

Reading Further: The Long Road to Equal Rights & Activity (HA)

During Reconstruction, Congress added three amendments to the Constitution to guarantee equal rights to African Americans. Still, it took another 100 years and large-scale political action to make those guarantees real.

The station wagon rolled down West 28th Street in Little Rock, Arkansas. It was part of a convoy, with one jeep in front of it and another behind. Each jeep carried soldiers and a machine gun. Each soldier carried a rifle. In the station wagon, nine high school students sat nervously. It was their first day of school at Little Rock's Central High School.

More soldiers waited at the school for the convoy to arrive. One of the students, Ernest Green, recalled that frightening moment.

The whole school was ringed with paratroopers and helicopters hovering around. We marched up the steps . . . with this circle of soldiers with bayonets drawn.

It was 1957. The students, who came to be known as the Little Rock Nine, would be the first African Americans to attend the city's all-white Central High School.

The students had tried to enter the school twice before, just a few weeks earlier, but had met fierce resistance. Many of Little Rock's white citizens were determined to keep them out. Melba Pattillo, one of the students, described what she went through.

On the first day, the kinds of things that I endured were parents kicking, parents hitting, parents throwing things. You would get tripped; people would just walk up and hit you in the face. And you couldn't hit back.



Carl Iwasaki/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

Linda Brown (front center) had to cross railroad tracks and catch a bus to attend a segregated school in Topeka, Kansas. After the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, Linda could attend the formerly all-white school in her neighborhood.

On those first days, police had escorted the Little Rock Nine into a side entrance of the school building. But the principal had sent the nine students home. He said he feared for their safety.

The third time the Little Rock Nine began their school year, they did so with military protection. On national television that night, President Dwight Eisenhower explained why. “I have today issued an executive order directing the use of troops under federal authority to aid in the execution of federal law at Little Rock.” The federal law that Eisenhower referred to was the law to integrate public schools. The military would be sure it was obeyed.

The Fourteenth Amendment Comes of Age

Efforts to integrate public schools began long before the Little Rock Nine entered Central High. In a sense, they began in 1868 during Reconstruction. That is when the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified.

It said that no state could limit privileges or deny any American equal protection under the law. The amendment guaranteed freed slaves the same rights that white Americans had.

Unfortunately, that guarantee was soon modified. In 1896, the Supreme Court held that it was legal to segregate public places. As long as facilities for blacks were equal to those for whites, the court said, segregation did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment. So, under this doctrine of “separate but equal,” segregation continued. Although the Constitution guaranteed equal rights, African Americans would have to fight to exercise those rights.

Focused efforts to end segregation in schools began in the 1930s. The long haul toward school integration began with a vision. A young African American lawyer named Charles Houston believed that the way to get equal rights was for black lawyers to challenge segregation in court. But there were very few black lawyers at the time. Most law schools were segregated or accepted only a few black students. But Houston had a plan. At the historically black Howard University in Washington, D.C., Houston trained a generation of black lawyers. Among them was his star pupil, Thurgood Marshall.

Those lawyers confronted segregation in one case after another for more than 20 years. They started by arguing against segregated law schools and then segregated graduate schools. It was not until the 1950s that they took on the segregated public schools.

Their efforts culminated in the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. In their decision, the Court held that separate schools could never be equal. This meant that public schools would have to integrate. Three years later—nearly 90 years after the Fourteenth Amendment was added to the Constitution—the Little Rock Nine, under armed guard, followed that law and entered Central High School.



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The voting rights movement urged blacks to register so they could vote. “So long as I do not . . . possess the right to vote, I do not possess myself,” Martin Luther King Jr. said.

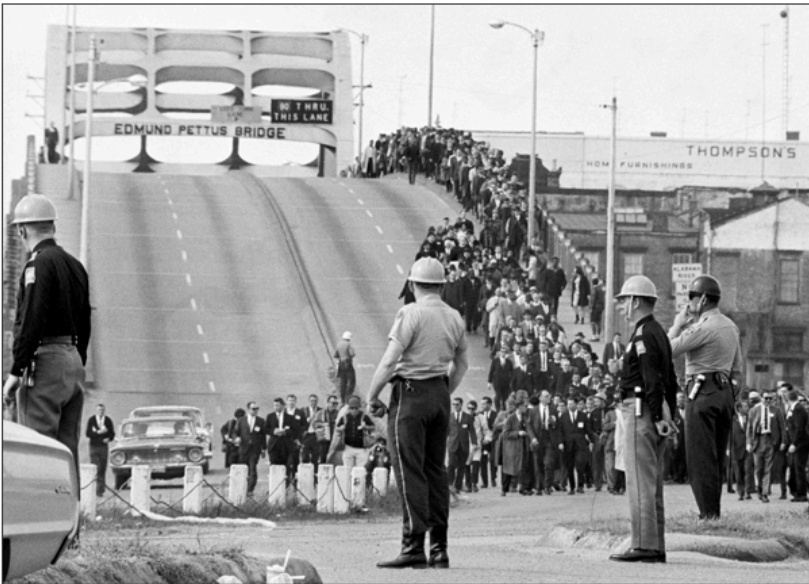
The Fifteenth Amendment Comes of Age

The struggle to integrate schools and other public places did not end at Central High. There would be other battles to win for African Americans to have equal rights. In 1963, to mark 100 years since Abraham Lincoln had emancipated the slaves, more than 200,000 people marched to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. At that historic event, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of the work that was still unfinished.

Five score [one hundred] years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation . . . But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity [wealth]. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing [suffering] in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land.

Voting rights, like integration, had been promised after the Civil War, but that promise had not been fulfilled when King spoke in 1963. The Fifteenth Amendment, which was ratified in 1870, granted African Americans the right to vote. But in the 1960s, very few black citizens in the South were able to exercise that right.

The reason? Laws in many Southern states made voting impossible for most African Americans. Some places had literacy tests, for example. Anyone who could not read and write was not allowed to register to vote. The tests were often rigged with questions no one could answer, so that even literate blacks could not pass them. Taxes and property requirements were other methods that made it impossible for most African Americans to exercise their right to vote.



Bettmann/CORBIS

John Lewis, a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, later said of the march, “You had to go—it was more than an ordinary march. To me there was never a march like this one before, and there hasn’t been one since.”

That is why, in the 1960s, African Americans were fighting to register to vote in places like Selma, Alabama. In Selma, the registration office was only open two days a month. The workers there often arrived late, left early, and took long breaks. In 1963, only 156 of Selma’s 15,000 eligible black voters were registered.

Through 1963 and 1964, black citizens of Selma tried again and again to register to vote. Again and again, the county sheriff and other white leaders tried to stop them. In 1965, the situation in Selma came to a head.

On Sunday, March 7, about 600 people gathered in Selma. They planned to march 50 miles to the state capital in Montgomery to insist on their right to vote. When they reached the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Alabama state troopers ordered them to leave. They stayed. The police advanced. They knocked people to the ground and fired tear gas. Riding horses, the police charged at the marchers.

That day, which came to be called Bloody Sunday, marked a turning point in the struggle for voting rights. On television and in newspapers, images of the violence in Selma reached people across America. Many had not known about the extent of segregation or the violent methods used to enforce it. They were horrified. The mayor of Selma, Joe Smitherman, remembered that the tide turned that day.



Yoichi Okamoto/CORBIS
President Lyndon B. Johnson (left) congratulates Martin Luther King Jr. (right) and other civil rights leaders. He had just signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

When that beating happened at the foot of the bridge, it looked like war. That went all over the country [on the television news]. And the people, the wrath of the nation came down on us.

The clashes in Selma continued for days. Then, President Lyndon Johnson put voting rights legislation before Congress. “Their cause must be our cause too,” Johnson said to the American people. “Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.”

Days later, thousands of people began the march from Selma to Montgomery. Five days after that, 25,000 people gathered at the state capitol in Montgomery. They celebrated their success and braced themselves for the hard work ahead. Later that year, Congress passed the historic Voting Rights Act of 1965. The act supported the rights that the Constitution had promised blacks nearly 100 years earlier.

Some historians say that the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a “Second Reconstruction.” They point out that the three Reconstruction amendments—the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth—promised equal rights to African Americans. Yet, it took another century for those rights to be realized.

Activity:

- 1. Preparing to Write: Identifying Values

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson told the U.S. Congress that the struggle of African Americans in Selma was a struggle shared by the nation. “Their cause must be our cause too,” he said. President Johnson expressed his values by saying that it was important for *all* Americans to be able to exercise their civil rights.

What values were the Little Rock Nine expressing by integrating Central High School?

- 2. What values did Charles Houston act on when he trained black lawyers?

- 3. What values did the Selma marchers express through their actions?

- 4. Writing a Personal Statement

The right to vote is one of the most important values in a democratic nation. Americans have fought and died to defend that right. American citizens are able to exercise their right to vote when they are 18 years old.

Write a statement expressing your personal beliefs about the value of the right to vote. Offer two reasons why voting is important in a democracy. Tell whether you intend to vote when you are 18, and explain the reasons for your answer.