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# Civil Rights in the USA 1865–1992

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**Leadership Conference** with **Ralph Abernathy** as his deputy. SCLC took a more confrontational line on black civil rights than the more cautious and legalistic **Roy Wilkins** of the NAACP.

## THE CIVIL RIGHTS EXPLOSION PART TWO: PROTESTS WIDEN

### How important were the sit-ins and Freedom Rides?

The movement now developed a new confidence and style of protest especially among younger blacks and increasing interest and sympathy from white liberals in the north. These two developments were illustrated in major protests in 1960 and 1961 – the **sit-ins** and Freedom Rides.

In Feb 1960 four black students staged a sit-in at the whites-only refreshment counter in their local Woolworth's store in Greensboro, North Carolina, which prided itself on good race relations. The state authorities hesitated, which allowed the numbers of protestors to grow rapidly. Soon the concept of the sit-in at segregated facilities had spread to neighbouring states such as Tennessee and Virginia. The demonstrations were all the stronger for their apparent spontaneity, although their success owed something to the build up of student organisations in the 1950s that made the sudden spread of protests more likely to succeed.

**Ella Baker**, an NAACP activist, saw the significance of these sit-ins and got Martin Luther King to come and address the students. She insisted that, rather than join the SCLC, they set up their own organisation, the **Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)**. The style of protest, though non-violent, was more confrontational than the boycott as it forced a response from the authorities. If police used force to remove the demonstrators and it was roughly done then the press and the **increasingly important medium of television** would record it. In this way public support could be increased. But if the police took no action then desegregation had effectively been achieved. Cracks were now beginning to appear in the segregationist system and by the end of 1961, 810 towns in the south had desegregated facilities.

## KEY PEOPLE

**Roy Wilkins (1910–81)** Leader of the NAACP from 1955 until his death. Wilkins continued the moderate policies of Walter White and felt uneasy with the more confrontational policies being developed by other civil rights groups during the 1960s.

## KEY TERMS

**Sit-in** A form of non-violent protest where protestors usually seat themselves and remain seated either until their requests are granted or until they are evicted, usually by force.

## KEY PEOPLE

**Ella Baker (1903–86)** Ran a black voters' registration campaign as early as the 1930s, and was active in the NAACP during the 1940s. She moved to Atlanta in 1959 to assist King and the SCLC. However, she disliked King's leadership style, saying '*strong people don't need strong leaders*'. She was active in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s.

## KEY TERMS

**Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC)** Set up as a result of the sit-ins, it organised swim-ins (pools), read-ins (libraries) watch-ins (cinemas) and even shoe-ins at shoeshine bars. When it began a move towards a Black Power approach, this split and weakened the organisation. It disbanded in 1970.

## KEY CONCEPTS

### The importance of Television

In 1949, one million American families had a television set; by 1960, the figure had risen to 45 million. This proved significant during the 1960s, when millions watched the horrific treatment of civil rights protesters by racist police. King and others deliberately courted this favourable publicity.

### Increased white support for black civil rights

Television and the written press were making inroads into white liberal opinion in the north to the extent that active and passionate supporters of the movement were emerging. This was despite the fact that protesting whites were likely to suffer even greater violence against them for 'betraying' their race.

## KEY PEOPLE

### Robert Kennedy (1925–68)

was Attorney General from 1961–64, forcefully implementing favourable Supreme Court decisions on civil rights. Senator for New York from 1964, he played a leading role in getting civil rights legislation passed. He fell out with Lyndon Johnson, especially over Vietnam. He could well have won the Democratic nomination for the Presidency but was assassinated in June 1968 when campaigning.

The Freedom Rides of 1961 re-enforced the success of the sit-ins. Taking advantage of **increased white support for black civil rights**, the idea was for blacks and whites to board inter-state buses in the north, where legally they could sit together, but remain in their places as the bus entered the south, where they would be breaking local segregation laws. This confrontational strategy was again employed effectively because of the publicity it received and the negative response from the police authorities. In Birmingham, Alabama, police ignored a white mob that attacked the riders. Favourable publicity had been achieved and CORE – the northern civil rights group (see pages 60–61) had been successfully re-vitalised to co-ordinate the event.

### How did the federal government respond?

Increasingly liberal verdicts from the Supreme Court were continuing to aid the civil rights cause. The Freedom Rides had been partly inspired by the Supreme Court case of *Boynton v. Virginia* 1960 which outlawed segregation on all inter-state travel facilities. In opposing the Freedom Riders it was the south who seemed to be defying the law. Moreover, it aroused the interest of President John F. Kennedy's (see pages 199 and 257) federal government. From the President's point of view, southern states were failing to maintain law and order.

Kennedy's response to civil rights demands had previously been lukewarm. Like previous Presidents from the Democrat Party, Kennedy was worried about losing southern white support, but as Republican Eisenhower had shown in 1957 at Little Rock, failure to keep order would no longer be tolerated. **Kennedy's brother Robert**, the Attorney General, enforced the legal orders confirming the desegregation of all inter-state travel. Federal assistance was also on hand in 1962 when, after great difficulty and two deaths, James Meredith was escorted through the gates of Mississippi University by federal marshalls to become its first black student. Perhaps more significant a few months later was the failure of the now militantly racist Governor of Alabama, George Wallace, to prevent two black students from entering the state's University at Tuscaloosa.