

BBC Bitesize GCSE History – The USA in the 20th century

Episode 9 – The civil rights movement

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

Katie: I'm Katie Charlwood.

Datshiane: And I'm Datshiane Navanayagam.

Katie: Welcome to the final episode in this Bitesize GCSE History series on twentieth-century America.

Datshiane: We'll be discussing themes related to the civil rights movement, including racism, discrimination, segregation and instances of violence and injustice.

Katie: We encourage you to approach this material with sensitivity, to seek support from a friend, teacher or trusted adult if you find any part of this discussion distressing, or pause and reflect if you need a break.

Datshiane: We'll go through important developments in these key years of protest in the 1940s, '50s and '60s. We'll also choose some choice historical quotes as direct evidence of those events.

Katie: Like the words of celebrated civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. whose famous speech 'I Have a Dream' is considered one of the most influential of all time.

Datshiane: Absolutely.

Katie: The civil rights movement, opposing racial segregation and discrimination, had an impact on other areas such as the economy, education and culture.

Datshiane: We'll be covering the different types of protests that came together in the civil rights movement, including legal challenges and non-violent direct action.

Katie: As well as the Black Power movements and figures such as Malcolm X who advocated black empowerment and others who backed more forceful means to end inequality.

Datshiane: We've previously looked at how discrimination was hardwired into the system through segregation, racial violence and economic exploitation. Listen back to the episode on African American Experiences or check out the Bitesize website for more.

Katie: The civil rights movement was a stand against this. Groups like the Women's Political Council or WPC and the NAACP campaigned for racial equality.

Datshiane: And the pressure they created through their activism and campaigns led to new legislation to reduce inequality. Make a note of these important milestones as we summarise the different campaigns from the 1940s and '50s.

Katie: Ending discrimination in employment was a major goal for campaigners and the path to achieving this was the passing of the Fair Employment Law in 1941.

Datshiane: And then in 1946, the President Committee on Civil Rights proposed measures to strengthen and safeguard civil rights in the USA.

Katie: Another focus after the Second World War was to highlight the hypocrisy of the USA fighting racism and fascism abroad with its allies while maintaining racist practices at home. That campaign led to developments like Executive Order 981 which desegregated the armed forces in 1948. But Datshiane, these new measures didn't make a big enough impact against the system and principle of segregation.

Datshiane: Unfortunately, you're right, Katie. The Civil Rights Act in 1957 aimed to address racial discrimination in respect to voting rights. It showed the federal government recognised civil rights as an important issue, but little was done to enforce the legislation.

Katie: Campaigners had to look for new ways to win civil rights for all citizens, whatever their race, colour, religious belief or national origin. One of the most important strategies were the legal cases brought by African Americans against segregation in schools. And we'll look at this in the next section.

Datshiane: So, in 1951, a landmark case was brought by the family of the schoolgirl Linda Brown against the local education authority in Topeka, Kansas. Linda's father wanted his daughter to attend the 'whites only' school, local to them, and they were supported by the NAACP. The Browns lost the

case, but they appealed to the Supreme Court and they won. The court ruled that all education boards across the nation had to desegregate, but some states still resisted.

Katie: And one of those was the state of Arkansas and in 1957, nine African American pupils who had enrolled in the Little Rock Central High School tried to attend. A crisis erupted as angry white protesters refused to accept that the school was being desegregated. Even though the school had pledged to desegregate, the governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, called on the National Guard, armed soldiers, to stop the teenagers entering the school. He said it was to protect them. One of the nine, Elizabeth Eckford, described the moment she was surrounded by the mob.

Datshiane: She said, 'They moved closer and closer. Somebody started yelling. I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the crowd, someone who could maybe help. I looked into the face of an old woman and it seemed a kind face, but when I looked at her again, she spat on me.'

Katie: That is a powerful primary source and you really get a sense of Elizabeth's fear as she described those events. Remember to use sources and quotes as evidence to back up your knowledge of events. Datshiane, what happened next?

Datshiane: Well, it was only after President Eisenhower intervened that the children eventually were provided with a safe passage into the school.

Katie: And even so, in 1960, the majority of African American children in Arkansas still went to black-only schools.

Datshiane: Ok, so the Browns family's victory at the Supreme Court and the Little Rock case are examples of how the civil rights organisations used the legal system to challenge segregation. But activists also had a variety of other methods. Two of these were boycotts and direct-action protests, like sit-ins.

Katie: Let's look at the use of a boycott first. The Montgomery Bus Boycott in the southern state of Alabama was an important development as an example of non-violent direct action, which was to become a powerful tool for civil rights activists.

Datshiane: First of December 1955, Rosa Parks, the secretary of the local NAACP, was on her way home from work and she refused to move from the whites-only section of a segregated bus. When she was arrested, the WPC and local NAACP chapter organised a boycott. Martin Luther King Jr. was then asked to lead the community in the boycott of the city buses.

Katie: Which really affected them because seventy-five percent of its customers were African American.

Datshiane: After a year of boycotting Montgomery buses, the Supreme Court ruled that segregated buses, like schools, were illegal.

Katie: Following Parks' example, more activists took similar direct action on segregated transport. Black and white civil rights activists, dubbed 'freedom riders', took to the buses in areas where local authorities were refusing to desegregate. They sat next to each other as they rode the buses.

Datshiane: And similar tactics were adopted in sit-ins. This was where African Americans, sometimes accompanied by white activists, usually students, sat in the whites-only section of cafes and restaurants and they refused to leave. Around seventy thousand campaigners staged sit-ins across the South in 1961 and 1962.

Katie: Let's check in with Jordan, our time-travelling Bitesize reporter who's in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1st, 1960.

Jordan: I'm standing outside the Woolworth store, where a group of black students have taken a stand against segregation. They're sitting down at the whites-only lunch counter, a powerful act of a non-violent protest. The students, determined and resolute, are demanding to be treated equally and to have the same rights as their white peers. One of the protesters told me, 'We will not be intimidated and we will not leave until we are served.' As I observe the scene, I can hear the murmurs of support from onlookers and the tension building from those among those who opposed this brave act. Reports suggest that over 70,000 activists have joined these protests. This moment is not just about a lunch counter. It represents a broader struggle for justice and equality in America. The fight for civil rights is far from over, but today marks a crucial step forward. This is Jordan, reporting for Bitesize. Back to the studio.

Datshiane: Thanks, Jordan. Martin Luther King Jr. organised more non-violent direct action with three marches in Alabama and Washington DC in 1963 and then two years later from Selma to Birmingham, which was also in Alabama. But police violently repressed the Selma to Birmingham protest. That day in March 1965 was dubbed Bloody Sunday.

Katie: News footage on TV of activists remaining peaceful in the face of violence from the local state police put pressure on the government to act.

Datshiane: Martin Luther King Jr. gave one of the most famous speeches of all time in August 1963, in which he painted a picture of a better society, telling crowds...

Katie: 'I have a dream.'

Datshiane: It was a phrase he'd used before and King took it up again as the celebrated blues and gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, sitting behind him, shouted out, 'Tell him about the dream, Martin.'

Katie: King spoke about the failure of American democracy to create racial equality and the urgency of civil rights and the speech reverberated round the world and became a defining moment in the civil rights movement. It put pressure on the government to pass further legislation to end segregation and discrimination.

Datshiane: A new Civil Rights Act in 1964 outlawed racial discrimination in employment and public places and in 1965, combined with the impact of the Selma March that year, the Voting Rights Act protected the rights of African Americans to vote.

Katie: Inter-racial marriages were legalised in 1967.

Datshiane: And the Fair Housing Act in 1968 made discrimination illegal for buying or renting property.

Katie: And Martin Luther King Jr. became the youngest person to receive the prestigious Nobel Prize for Peace in December 1964. But just four years later, he was assassinated.

Datshiane: So, the civil rights movement campaigned for change through non-violence. But several groups favoured other approaches as a response to what they saw as limitations of non-violent civil rights activism.

Katie: The Black Power Movement, or BPM, emerged from the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, SNCC. Their leader, Stokely Carmichael, embraced the concept of black power.

Datshiane: Carmichael emphasized black pride and identity and the development of independent black political, economic and cultural institutions. In his 1968 book, 'Black Power: The Politics of Liberation', he wrote, 'It is a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize the heritage, to build a sense of community.'

Katie: And another group, The Nation of Islam, also known as Black Muslims, thought that white society was racist and corrupt. And because of this, they believed black people would be better off developing their own communities rather than relying on integration for equality. This is an idea called separatism.

Datshiane: The Nation of Islam rejected Christianity as a white man's religion, urging African Americans to adopt Islam. And its most famous member was Malcolm X.

Katie: But Malcolm X's views shifted and he left the group to set up a new secular organisation called the Organisation of Afro-American Unity, or OAAU.

Datshiane: They campaigned for political autonomy for African Americans and for the human rights of everyone of African descent.

Katie: But in 1965, whilst giving a lecture, Malcolm X was assassinated by a member of the Nation of Islam, although this has been disputed. In contrast to Martin Luther King Jr.'s non-violent approach and tactics, another group, the Black Panther Party, believed African Americans needed to use self-defence if necessary.

Datshiane: Members dressed in black and carried guns to protect themselves from the police and white racists. They also monitored the police to make sure they were not mistreating black Americans.

Katie: The Black Panther set up community groups, breakfast clubs and protected black neighbourhoods against police brutality.

Datshiane: Ok, let's consider an exam question that asks what methods were used by civil rights and black organisations in their quest to achieve civil rights and racial justice. Have a go at this after the podcast. But Katie, first, any tips?

Katie: As always with any question like this, think about what it's asking. In this case, it's about your knowledge of the methods of the civil rights movement. So, include short paragraphs on legal battles, boycotts, peaceful sit-ins and marches advocated by the civil rights movement.

Datshiane: So, remember who, when, where and what happened.

Katie: Right, as well as ideas of separatism, black empowerment and community organising backed by other organisations such as the Black Power Movement, The Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party.

Katie: And remember that including a quote from a source to back up your knowledge is always a very, very, very good thing to do.

Katie: So, there's a lot to absorb there, so let's recap the key points. The civil rights movement's objective was to achieve the same civil rights for African Americans as for white Americans.

Datshiane: And the campaign saw a variety of strategies, including peaceful direct action such as boycotts and sit-ins.

Katie: Non-violence was a principle of leading campaigner Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Datshiane: This pressure from the civil rights movement led to new legislation to end racial segregation and discrimination.

Katie: The emphasis of the Black Power Movement was on empowerment and self-determination, fostering a sense of black pride and identity.

Datshiane: However, some of their campaigners, such as the Black Panthers, advocated violence if necessary to gain civil rights.

Katie: The civil rights movement was more effective in achieving legal and political changes while the Black Power Movement's contributions were more cultural.

Datshiane: Thanks for listening to this series. And remember, there's much more revision on the Bitesize website.

Katie: Good luck with your exams. Bye!

Datshiane: Bye!