

Civil Rights

and the 1960s

Civil Rights & the Judiciary

- The civil rights activism of the 20th century owes much to the legal work of organizations like the NAACP
- When state legislatures and Congress can't or won't act, the Judicial Branch is the only option
- *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) overrides the 1896 ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*
- In *Plessy*, the court provided that segregation couldn't run afoul of the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment as "separate" didn't mean "unequal"
- The *Brown* court rejected the argument, providing that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (Chief Justice Earl Warren, writing for the unanimous court)

Civil Rights & the Judiciary

- Segregation and other oppressive policies - whether *de facto* or *de jure* - have become an international liability for the United States
- The Soviets use oppression of black Americans as a way to point out the hypocrisy of American values
- The Federal government is becoming less willing to participate in the oppressive policies of local and state governments: *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948), Truman desegregates the military
- To fight the backlash against the *Brown* decision and Eisenhower's ordering Federal troops to protect the Little Rock Nine, Congress makes some new steps with the Civil Rights Act of 1957

Civil Rights Act of 1957

- In 1957, only about 20% of eligible black voters were registered to vote
- Since states and localities ran elections and set the basic rules for participation in them, it was easy for the authorities to disenfranchise black voters via instruments like poll taxes and literacy tests
- Then- Senate Majority Leader LBJ and allies stepped in to try to enforce black Americans' right to vote in Federal elections for Federal candidates and electors

Civil Rights Act of 1957

- Southern Dems managed to water down much of the bill, but it still managed to establish the Commission on Civil Rights to explore the voting rights problem
- Also created a separate Civil Rights division with the DOJ to oversee civil rights cases and an Assistant AG for Civil Rights position
- It's not much, but it's a start - the first serious attempt at Civil Rights legislation in Congress since Reconstruction!

Activism

- The 1960s featured a blend of Civil Rights activist strategies, including judicial strategies, new legislation in Congress, protests, boycotts, and civil disobedience (sit ins!)
- Religious leaders like Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., are key figures in the movement
- Young people - particularly college students - get involved

Activism

- Greensboro, NC, Woolworth lunch counter sit-in in 1960 - sparks a movement that successfully desegregates the Woolworth chain!
- “Freedom Riders” of 1961 promote desegregation of southern public transportation, building upon Rosa Parks’ earlier act of protest in refusing to sit “in the back of the bus”
- The “Albany Movement” blends cooperation among the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (MLK’s group), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee - a longstanding civil rights organization, a Christian civil rights organization, and a student-run civil rights organization

Things get more violent

- While these groups promoted nonviolent means of protest, they faced very real violence at the hands of segregationists - including law enforcement
- In 1962, the integration of the Ole Miss campus sparked riots. US Marshalls and National Guard sent in by JFK; 2 die and hundreds are injured
- In 1963, the SCLC's Birmingham Campaign is intended as a peaceful protest against segregation and violence in Alabama's biggest city
- It results in arrests (including MLK's) and intense attacks on young black protestors, including firehoses and dogs

Things start to change

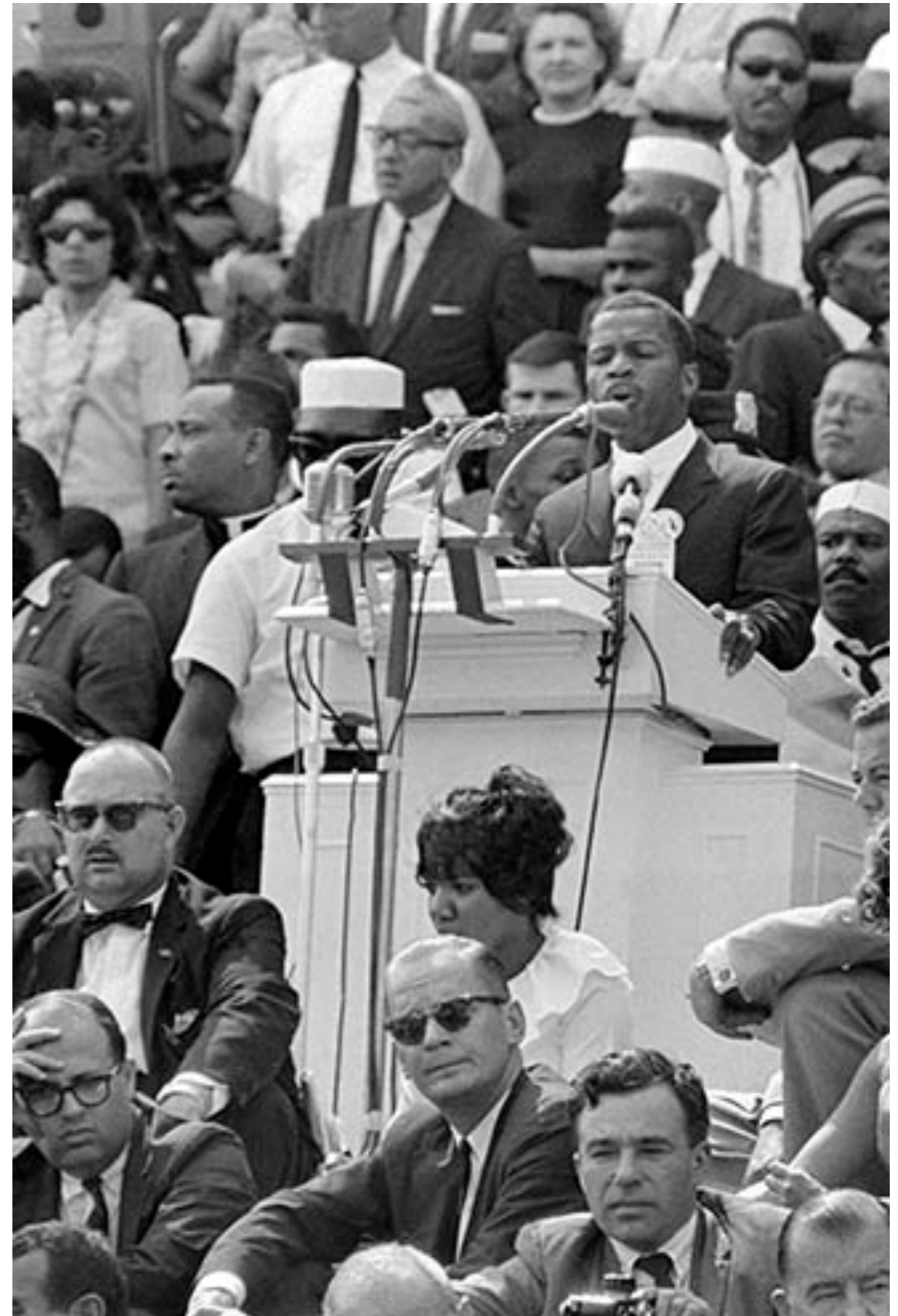
- The Birmingham Campaign gets some results - public accommodations are desegregated in the town
- 1963 March on Washington - MLK and thousands of allies converge on the capital for speeches promoting government action on civil rights, including a new Civil Rights Act
- JFK wants a new law, but is reluctant to rock the boat; many powerful Southern Democrats are not into the idea

March on Washington

John Lewis is the youngest of the main speakers at the March

He's 23, the Chair of SNCC, and one of the organizers of the march

His speech is one of the most “radical” of the day



John Lewis

- In his “March on Washington” speech, what does John Lewis lay out as the goals of the march, and of the civil rights movement as a whole? How does he characterize the movement?
- What are his misgivings about government action (or inaction) at the time?
- What does he want out of the civil rights act being considered at the time? What did he feel was wrong with the Congressional discourse about the act?
- Who does he blame for the inaction plaguing the legislation at the time?

John Lewis

- Goals of the march/movement: Jobs, desegregation, freedom, equality, voting rights, protection from police brutality and abuse by authority, wrongful imprisonment
- The bill as-is is not enough; it doesn't guarantee votes to all Americans who should be eligible; it doesn't protect black people from retribution if they try to register/vote
- Politicians are not really helping; there are some who are on our side, but so many are happy with status quo and maintaining power
- He had originally intended to ask during his speech: Which side is the federal government on?

John Lewis

- “But what political leader can stand up and say, ‘My party is the party of principles’? For the party of Kennedy is also the party of Eastland. The party of Javits is also the party of Goldwater. Where is our party? Where is the political party that will make it unnecessary to march on Washington?”
- Moderates need to get in the game and **SUPPORT AMERICAN RIGHTS**
- Moderates need to act to protect us from the violence they claim to hate
- Why slow down? Why stop? Let’s finish “the revolution of 1776”!
“Wake up, America!”

Civil Rights Act

- In 1964, after Kennedy's assassination, LBJ takes up the fight for the Civil Rights Act
- LBJ was a fan of the New Deal and a proponent of policies that reduced poverty and promoted human dignity
- He grew up poor in Texas, and his work as a teacher in poor Hispanic communities in southern Texas helped him see the value of equality-minded policy
- He works with Congress and civil rights leaders to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits both segregation in public and quasi-public spaces AND general discrimination on the basis of race, gender, creed, or national origin

Civil Rights Act

- Even with the Civil Rights Act, voting rights are still not vigorously enforced in the south
- The “Freedom Summer” voter registration drives and schools (cosponsored by SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality) in Mississippi happen in 1964, too, highlighting the deep south’s unwillingness to cooperate; the Freedom Summer volunteers face resistance and violence
- In March 1965, a peaceful voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, AL, is attacked by law enforcement
- “Bloody Sunday” is where John Lewis and many others are brutally beaten and gassed by law enforcement



Bloody Sunday

Peaceful protesters beaten and teargassed (John Lewis)

Voting Rights Act of 1965

- There will be more protests at Edmund Pettus Bridge, but the first and bloodiest prompts LBJ to call for a voting rights bill
- He speaks to Congress on March 15, on “Voting Rights and the American Promise”

Voting Rights & The American Promise

- How does President Johnson characterize the events on “Bloody Sunday” in Selma?
- How does he characterize the duty and mission of America, and American government? What must be done?
- Why are voting rights an American necessity, according to Johnson?
- Is the Voting Rights Act just about African-American rights?

Voting Rights & The American Promise

- Selma as a watershed moment in our national experience
- “Our mission is at once the oldest and the most basic of this country: to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man.”
- We NEED to establish protections for fair and equal voting rights; we have failed as a nation if we fail in this...money and power means nothing if we don't have human rights
- If we take “all men are created equal” and “consent of the governed” seriously, we have to do this
- Americans fought and died for us to do this; we can't dishonor them by not acting

Voting Rights & The American Promise

- “Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.”
- I taught poor children who were victimized by poverty and racial hatred, and I wished I could do more. Now I’m trying to do more. I need you to help me do it!

Voting Rights Act

- The Voting Rights Act passes, as does much of LBJ's "Great Society" and "War on Poverty" platform of policies
- He means it all to be an extension of sorts of the New Deal
- Despite the lofty goals of these programs, it does provoke a reaction among conservatives, and not just the overtly white supremacist kind
- And unsurprisingly, the problems of inequality and oppression are not solved overnight; racial tension continues

In the Heat of the Night VR 8

- This 1967 classic, starring Sidney Poitier as Detective Tibbs, uses the reluctant-to-desegregate Deep South as a backdrop for a murder mystery
- How do white supremacist attitudes affect the story and characters?
- Do the beliefs and actions of the residents of fictional Sparta, MS, seem to reflect the real beliefs of southern white people in the 1960s? How so? Give examples from real history (textbook & primary sources can help).
- How does the story attempt to subvert or correct racist attitudes? Do you think the ending reflects reality, given the circumstances?
- What does this film seem to have in common with John Lewis' 1963 speech, and with LBJ's goals for the Voting Rights Act of 1965?
- What value does a film like this bring to the civil rights movement? How does it reflect the values of the movement?