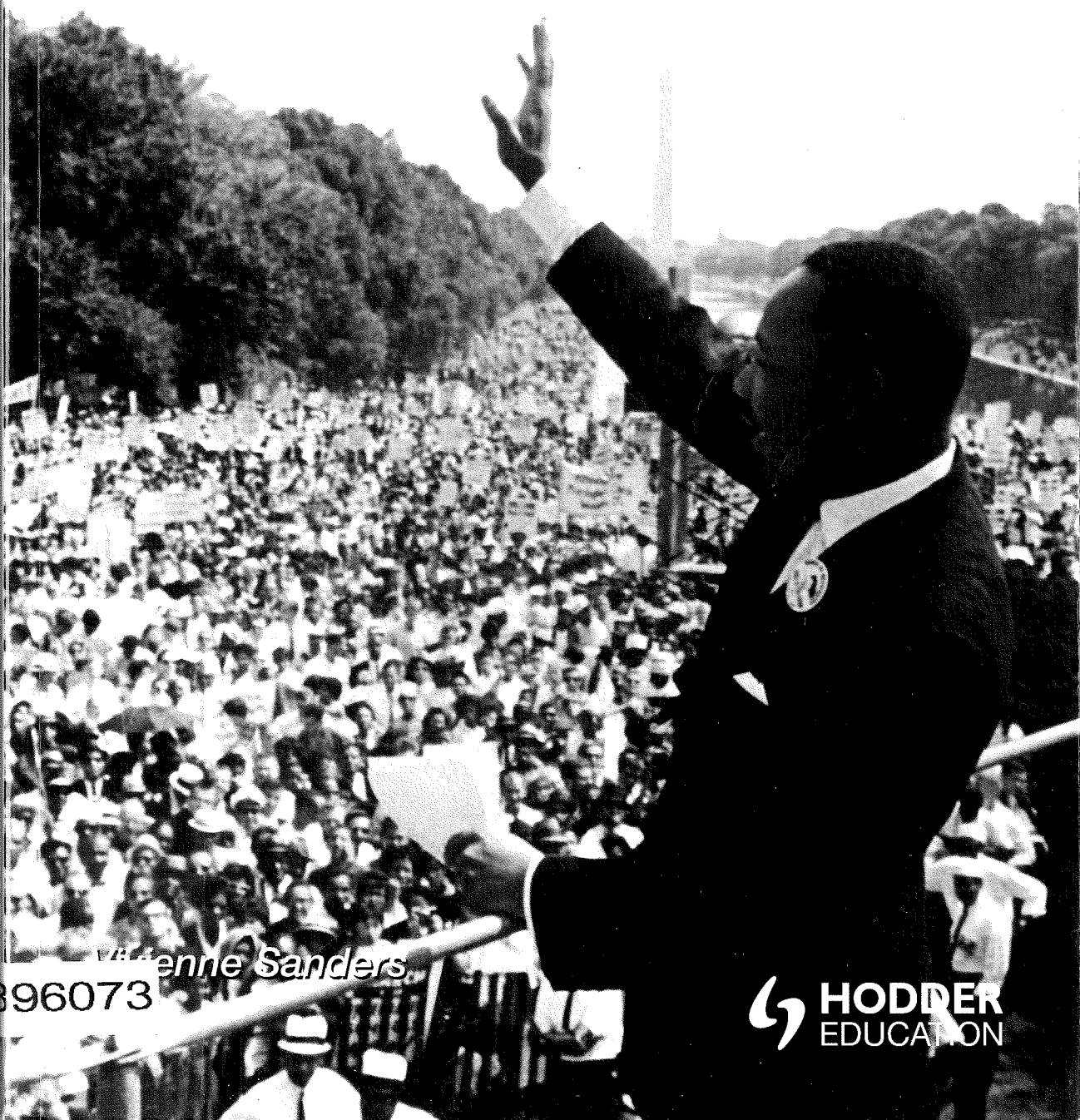


*access to history*

a  
t  
h

# Civil Rights in the USA 1945–68



*Wendie Sanders*

96073

 **HODDER**  
EDUCATION

- He said he feared the ‘great emotional strains’ which would arise from desegregating schools.
- As a Republican, he was ideologically opposed to large-scale federal intervention in any great issue, which was why he rejected the re-establishment of the wartime FEPC.
- There were good political reasons for inactivity. His Republican Party had seen the damage inflicted on the Democrats by disagreements over civil rights. The Republicans had done unusually well in the Southern states as a result. The Republican Party could only lose by adopting a firm civil rights policy.

### (c) Morrow

The sole black on Eisenhower’s staff, ex-NAACP worker E. Frederic Morrow, was employed in 1955 with the black vote in the presidential election in mind. Initially he arranged parking spaces for staffers, then he answered correspondence from blacks. White House clerks and typists refused to file or type for him and Eisenhower never consulted him on civil rights. Morrow was shocked by the administration’s ignorance and concluded that Eisenhower never understood how blacks felt.

### (d) Meeting with black leaders

Eisenhower only met black leaders (King, Wilkins and Randolph) once. Randolph criticised Eisenhower’s inactivity and called for more presidential leadership. Eisenhower avoided talking to Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, whom he considered to be a rabble-rousing extremist. When Powell tried to make federal aid for school-building contingent upon desegregation, that lost the federal aid, which infuriated Eisenhower. Eisenhower’s staff felt that black organisations over-dramatised incidents of racial injustice, demanded too much time and attention, and were insufficiently grateful for the administration’s deeds on their behalf. One presidential aide felt that black demands were made with ‘ugliness and surliness’.

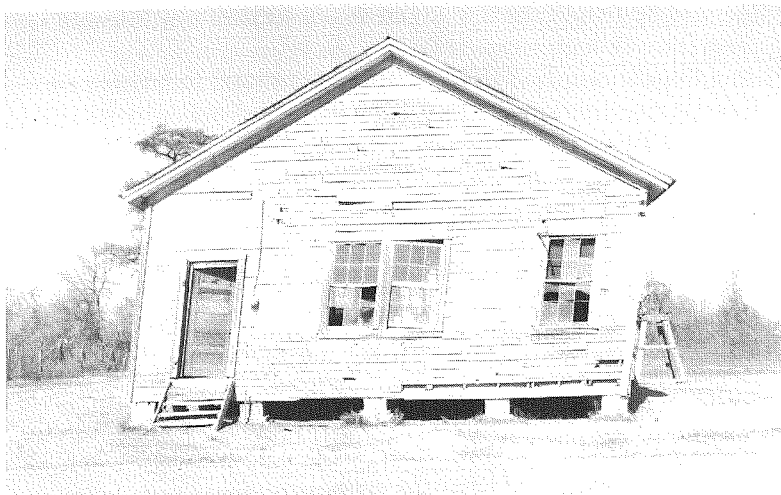
#### Key question

How important was the BROWN decision?

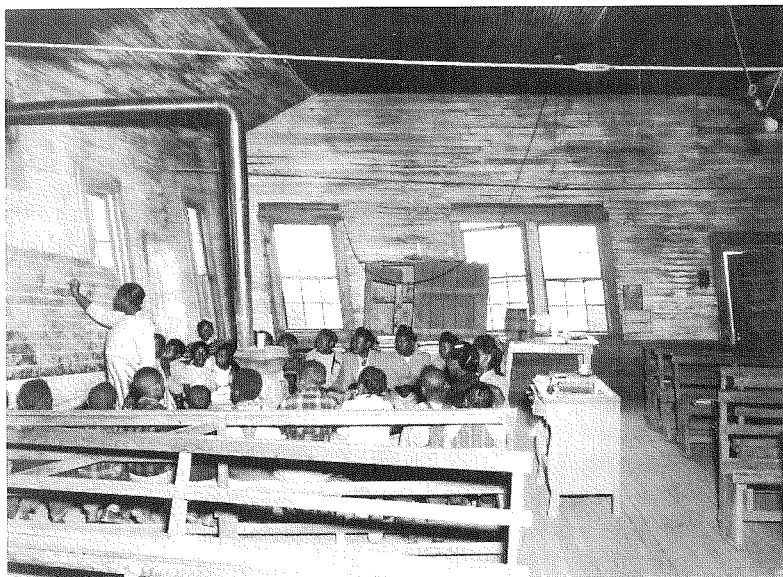
## 5 | BROWN (1954)

### (a) Oliver Brown and the NAACP

Kansas was one of the 17 states in which schools were legally segregated. Church minister Oliver Brown decided to challenge segregated schools in Topeka, in the border state of Kansas. Brown could not send his daughter to a whites-only school five blocks away, only to an all-black school 20 blocks away. The NAACP had been working against segregated schools in the law courts, slowly eroding the ‘separate but equal’ decision of the Supreme Court (PLESSY v. FERGUSON). Now, the NAACP decided to support Brown in his appeal to the Supreme Court. The organisation felt that it had a good chance of success, because Kansas was not a Southern state.



Exterior and interior views of a school for black children in Ruleville, Sunflower County, Mississippi, in 1949: 'separate' but clearly not 'equal'.



### (b) The Supreme Court BROWN decision (1954)

The leading NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall represented Brown before the Supreme Court. Marshall argued that segregation was against the 14th Amendment (see page 13). In *BROWN v. THE BOARD OF EDUCATION, TOPEKA, KANSAS* (1954), Chief Justice Earl Warren adjudged that even if facilities were equal (they never were), separate education was psychologically harmful to black children. The Supreme Court agreed, in defiance of President Eisenhower's wishes.

Supreme Court's BROWN decision opposed segregated education: 1954

Key date

### (c) Results and significance of the BROWN ruling

The **BROWN** ruling was highly significant.

- It was a great triumph for the NAACP's long legal campaign against segregated education. Brown seemed to remove all

#### **BROWN**

The 1954 Supreme Court ruling in favour of integrated education.

Key term

**(ii) The reluctance to use federal power**

Eisenhower refused to use federal power to enforce the BROWN decision, until forced by events at Little Rock, Arkansas (see pages 69–71). His initial silence over BROWN owed much to his belief in the separation of the powers of the president and the judiciary. He disliked federal intrusion into private lives and he feared that some schools would close rather than let in blacks:

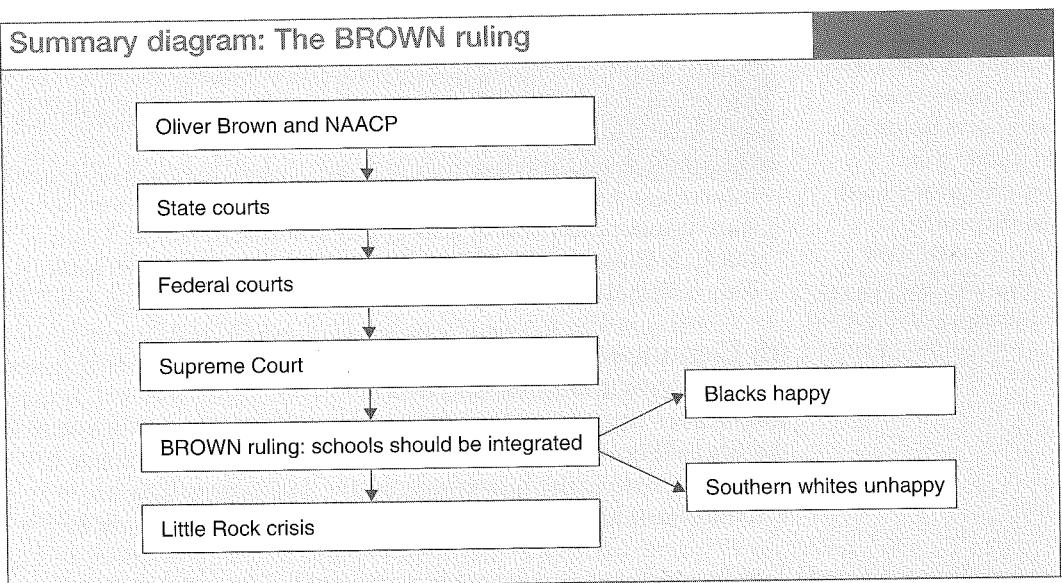
It is all very well to talk about school integration, but you may also be talking about social disintegration. We cannot demand perfection in these moral questions. All we can do is keep working toward a goal.

Eisenhower's public silence was widely interpreted as signifying his lack of support for BROWN. He refused to condemn the pro-segregation Southern Manifesto, saying change would have to be gradual.

**(iii) Results and significance**

Chief Justice Warren thought that a word of approval from Eisenhower on BROWN would have helped to stop the mob violence that kept blacks out of white schools throughout the South.

Eisenhower's speechwriter Arthur Larsen came to the 'inescapable conclusion' that President Eisenhower 'was neither emotionally nor intellectually in favour of combating segregation'.



**Key question**  
How important was Little Rock?

**(d) Results and significance of Little Rock**

- It showed that Supreme Court rulings like BROWN met tremendous grassroots resistance in practice. Blacks tried to push things along more quickly at Little Rock, and still there was no dramatic immediate improvement. Faubus got re-elected four times!
- Neither local nor national authorities were keen to enforce BROWN. Faubus did what Eisenhower had always feared and closed the schools rather than integrate. Eisenhower did not respond. It was 1960 before Central High was integrated and 1972 before Little Rock's schools were fully integrated. In contrast, some cities, such as Atlanta, desegregated to avoid Little Rock-style violence and publicity.
- As late as 1964, only two to three per cent of black children attended desegregated schools.
- The image of black children being harassed and spat at by aggressive white adults in Little Rock helped to influence moderate white opinion throughout the USA, a testimony to the increasing importance of the new television age to the civil rights movement. Little Rock had drawn national television crews; on-site television reporting was pioneered there.
- The Supreme Court ploughed ahead. In COOPER v. AARON (1958) it said that any law that sought to keep public schools segregated was unconstitutional.
- Finally, and perhaps most significantly, blacks realised that they probably needed to do more than rely on court decisions.

**Key dates**  
COOPER v. AARON ruling – any law that tried to keep schools segregated was unconstitutional: 1958  
Civil Rights Act: 1957

**Summary diagram: Little Rock**

When?	1957
Where?	Little Rock, state capital of Arkansas, upper South
What?	Nine black children tried to enter Central High School; a white mob tried to stop them
Why?	White schools were better and in BROWN, the Supreme Court had ruled pro-integration. Many blacks wanted integrated schools, most whites did not
With what result?	Slowly, Central High and other schools were integrated

**Key question**  
How helpful were Eisenhower's Civil Rights Acts?

**10 | Eisenhower's Civil Rights Acts (1957 and 1960)**

**(a) 1957 Civil Rights Act**

(i) Why did Eisenhower introduce a civil rights bill?

In order to win the black vote in the 1956 election year, the Eisenhower administration drew up a civil rights bill that aimed to ensure that all citizens could exercise the right to vote. Eighty per cent of Southern blacks were not yet registered to vote, including some college professors.

## 12 | The Eisenhower Years – Conclusions

### (a) Eisenhower's role

Unlike Truman, Eisenhower did not seem keen to help the black movement towards equality.

Eisenhower's biographer Stephen Ambrose concluded that until his hand was forced at Little Rock, in 1957, Eisenhower provided 'almost no leadership at all' on the most fundamental social and moral problem of his time. On the other hand, Eisenhower supporters claim that his evolutionary approach to civil rights was best for national unity. Eisenhower loved to quote a story he heard while golfing in Augusta, Georgia. An agricultural worker supposedly said, 'If someone does not shut up around here, particularly those Negroes from the North, they are going to get a lot of us niggers killed!'

### (b) BROWN and Eisenhower's civil rights legislation

Although the Supreme Court had declared segregated schools unconstitutional (BROWN), desegregation proved painfully slow. This was due to a powerful white backlash. In 1960, only 6.4 per cent of blacks went to integrated schools in the South, and only two per cent in the Deep South. On the other hand, BROWN could be considered as the first breach in the dam, which ensured further progress. Many historians talk of a 20-year 'Second Reconstruction' dating from BROWN. Similarly, while Eisenhower's Civil Rights Acts were so weak that many blacks dismissed them as irrelevant, other blacks felt they were another breach in the dam.

### (c) Black activism

The historian Robert Cook sees 'relative federal inactivity' and 'limited organisational goals' as the main reasons why the civil rights movement stood relatively still in the late 1950s. It was blacks themselves who bore greatest responsibility for precipitating such change as there was in the Eisenhower years. Activists, especially the NAACP, were the moving force behind the Supreme Court decisions, Little Rock and the Montgomery bus boycott. This incessant black pressure, along with the international situation and the black vote, forced the Eisenhower administration to propose civil rights legislation.

The civil rights movement was acquiring 'heroes', such as Rosa Parks. However, there were also victims such as Emmett Till. While there were signs that mass action could bring about results, as in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, this was still not a universal, organised movement. There was no single, strong black organisation. After BROWN the NAACP was persecuted in the South, and was jealous of the emerging SCLC. NAACP met some great setbacks, such as obstructive federal judges and unsuccessful attempts at mass action. King's Crusade for Citizenship failed because as yet SCLC lacked the massive grassroots support and organisational infrastructure necessary for success. Progress on voting rights awaited greater federal assistance against recalcitrant Southern states, and the mobilisation of rural blacks.

#### Key questions

What progress was made towards racial equality in the Eisenhower years? Who or what contributed most to that progress?



Thus Indians, like blacks, found federal and state government unsympathetic in the Eisenhower years. However, while blacks still made some progress towards equality, Indians did not. Why?

Blacks had more contact with whites, so they used white traditions such as national organisation and litigation. Indians were fewer in number, less urbanised and culturally disorientated. Separate tribes and geographical segregation militated against national and effective organisations. Therefore, Indians were easier prey for an administration that preached the virtues of self-help and minimal federal intervention.

### 13 | Key Debate

When did the civil rights movement start?

Many historians date the start of the civil rights movement in the Eisenhower years, although they disagree over the crucial events. Sociologist Aldon Morris (1984) dated it to the Baton Rouge bus boycott (1953). Harvard Sitkoff (1993) sees the BROWN decision (1954) as the start of the struggle. However, law professor Michael Klarman concluded (1992) that BROWN 'was a relatively unimportant motivating factor for the civil rights movement', and that its real significance was to generate a vicious white backlash.

David Garrow (1994) disagreed, saying BROWN inspired the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Studies of Georgia and Louisiana suggest BROWN did not generate civil rights activism immediately, although many activists have attested the inspirational importance of BROWN. While Garrow thought the Montgomery Bus Boycott signalled the start of the civil rights movement, Mark Newman (2004) says it 'did not spark a mass movement', and cites SCLC's early ineffectiveness as proof.

Recently, historians have emphasised the significance of the federal government's anxieties about America's image in the Cold War world. Mary Dudziak (2000) talks of 'the Cold War imperative' which encouraged the federal government to try to make blacks more equal, while pointing out on the other hand how anti-communism made criticism of the status quo difficult.

---

#### Some key books in the debate

Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights* (Princeton, 2000).

David Garrow, 'Hopelessly hollow history: revisionist devaluing of BROWN'. *Virginia Law Review* (1994).

Michael Klarman, 'Constitutional fact/constitutional fiction'. *Stanford Law Review* (1992).

Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1986).

Mark Newman, *The Civil Rights Movement* (Edinburgh, 2001).

Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (New York, 1993).

---

**(e) Did the civil rights movement in the South disintegrate after Selma?**

Some historians claim that the civil rights movement in the South disintegrated soon after Selma. Adam Fairclough held that view in 1987, but by 1995 his study of Louisiana, confirmed by Stephen Tuck's of Georgia (2001), suggests that there was 'continuity of protest' at the local level, for example, in challenging electoral abuses. NAACP membership and activism grew again, while Tuck recorded SCLC as very active in early 1970s Georgia.

**(f) The impact of BROWN**

Perhaps the greatest debate on this period, because it is so relevant to the present, is the debate over the impact of BROWN. In 1984, Raymond Wolters studied the impact of BROWN and concluded that it had not helped to improve the academic performance of black schoolchildren and had led to new routes (such as white flight and private schools) to segregation. Wolters claimed that integration had lowered standards because of the presence of poorly prepared and poorly behaved lower class black children. David Garrow (1985) accused Wolters of political bias. Such debates remind us that racial tensions remain in America and amongst those who write its history.

---

**Some key books in the debate**

Anthony Badger and Brian Ward, eds, *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1996).

Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Harvard, 1981).

William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Oxford, 1981).

William Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York, 2003).

Glenn Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (North Carolina, 1997).

Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–72* (Georgia, 1995).

David Garrow, *Segregation's Legacy* (Reviews in America History, 1985).

Steven Lawson, *Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (American Historical Review, 1991).

Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1984).

Mark Newman, *The Civil Rights Movement* (Edinburgh, 2004).

Lynne Olsen, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970* (New York, 2001).

Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organising Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (California, 1995).

Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (New York, 1993).

Stephen Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia* (Georgia, 2001).

Raymond Wolters, *The Burden of Brown* (Knoxville, 1984).

---