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Civil Rights in the USA 1945–68



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 **HODDER**
EDUCATION

- 1960 – Left SCLC. Joined SNCC, the organisation willing to take on the impossible, for example, voter registration in Mississippi. Baker shaped SNCC's goal, the politicisation of local communities and empowerment of ordinary people
- 1964 – Helped to set up Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (see page 145)
- 1966 – Although sympathetic to black power, drifted away from SNCC when it became more radical (see page 121)
- 1970 – Campaigned for the (probably unfairly) imprisoned Black Panther radical and Communist Party member Angela Davies
- 1970s – Age, asthma and arthritis slowed her down, but helped many different organisations
- 1986 – Died

Ella Baker was significant because she worked tirelessly and often effectively to empower ordinary people into an activism that could be sustained independently of any leader or organisation. She empowered black women, through her example and encouragement. She reminds historians of the civil rights movement that to give an accurate account of the black struggle for freedom they cannot ignore the role of women and grassroots protest. Her co-workers at SNCC recognised her importance, although some historians have missed it.

struggles in places like Danville, Virginia, Lowndes County, Alabama, Albany, Georgia, Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and the Mississippi Delta. SNCC workers became known as the 'shock troops' of the civil rights movement: wherever there was activism or the need for activism, SNCC workers and volunteers were there, as in the Freedom Rides.

Key question

Did King play an important role in the Freedom Rides?

Key date

Freedom Rides: 1961

(d) Freedom Rides (1961)

(i) Aims and methods of the Freedom Riders

While King seemed unable to think up new tactics for gaining attention, CORE's 'Freedom Ride' of May 1961 electrified the civil rights movement. A small, integrated group travelled the South testing Supreme Court rulings against segregation on interstate transport (*MORGAN v. VIRGINIA*, 1946) and on interstate bus facilities (*BOYNTON v. VIRGINIA*, 1960). The tactic had been used before in 1947 without success (see page 55). Now CORE's director James Farmer explained that:

We planned the Freedom Ride with the specific intention of creating a crisis. We were counting on the bigots in the South to do our work for us. We figured that the government would have to respond if we created a situation that was headline news all over the world, and affected the nation's image abroad.

As expected, Alabama racists attacked black passengers with clubs and chains and burned their buses. King quickly made contact with the riders. Students criticised King for not going on the rides himself, but as he was on probation for a minor traffic offence he feared arrest.

(ii) The significance of the Freedom Rides

Although CORE initiated the Freedom Rides, King used them to get CORE, SCLC and SNCC to work together – or to ensure SCLC domination, his critics said. All agreed that the aim was publicity. It worked. **Attorney General** Bobby Kennedy enforced the Supreme Court rulings on desegregated interstate travel in November 1961, demonstrating yet again the importance of federal intervention. However, black divisions remained. CORE insisted SCLC announce that CORE had originated the Freedom Rides!

Attorney General
Head of the Justice
Department in the
federal government.

Key term

(iii) How well had King done by 1961?

King's first 18 months in Atlanta had been productive. SCLC was better organised, better financed, and more united. It was agreed that some members could concentrate on protests, others on voter registration. King's leadership was characterised by a willingness to be led by others when their methods were effective. Despite tensions, SCLC, CORE, NAACP, SNCC and the National Urban League all agreed to work together on voter registration in Mississippi. King was also learning how to use the media.

(e) Albany (1961–2)

(i) Initiators and aims

In November 1961 others led the way again. SNCC organised students from (black) Albany State College, Georgia, in sit-ins in Albany bus station, which had ignored the Interstate Commerce Commission's order to desegregate. Hundreds of freedom riders were arrested. Blacks boycotted white businesses but the city authorities refused to desegregate, despite pressure from Attorney General Kennedy.

Key question

What was King's role in the Albany movement?

(ii) The role of Martin Luther King

Once again King followed rather than led. Older leaders of the 'Albany Movement' invited him to join them. This angered SNCC leaders who stressed that the Albany Movement was 'by and for local Negroes'. King told a reporter, 'The people wanted to do something they would have done with or without me.'

King led a march and came to a promising agreement with the city authorities. However, after King left, the authorities reneged on the agreement. The Albany Movement petered out in a series of decreasingly supported protests. King recognised Albany as a major defeat. The interstate terminal facilities were desegregated, and more black voters were allowed to register, but the city closed the parks, sold the swimming pool, integrated the library only after removing all the seats, and refused to desegregate the schools.

Albany Movement:
1961–2

Key date

absolutely charmed by the manner in which they had been turned down'. Kennedy ostentatiously resigned from an exclusive club that refused to admit blacks. The Washington Redskins was the last great football club to refuse to hire blacks. When Kennedy said the team could no longer use its federally supported stadium, the Redskins signed three black players.

(iv) **Equal Employment Opportunity Commission**
Blacks found the Kennedy administration disappointing on more substantial issues, such as equal opportunities in employment. Although Kennedy refused to endorse affirmative action, he used his executive powers to create the **Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)**. It aimed to ensure equal employment opportunities for federal employees and in companies that had contracts with the government. EEOC encouraged companies to hire more blacks. It had a few triumphs, for example, the integration and promotion of blacks at the Lockheed aircraft plant in Georgia. However, EEOC failed to bring about a great increase in black employment by federal agencies or companies doing business with the federal government. It exaggerated its successes, boasting a rise from one to two black employees as a 100 per cent increase in black employment! The Kennedys blamed EEOC chairman Vice-President Lyndon Johnson for the failures, but it was a difficult task. Employers frequently and rightly complained they were simply complying with demands from their workers for segregated facilities.

Key term

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

Set up by President Kennedy to give equal economic opportunities to employees of the federal government and to those who worked for its customers.

Key question

How and why did Kennedy react to the civil rights movement?

(e) Reacting to civil rights activists

President Kennedy had not planned extensive use of executive authority to help blacks. However, civil rights activists forced his hand, beginning with the Freedom Rides in 1961 (see pages 89–90).

Key date

Freedom Rides began: 1961

(i) The Freedom Rides (1961)

White racist responses to the Freedom Riders gained national attention, especially when a white mob poured and then lit kerosene on a black Freedom Rider in Montgomery. Kennedy was reluctant to intervene. He accused the Freedom Riders of lacking patriotism because they exposed US domestic problems during the Cold War. Attorney General Robert Kennedy wanted to protect the constitutional rights of the activists, but did not want to alienate Southern Democrats or the 63 per cent of Americans who, opinion polls indicated, opposed the Freedom Rides. When Robert Kennedy's federal marshals could not control a white mob bombing a meeting at Ralph Abernathy's church, Kennedy pressured Alabama's governor to call out the National Guard and state troopers.

The Freedom Riders' persistent pressure forced Robert Kennedy to get an Interstate Commerce Commission ruling supporting the Supreme Court rulings (1946, 1960) that terminals and interstate bus seating should be integrated.

Although supposedly achieved by autumn 1961, historian W.T.M. Riches records seeing *de facto* segregation in the Selma, Alabama, bus station as late as 1966. While black activists had to force the administration into action, it had done quite well.

(ii) Southern black voter registration (1961)

Later in 1961, SNCC worked on Southern black voter registration in Mississippi (see page 95). Robert Kennedy condemned white attacks on would-be voters, but said the federal government could not interfere with local law enforcement unless there was a total breakdown of law and order:

Mississippi is going to work itself out ... Maybe it's going to take a decade and maybe a lot of people are going to be killed in the meantime ... But in the long run I think it's for the health of the country and the stability of the system.

Why were the Kennedys so reluctant to interfere with Southern justice? The president felt the SNCC 'sons of bitches' were unnecessarily provocative: 'SNCC has got an investment in violence'. The Justice Department lacked sufficient staff, and the Kennedys feared using force against the South's white racists, most of whom voted Democrat. Kennedy inaction alienated blacks, and increased black militancy.

(iii) James Meredith and the University of Mississippi (1962)

Twenty-eight-year-old James Meredith, grandson of a slave and son of a sharecropper, had served in the US Air Force for a decade. He wanted a university education. His local black college had poorly qualified teachers so Meredith applied for the white University of Mississippi, which did not want him. When Meredith got legal aid from the NAACP and a Supreme Court decision in his favour, Robert Kennedy had to send 500 marshals to help him enrol. The ill-equipped marshals clashed with a racist mob. Two people were shot and one-third of the marshals were injured. President Kennedy sent the Mississippi National Guard and US Army regulars to the area. Meredith finally enrolled, inspiring other blacks to do likewise. Historians disagree over whether the administration handled the crisis well. They 'had been extremely lucky that none of the marshals had been killed, and that Meredith had not been lynched', according to historian Hugh Brogan.

(iv) University integration in Alabama, June 1963

Alabama was the last state to begin university integration. Kennedy sent in federal troops, marshals and the federalised Alabama National Guard. Governor George Wallace made a gesture of protest (proving his racist credentials to white voters), then gave in. To Martin Luther King's delight, President Kennedy publicly declared black inequality immoral, appealing to the Bible and the US Constitution. Kennedy asked how many whites would be content with the 'counsels of patience and delay' given to blacks.

SNCC began work in Mississippi: 1961

James Meredith entered University of Mississippi: 1962

Alabama began university integration: 1963

Key dates

Key question

To what extent did Kennedy help university integration?