

The civil rights movement

[Politics](#), [Civil Rights](#)



In this essay, I will aim to establish whether or not the civil rights movement has achieved equal rights for black people in USA and if so, to what extent. In order to do this, we must compare the situation for blacks in USA currently, to that of blacks many years ago. Absolutely no one would even try to argue that Black Americans had equal rights during, or even directly after the abolition of slavery. This would be ridiculous bearing in mind that many were forced to work from sunrise to sunset, an eighteen hour day in some places, with few, if any rights at all.

At one point, slave owners were even given specific rights to brand, maim, whip or even burn disobedient slaves. This hardly indicates any sort of equal rights. They were unable to vote, serve on juries receive an education and work in certain trades. The fact that they were unable to serve on juries almost made certain that any black man could be tried and convicted even though totally innocent. Also, no voting meant no black politicians, and no politicians meant no say in government.

There were a few lucky blacks living in the south who had managed to obtain freedom, some by purchasing their liberties and others handed their freedom after their masters had passed away. However, these blacks were constantly living in the fear that they could once again be taken into slavery. Most blacks had now been freed, yet they were not compensated for past labours, leaving them jobless and almost penniless. Many "white supremacy" organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan were formed solely to intimidate the black population.

Public lynchings and public beatings became common place and very rarely was anything done about it in the courts as it was supported by many officials. After slavery was abolished, many years of black campaigning followed and gradually, the campaigning became more and more successful. In 1870, the fifteenth ammendment was passed declaring the right for all to be able to vote regardless of race. This was seen as a real breakthrough yet celebrations were proved to be far too premature. At first everything seemed fine.

States which had black majorities soon began to have black politicians who were more understanding to their plight. Free education was introduced and the system of having to own land to be able to have the right to vote was also scrapped. All seemed well and good until 1877, when the army decided that it was time to pull out of the southern states. This immediately left the blacks vulnerable to attack from the various groups which had been formed who had a great hatred towards the blacks. These secret organisations began using violence in order to prevent blacks from voting and this led to an almost immediate change.

The lack of the black vote led to all white governments once again being elected and this in turn saw the re-introduction of many laws against those African Americans. Once again, control of the blacks was firmly in the hands of their white rulers. 'Jim Crow' laws were introduced enforcing segregation in various areas of life. Transport saw separate seating for blacks and whites. Separate schools and hospitals were also introduced. The segregation even

went as far as having different cemeteries for deceased whites and deceased blacks, even in church, they were sat separately.

The much lower wages that the blacks were being paid meant that they could only afford housing in more run down neighbourhoods, again leading to a separation, with "black only" towns. This residential segregation was even made compulsory in some states. Inter-racial marriages became a massive target for groups such as The Ku Klux Klan. They felt that this would lead to a society where racial categorization would become difficult and white dominance would become hard to maintain. Again violence was used to ensure that no inter-racial marriages could take place.

If any kind of recession came round, black employees were always the first to be fired regardless of experience or quality of work and no blacks were allowed to join unions. This of course meant that in the event of any strike action, the blacks would continue to work arousing yet more hatred and hostility from their fellow white compatriots. After the white governments had been firmly re-established, the power of blacks was continually undermined. Successful black businessmen were attacked and any attempts to form black protection groups were quickly quashed.

The KKK also introduced lynching for those blacks accused of committing crimes, many of whom were completely innocent. This was seen as not really a form of punishment for criminals, but more a way of intimidating the local black population into accepting the rule of the whites. Yet again, the blacks were forced to accept the inhumane ways in which they were being treated and once again there was nothing they could really do about it. One hundred

years on, to what extent have civil rights been achieved for blacks? On visiting America now, and comparing life to that of a hundred years ago, the most apparent difference is desegregation.

Whereas blacks and whites were forced to attend separate schools, take part in leisure activities separately, use separate transport and forced to be segregated in the supreme court, there is now no lawful segregation in the USA. Blacks have been given equal rights as far as voting goes and it has been this way for many years now. However, this did not mean that all Blacks were suddenly voting. There was still the problem of persuading blacks to register although, this has now been rectified with very public registration campaigns. The result has been a huge increase in the proportion of blacks registered to vote.

There have been monumental changes in attitudes towards blacks which has meant the uprising of many black celebrities which would have been unthinkable until recent years. A prime example of this could be that of black boxer, Mohammed Ali. His refusal to participate in the Vietnam War because of his personal beliefs, and being prepared to go to jail rather than back down, earned him world wide respect. This went along with the respect that he had already gained from his doubtless talent in the ring. To this day, Ali is one of the most highly respected sportsmen throughout the world.

Various black musicians have reached stardom also. Examples include Stevie Wonder, Tupac Shakur, Billy Halliday and Bessie Smith, who had to fight adversity throughout her career. However, even here there is the possibility of racial discrimination having taken place as it is widely claimed

that, after a car crash Bessie Smith was refused treatment due to the colour of her skin and as a direct result, died from excessive blood loss. Blacks have also been very successful in Hollywood, with both Will Smith and Samuel L. Jackson being among the top ten earners.

This does not even take into account Denzel Washington, Danny Glover, Whoopi Goldberg and many others. The major turning point as far as civil rights were concerned, was the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This finally insured equal opportunity for all, in terms of employment and otherwise. There were also affirmative action programs set up to help those blacks, who through no fault of their own, were given very poor educations. Some blacks have even made a success of themselves by writing or talking about their difficulties in achieving liberation. Maya Angelou is one such person.

The political influence of blacks is always rising and I have already spoken about the rise in blacks registered to vote. Recently, we have also seen the rise to prominence of some black politicians. Namely, Jesse Jackson and Colin Powell. Jackson ran for presidency in both the 1984 and 1988 elections and although he failed on both occasions, his skills as a negotiator have been proven on many separate occasions. His current title is Washington's special envoy to Africa. Colin Powell has come into the limelight much more after the very tragic events of September 2001.

Much praise has been heaped on the Secretary Of State for the way in which he has handled the crisis. He was often referred to as "the face of America" in the aftermath of the attacks. There have also been great strides made in the way of economic progress. Many blacks have managed to break through into

the middle classes. " The Fresh Prince Of Bel-Air" is a popular, black sitcom in which one such family is portrayed. The father is a well respected lawyer and the family is shown to be living in great luxury.

Similarly, there have been other very successful " black" shows such as " The Cosby Show. There are now many, many black homeowners also, in complete contrast to the slavery which existed a century earlier. As yet, I have talked about the great amount of change and progress which has been achieved for blacks in USA, however, in the same period of time there have been many incidents and there are many facts which suggest that not too much has really changed. For example, many people argue that there is a continuity in attitudes of discrimination and they point to certain events to support this.

Accusations of police brutality and heavy handedness towards blacks are constant and the Rodney King incident seems to justify this. Rodney King was a drunken, black driver, who after being stopped by police, was brutally assaulted by four police officers. The whole incident was video-taped by an onlooker. Because of the video-tape, there was a resulting trial in which all four police officers were accused of using excessive force. However, the entirely white jury judged all four to have been not guilty of all charges and the result was the largest riots in Los Angeles' history.

Many people were injured during these riots. Consequently, there was a second trial, in which two officers were again acquitted and the other two received minimum jail terms. There were fears of a second round of rioting which never materialised. Other such incidents include an African refugee

being shot 24 times by police officers. To this day, there are still more blacks than whites on death row, which again leads to calls of discrimination by the police force and law courts. Earlier, I spoke about black successes in politics, pointing to Jesse Jackson and Colin Powell as examples.

However, there has still been no black president, and it still does not even seem like a possibility in the foreseeable future. Even, with the prominence of Jackson and Powell, it can still be said that there is an exclusion of blacks in politics. The poverty trap of many years earlier also still exists in many parts of America, where the idea that if a black person was forced to live in a ghetto due to poor wages, there was really no way out and achieving something for their children as opportunities and resources were greatly limited.

In conclusion, I think it is obviously clear that change has been achieved and progress has been made as far as civil rights are concerned and there will always be isolated incidents, which suggest otherwise. A great distance has been traveled on the road to achieving equal rights and hopefully, the last few miles will also be covered in the near future.