

The Transition from Segregation to Civil Rights

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Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The new militancy of black Americans in the post war era ushered in the transition from segregation to civil rights. The NAACP had supported numerous legal battles from the 1920s forward--usually local litigation and investigations of lynching, challenging the unequal facilities of state institutions and laying down thereby a body of legal precedent used by the courts in the 1950s. In 1944, the Supreme Court struck down the **white primary**, a measure used to exclude blacks from the Democratic Party primaries in the South. The number of southern, African Americans registered to vote rose from 150,000 in 1940 to more than a million by 1952.

The transition was complete when the NAACP lawyers convinced the Supreme Court to reverse the doctrine of "separate but equal" in education. Other court cases followed, along with ground-breaking federal legislation, and waves of protests by black and white activists determined to implement the Court's rulings and to end segregation and disfranchisement. This activism became known as the Civil Rights Movement, and the era is frequently called the "Second Reconstruction" because it effectively completed the Civil Rights revolution begun by Congress and embodied in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments passed in the decade after the Civil War.

This incredibly successful challenge to Jim Crow coincided with the de-colonization of non-white nations throughout the world. It was no accident that the great African-American leader of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, Martin Luther King Jr., drew his greatest inspiration from the non-violent tactics espoused by Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of India's independence from Great Britain.

With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, legalized segregation and the disfranchisement of African Americans was finally ended. It had taken almost one hundred years of resistance to terror and discrimination to achieve what had been promised to African Americans at the end of the Civil War. The struggle from terror to triumph had not been an easy victory, but it was a war valiantly fought--and it was a war in which justice ultimately prevailed.

In fact, so dead is the historical meaning of the word Jim Crow that the average college student today is unaware of its significance. According to a survey of students in American history classes at a major university, less than 20 percent recognized the word at all. And most of them have only a vague notion that the word once had something to do with segregation.

Yet, if Jim Crow is legally buried, the belief in white superiority and the legacy of segregation and racial discrimination still lives on in the hearts, minds, and actions of many Americans. The recurrent outbreaks of race riots in American cities are telling reminders that voting rights and integration of public schools represent only part of the solution to the problem of race in America. Indeed, the lack of equal access by African Americans to adequate and rewarding jobs, quality education, and affordable housing strongly suggests to many observers that the spirit of Jim Crow still haunts the social and economic landscape of the American nation.