal against demonstrators; and fear of white vigilante groups like the Ku Klux Klan, who exerted an often-unchecked reign of terror across the South, where lynching of African-Americans was a common occurrence and rarely prosecuted. Nearly 4,500 African-Americans were lynched in the United States between 1882 and the early 1950s.

The Players People, not processes, won the significant gains of the civil rights movement. Against incredible odds—and often at great risk--thousands of activists in the modern freedom struggle won victories that touched their own lives as well as those of their neighbors and future generations. Here are highlights about some of the groups and individuals involved in the unfolding human drama:
Southern resistance Resistance to racial equality in the Deep South came not only from extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and white "citizens' councils." It occurred at all levels of government and society — from federal judges to state governors to county sheriffs to local citizens serving on juries.

Governor Orvil Faubus of Arkansas used state troopers to prevent school integration, and Governors Ross Barnett of Mississippi and George Wallace of Alabama physically blocked school doorways. E. H. Hurst, a Mississippi State Representative, stalked and killed a black farmer for attending voter registration classes. Laurie Pritchett, Albany, Georgia's police chief, thwarted student efforts to integrate public places in the city. Birmingham's public safety commissioner, Eugene T. "Bull" Connor, advocated violence against freedom riders and ordered fire hoses and police dogs turned on demonstrators. Sheriff Jim Clark of Dallas County, Alabama, loosed his deputies on "Bloody Sunday" marchers and personally menaced other protestors. Police all across the South arrested civil rights activists on trumped-up charges. All-white juries in several states acquitted known killers of local African-Americans.

Black churches

The leadership role of black churches in the movement was a natural extension of their structure and function. They offered members an opportunity to exercise roles denied them in society. Throughout history, the black church served not only as a place of worship but also as a community "bulletin board," a credit union, a "people's court" to solve disputes, a support group, and a center of political activism. These and other functions enhanced the importance of the minister. The most prominent clergyman in the civil rights movement was Martin Luther King, Jr. *Time* magazine’s 1964 "Man of the Year" was a man of the people. He joined as well as led protest demonstrations, and as comedian Dick Gregory put it, "he gave as many fingerprints as autographs." King's powerful oratory and persistent call for racial justice inspired sharecroppers and intellectuals alike. His tireless personal commitment to and strong leadership role in the black freedom struggle won him worldwide acclaim and the Nobel Peace Prize.

Other notable minister-activists included Ralph Abernathy, King's closest associate; Bernard Lee, veteran demonstrator and frequent travel companion of King; Fred Shuttlesworth, who defied Bull Connor and who created a safe path for a colleague through a white mob in Montgomery by commanding "Out of the way!" and C.T. Vivian, who debated Sheriff Clark on his conduct and the Constitution.
Students and seminarians in both the South and the North played key roles in every phase of the civil rights movement—from bus boycotts to sit-ins to freedom rides to social movements. The student movement involved such celebrated figures as John Lewis, the single-minded activist who "kept on" despite many beatings and harassments; Jim Lawson, the revered "guru" of nonviolent theory and tactics; Diane Nash, an articulate and intrepid public champion of justice; Bob Moses, pioneer of voting registration in the most rural—and most dangerous—part of the South; and James Bevel, a fiery preacher and charismatic organizer and facilitator. Other prominent student activists included Charles McDew, Bernard Lafayette, Charles Jones, Lonnie King, Julian Bond (associated with Atlanta University), Hosea Williams (associated with Brown Chapel), and Stokely Carmichael, who later changed his name to Kwame Toure.

Institutional frameworks Church and student-led movements developed their own organizational and sustaining structures. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (the SCLC), founded in 1957, coordinated and raised funds, mostly from northern sources, for local protests and for the training of black leaders. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, founded in 1957, developed the "jail-no-bail" strategy. SNCC's role was to develop and link sit-in campaigns and to help organize freedom rides, voter registration drives, and other protest activities. Bob Moses of SNCC created the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to coordinate the work of the SCLC, SNCC, and various other national and independent civil rights groups. These three new groups often joined forces with existing organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), founded in 1942, and the National Urban League. The NAACP and its Director, Roy Wilkins, provided legal counsel for jailed demonstrators, helped raise bail, and continued to test segregation and discrimination in the courts as it had been doing for half a century. CORE initiated the 1961 Freedom Rides which involved many SNCC members, and CORE's leader James Forman later became executive secretary of SNCC. The National Urban League, founded in 1911 and headed by Whitney M. Young, Jr., helped open up job opportunities for African-Americans. Labor was represented by A. Philip Randolph, vice-president of the American Federation of Labor, and his chief assistant and organizer, Bayard Rustin.

Federal involvement All branches of the federal government impacted the civil rights movement. President John Kennedy supported enforcement of desegregation in schools and public facilities. Attorney General Robert Kennedy brought more than 50 lawsuits in four states to secure black Americans' right to vote. President Lyndon Johnson was personally
committed to achieving civil rights goals. Congress passed and President Johnson signed the century's two most far-reaching pieces of civil rights legislation — the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Johnson advocated civil rights even though he knew it would cost the Democratic Party the South in the next presidential election, and for the foreseeable future. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, concerned about possible Communist influence in the civil rights movement and personally antagonistic to Martin Luther King, Jr., used the FBI to investigate King and other civil rights leaders. U.S. District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr., ruled against segregation and voting rights discrimination in Alabama and made the Selma-to-Montgomery March possible.

The Strategy

In the early days of the civil rights movement, litigation and lobbying were the focus of integration efforts. The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education led to a shift in tactics, and from 1955 to 1965, "direct action" was the strategy primarily bus boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, and social movements.

Locally initiated boycotts of segregated buses, especially the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-1956, were designed to unite and mobilize black communities on a commonly-shared concern. Protestors refused to ride on the buses, opting instead to walk or carpool. The nearly one year-long boycott ended bus segregation in Montgomery and triggered other bus boycotts such as the highly successful Tallahassee, Florida boycott of 1956-1957.

Student-organized sit-ins like the February 1960 protest at Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, offered young men and women with no special skills or resources an opportunity to display their discontent and raise white awareness. Protestors were encouraged to dress up, sit quietly, and occupy every other stool so potential white sympathizers could join in. The success of the Greensboro sit-in led to a rash of student campaigns all across the South. By the end of 1960 the sit-ins had spread to every southern and border state and even to Nevada, Illinois, and Ohio. Demonstrators focused not only on lunch counters but also on parks, beaches, libraries, theaters, museums, and other public places. When they were arrested, student demonstrators made "jail-no-bail" pledges to call attention to their cause and to reverse the cost of protest (putting the financial burden of jail space and food on the "jailors").

The 1961 Freedom Rides on public buses tested compliance with court orders to desegregate interstate transportation terminals. The trips enabled students from both the South and the
North to protest away from campus and to form a tightly-knit community of activists, many of whom would participate in the last protest phase which began in 1961. National civil rights leaders launched these efforts to involve poor blacks and other blacks who had been uninvolved until then. The movements included door-to-door voter education projects in rural Mississippi, "The Birmingham Campaign" to desegregate public accommodations in the city, and "Freedom Summer," to try to unseat the regular delegation at the 1964 Democratic Convention and to publicize the disenfranchisement of southern blacks.

While some groups and individuals within the civil rights movement advocated Black Power, black separatism, or even armed resistance, the majority of participants remained committed to the principles of nonviolence—a deliberate decision by an oppressed minority to abstain from violence for political gain. The commitment to nonviolence gave the civil rights movement great moral authority. Using nonviolent strategies, civil rights activists took advantage of emerging national network-news reporting, especially television, to capture national attention and the attention of Congress and the White House.

In 1955, journalists covered the Mississippi trial of two men accused of murdering 14-year-old Emmett Till from Chicago. The cover of Jet magazine featured a photo of the boy's mutilated face. A few years later, Americans watched the live footage of violent unrest at Little Rock High School as whites rioted to prevent nine black students from entering the school. Radio, television, and print journalism exhaustively covered such 1960s events as police dogs attacking children in Birmingham, former sharecropper Fannie Lou Hammer describing her jail beatings to delegates at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, and a mounted posse charging "Bloody Sunday" demonstrators in Selma, Alabama.

The Cost
Freedom wore an expensive price tag.

Southern blacks who tried to register to vote — and those who supported them — were typically jeered and harassed, beaten or killed. In 1963, the NAACP's Medgar Evers was gunned down in front of his wife and children in Jackson, Mississippi. Reverend George Lee of Belzoni, Mississippi, was murdered when he refused to remove his name from a list of registered voters, and farmer Herbert Lee of Liberty, Mississippi, was killed for having attended voter education classes. Three "Freedom Summer" field-workers--Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman--were shot down for their part in helping Mississippi blacks register and organize. Michael Schwerner, a social worker from Manhattan's Lower East Side, James Chaney, a local plasterer's apprentice, and Andrew
Goodman, a Queens College anthropology student, disappeared in June 1964. Their bodies were discovered several months later in an earthen dam outside Philadelphia, Mississippi. Schwerner and Goodman had been shot once; Chaney, the lone African-American, had been savagely beaten and shot three times.

When violence failed to stop voter registration efforts, whites used economic pressure. In Mississippi’s LeFlore and Sunflower Counties — two of the poorest counties in the nation — state authorities cut off federal food relief, resulting in a near-famine in the region. Many black registrants throughout the South were also fired from their jobs or refused credit at local banks and stores. In one town, a black grocer was forced out of business when local whites stopped his store delivery trucks on the highway outside town and made them turn around.

Like voter registrants, freedom riders paid a heavy price for racial justice. When the interracial groups of riders stepped off Greyhound or Trailways buses in segregated terminals, local police were usually absent. Angry mobs were waiting, however, armed with baseball bats, lead pipes, and bicycle chains. In Anniston, Alabama, one bus was firebombed, forcing its passengers to flee for their lives. In Birmingham, where an FBI informant reported that Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor had encouraged the Ku Klux Klan to attack an incoming group of freedom riders. The riders were severely beaten "until it looked like a bulldog had got a hold of them." In eerily-quiet Montgomery, a mob charged another busload of riders, knocking John Lewis unconscious with a crate and smashing Life photographer Don Urbrock in the face with his own camera. A dozen men surrounded Jim Zwerg, a white student from Fisk University, and beat him in the face with a suitcase, knocking out his teeth. The freedom riders did not fare much better in jail. There, they were crammed into tiny, filthy cells and sporadically beaten. In Jackson, Mississippi, some male prisoners were forced to do hard labor in 100-degree heat. Others were transferred to Parchman Penitentiary, where their food was deliberately oversalted and their mattresses were removed. Sometimes the men were suspended by "wrist breakers" from the walls. Typically, the windows of their cells were shut tight on hot days, making it hard for them to breathe.

Out of jail, the freedom riders joined mass demonstrations where the violent response of local police shocked the world. In Birmingham, police loosed attack dogs into a peaceful crowd of demonstrators, and the German shepherds bit three teenagers. In Birmingham and Orangeburg, South Carolina, firemen blasted protestors with hoses set at a pressure to remove bark from trees and mortar from brick.

On "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, Alabama, police and troopers on horseback charged into a
group of marchers, beating them and firing tear gas. Several weeks later, the marchers trekked the 54 miles from Selma to Montgomery without incident, but afterwards four Klansmen murdered Detroit homemaker Viola Liuzzo as she drove marchers back to Selma. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his life for the movement, struck down by an assassin's bullet in Memphis, Tennessee. When white supremacists could not halt the civil rights movement, they tried to demoralize its supporters. They bombed churches and other meeting places. They set high bail and paced trials slowly, forcing civil rights organizations to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars. At a Nashville lunch counter sit-in, the store manager locked the door and turned on the insect fumigator. In St. Augustine, Florida, city officials who had promised to meet with black demonstrators at City Hall, offered them an empty table and a tape recorder instead. In Selma, Sheriff Jim Clark and his deputies forced 165 students into a three-mile run, poking them with cattle prods as they ran. Random violence accompanied calculated acts. The Klan bombing of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church killed four black girls. On the campus of the University of Mississippi, a stray bullet struck a local jukebox-repairman in a riot that killed one reporter and wounded more than 150 federal marshals. In Marion, Alabama, 26-year-old Jimmy Lee Jackson was gunned down while trying to protect his mother and grandfather from State Police. Not far away in Selma, a white Boston minister, who had lost his way, was clubbed to death by white vigilantes.

The more violent southern whites became, the more their actions were publicized and denounced across the nation. Increasing violence in the South's streets, jails, and public places failed to break the spirits of the freedom fighters. Indeed, it emboldened them.

The Prize

At times, history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama. There is no Negro problem. There is no southern problem. There is no northern problem. There is only an American problem. Many of the issues of civil rights are very complex and most difficult. But about this there can and should be no argument. Every American citizen must have the right to vote...Yet the harsh fact is that in many places in this country men and women are kept from voting simply because they are Negroes... No law that we now have on the books...can insure the right to vote when local officials are determined to deny it... There is no Constitutional issue here. The command of the Constitution is plain. There is no moral issue. It is wrong — deadly wrong — to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote in this country. There is no issue of States' rights or National rights. There is only the struggle for human rights.
President Lyndon B. Johnson
Introducing the Voting Rights Act to Congress, March 15, 1965

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which required equal access to public places and outlawed discrimination in employment, was a major victory of the black freedom struggle, but the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was its crowning achievement. The 1965 Act suspended literacy tests and other voter tests and authorized federal supervision of voter registration in states and individual voting districts where such tests were being used. African-Americans who had been barred from registering to vote finally had an alternative to the courts. If voting discrimination occurred, the 1965 Act authorized the attorney general to send federal examiners to replace local registrars. The Act had an immediate impact. Within months of its passage on August 6, 1965, one quarter of a million new black voters had been registered, one-third by federal examiners. Within four years, voter registration in the South had more than doubled. In 1965, Mississippi had the highest black voter turnout — 74% — and led the nation in the number of black leaders elected. In 1969, Tennessee had a 92.1% turnout; Arkansas, 77.9%; and Texas, 73.1%. Winning the right to vote changed the political landscape of the South. When Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, barely 100 African-Americans held elective office in the U.S.; by 1989 there were more than 7,200, including more than 4,800 in the South. Nearly every Black Belt county in Alabama had a black sheriff, and southern blacks held top positions within city, county, and state governments.

Atlanta boasted a black mayor — Andrew Young, and so did New Orleans — Ernest Morial. Black politicians on the national level included Barbara Jordan, who represented Texas in Congress, and former mayor Young, who was appointed U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations during the Carter Administration. Julian Bond was elected to the Georgia Legislature in 1965, although political reaction to his public opposition to U.S. involvement in Vietnam prevented him from taking his seat until 1967. John Lewis currently represents Georgia’s 5th Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives, where he has served since 1987. Lewis sits on the House Ways and Means and Health committees.

The enormous gains of the civil rights movement stand to last a long time. Yet the full effect of these gains is yet to be felt. "Equal rights" struggles now involve multiple races, as well as the issues of rights based upon gender and sexual orientation. Racism has lost its legal, political, and social standing, but the legacy of racism — poverty, ignorance, and disease — confronts us. "They are our enemies, not our fellow man, not our neighbor," said President Johnson at the end of his voting rights speech. "And these enemies too — poverty, disease, and
ignorance — we shall overcome."

From the Web site We Shall Overcome: Historic Places of the Civil Rights Movement sponsored by the National Parks Service at http://www.cr.nps.gov(nr/travel/civilrights/)