

CAUSES & CONSEQUENCES

OF THE

AFRICAN-AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT



MICHAEL WEBER

became the first black to play for a major league baseball team. Individual black athletes had occasionally achieved general recognition before. The victories of African-American track star Jesse Owens in the 1936 Olympics, held in Berlin, Germany, helped show the falseness of Nazi theories about a German 'master race'. Hitler left the stadium early to avoid having to congratulate Owens. Joe Louis, another African-American, became the heavyweight boxing champion in 1937 by defeating James Braddock.

Baseball was America's 'national pastime', and like so many American institutions, it was segregated. Black players, no matter how talented, were forced to play in the separate 'Negro leagues' and were largely ignored by mainstream America. In 1947, however, Branch Rickey, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, broke this barrier by hiring Jackie Robinson to play for his team. For a time, Robinson suffered abuse from some fans and other players, but he courageously persisted. By the 1950s, baseball as well as professional tennis and basketball had been integrated and the sports world could serve as a model for the rest of American society.

Meanwhile, the NAACP's strategy of fighting discrimination in the courts, begun years earlier, was beginning to bring results. In the 1930s, the NAACP filed suits demanding that the federal courts actually apply the separate-but-equal principle announced by the Supreme Court in 1896. This approach brought about the desegregation of law and graduate schools in several states when the courts found that equal facilities had not been provided for black students. The NAACP also won a victory on voting rights in 1944. The Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional to bar blacks from voting in a party's primary elections, the elections in which a party's candidates were chosen. In the one-party South, primaries were often the only election that really mattered.

These decisions chipped away at Jim Crow. In 1946 the Supreme court ruled that states could not segregate inter-state buses. In 1948 it went on to rule that there should be no racial discrimination in the housing market. Then, in 1951, Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP's chief lawyer, brought a case that challenged the basis of segregation itself. The suit, on behalf of a black girl, Linda Brown, was against the entire public school system in Topeka, Kansas, a system segregated similarly to many in the South. The

In the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore [the black students have been] deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

Supreme Court decision in *Brown v Board of Education*, 1954.

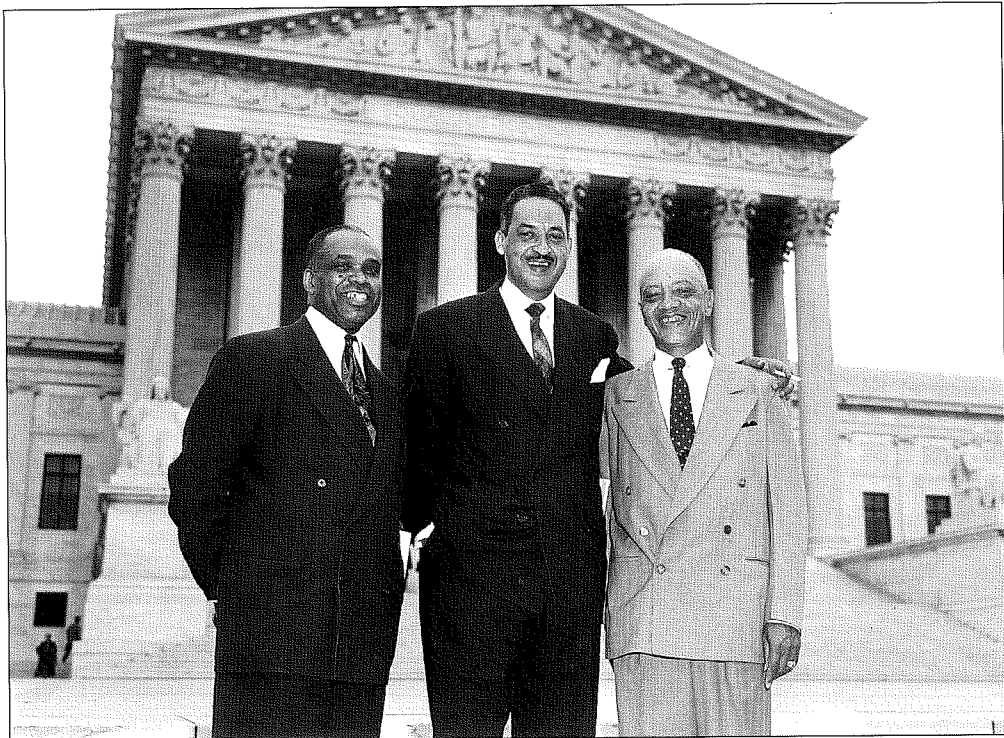
THE STRUGGLE INTENSIFIES

NAACP claimed that such segregation generated a sense of inferiority among blacks and thus violated the Fourteenth Amendment. In its historic and unanimous 17 May 1954 *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* decision, the Court agreed with the NAACP's position. Later, the reasoning behind the 1954 public school decision would be applied to other areas where the races were segregated by law, such as public parks and public transport.

THE SCHOOLHOUSE DOOR

The consequences of the *Brown* decision were far-reaching, although some were slow in coming. The Supreme Court had made its decision. Now local authorities had to enforce it. In some places, the process took place relatively quickly and smoothly. But in the Deep South, there was trouble. The Ku Klux Klan once again became active and was joined by new groups, such as the White Citizens' Councils, that preached white superiority and vowed resistance to progress on civil rights. Many state and local officials, supported by 90 Southern congressmen, proclaimed their resistance to

Thurgood Marshall is shown here (centre) standing in front of the Supreme Court building having won the historic Brown v Board of Education case in 1954. During 23 years of service with the NAACP, Marshall undertook 32 major cases and won 29 of them.



desegregation. They raised the old cry of states' rights, claiming the Supreme Court and federal government had no authority to compel states and localities to change traditional practices. Violent incidents were frequent. When Autherine Lucy, a 26-year-old black woman, tried to enroll in the University of Alabama in 1956, school officials objected, and she was attacked by stone-throwing mobs. She was forced to withdraw.

A major crisis occurred in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus called up the state's National Guard to prevent the admission of black students to the city's Central High School. President Eisenhower privately doubted the wisdom of the *Brown* decision and said 'you cannot change the hearts of people by law'. Reluctantly, however, Eisenhower ordered National Guard troops to escort the children to school past mobs of whites who taunted and screamed at them. One morning, a bomb exploded at the home of a 16-year-old black student.

Other communities avoided desegregation by more subtle means. When bi-racial schools threatened to become a reality, many white parents who could afford to do so withdrew their children from public schools and sent them to private ones. By 1962, eight years after the *Brown* decision, fewer than one-half per cent of the black children in the Deep South were attending integrated schools. Segregation had been declared unconstitutional, but it still persisted in both North and South. Liberals introduced legislation in Congress to speed up school desegregation and protect civil rights in other areas, but once again Southern Democrats and conservative Republicans combined to prevent any significant action. Congress passed weak civil rights legislation in 1957 and 1960 that had little effect.

Resistance continued at Southern colleges as well. In the autumn of 1962, President Kennedy had to send US marshals and soldiers to help a young man, James Meredith, register at the University of Mississippi over the opposition of Mississippi's governor, Ross Barnett, and crowds of white racists. Two people were killed in the ensuing violence. The next spring, Alabama's Governor George Wallace literally stood in the entrance of the University of Alabama to try to prevent two blacks from enrolling there. He failed, but once again federal troops had to be called in.

On the whole, the North did not have public school systems segregated by law. But housing patterns, with African-Americans living in one