

Document 1

African – American Civil Rights Movement

Directions: Read the following documents and record the information in your chart.

The Civil Rights Movement

African Americans had been denied basic civil rights both during and after the days of slavery. In the years after World War II, a broad movement to secure these rights finally developed. Blacks who had fought in the war demanded equal treatment at home. Many whites agreed. Also, the United States was trying to get developing nations in Asia and Africa to line up on its side in the Cold War. Racist laws and customs in the U.S. damaged this effort.

Segregation. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) had been founded in 1909. Ever since, it had been a leading African-American rights group. In the 1940s and 1950s, the NAACP waged war in the courts on laws that treated blacks unequally. One of its cases was *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. This case produced a landmark Supreme Court ruling in 1954. The case attacked the “separate but equal” doctrine the Court had proclaimed in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. The NAACP lawyer who argued the case was Thurgood Marshall. He argued against forcing black children to attend separate schools from white students. He said this resulted in an unequal education for blacks. It also caused emotional damage to these students, Marshall added. The Court agreed. It was a huge breakthrough for African Americans.

Segregated southern school districts resisted the *Brown* decision strongly. In Little Rock, Arkansas, things came to a head. The state’s governor used National Guard troops to keep black students from attending Central High School. This was a direct refusal to obey federal court rulings. President Eisenhower took federal control of the National Guard. He used the troops to protect the black students.

Blacks and many northern whites now took action. They were resolved to change things all through the South. They worked to overturn segregation laws. They struggled to secure voting rights for African Americans. In Montgomery, Alabama, blacks successfully boycotted the city bus system until they got equal seating rights with whites. A new leader emerged during this boycott. He was Martin Luther King, Jr., a charismatic minister. He urged his followers to use the tactics of passive resistance. That is, he promoted a policy of protest without violence.

A new wave of protests began in 1960. Four black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, sat at a whites-only lunch counter. Sit-ins spread across the South. Next came freedom rides. Buses full of blacks and whites traveled around the South. They stopped at segregated eating places and bus stations. The sit-ins and freedom rides got national attention. Many Americans spoke out against the illegal segregation of public places. Over the next few years, the racial barriers crumbled.

Voting Rights. Whites often blocked blacks from registering to vote in the South. Starting in 1962, SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) worked to change this. SNCC sent a wave of workers, mostly students, across the South. These workers helped African Americans secure their voting rights. Racist whites viciously attacked the SNCC workers. Some were murdered. Demands for protection and change mounted. In response, President Kennedy proposed a civil rights act. This law was passed after his death. It outlawed segregation in public places, such as hotels and restaurants. It also barred discrimination in employment. A Voting Rights Act followed in 1965. It gave federal protection to the rights of blacks to register and to vote. Within five years, the number of blacks registered to vote in the South leaped from 35 to 65 percent.

More Militant Voices. As the civil rights movement went on, many blacks became more radical and militant. Martin Luther King continued to call for nonviolence. Others were more aggressive. They wanted changes in oppression of African Americans all across the country.

- Malcolm X of the Black Muslims urged complete separation of blacks from white society. (He moderated this position just before his death by assassination.)
- Stokely Carmichael of SNCC coined the slogan “Black Power.” It urged blacks to take pride in their African-American identity and culture. It called on blacks to fight for their own black communities.
- Growing black anger resulted in a series of destructive riots in cities across the country. Watts, a black ghetto in Los Angeles, erupted in 1965. More serious riots shook U.S. cities in 1966 and 1967. Many riots broke out after the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968.

How did the leaders of the African – American Civil Rights Movement differ in their approaches to obtaining equality?

Do you think one set of ideas was better for achieving civil rights?
Why or why not? Explain.
(Answer in your notebook)

Black Rights and Protests: Different Views

Different African-American leaders had different ideas about what changes blacks should strive for in American society, and what methods they should use. Here are some of their words.

Martin Luther King, Jr., 1963

You may well ask, "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.

. . . I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss as "rabble-rousers" and "outside agitators" those of us who employ nonviolent direct action and if they refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes will, out of frustration and despair, seek solace and security in black nationalist ideologies—a development that would inevitably lead to a frightening racial nightmare.



Stokely Carmichael, 1966

Politically, black power means . . . the coming-together of black people to elect representatives and to *force those representatives to speak to their needs*. . . .

As for initiating the use of violence, we hope that such programs as ours will make that unnecessary; but it is not for us to tell black communities whether they can or cannot use any particular form of action to resolve their problems. Responsibility for the use of violence by black men, whether in self-defense or initiated by them, lies with the white community.

Malcolm X

1962: We don't think that it is possible for the American white man in sincerity to take the action necessary to correct the unjust conditions that 20 million black people here are made to suffer morning, noon, and night. And because we don't have any hope or confidence or faith in the American white man's ability to bring about a change in the injustices that exist, instead of asking or seeking to integrate into the American society we want to face the facts of the problem the way they are, and separate ourselves. And in separating ourselves this doesn't mean that we are anti-white or anti-American, or anti-anything. We feel, that if integration all these years hasn't solved the problem yet, then we want to try something new, something different and something that is in accord with the conditions as they actually exist.

1964: I don't go along with any kind of nonviolence unless everybody's going to be non-violent. If they make the Ku Klux Klan nonviolent, I'll be nonviolent. If they make the White Citizens Council nonviolent, I'll be nonviolent. But as long as you've got somebody else not being nonviolent, I don't want anybody coming to me talking any nonviolent talk. I don't think it is fair to tell our people to be nonviolent unless someone is out there making the Klan and the Citizens Council and these other groups also be nonviolent.

