

What was the most significant factor for the achievement of civil rights in the u...



Civil rights are legal rights, which every person should be entitled to, such as freedom of speech and the right to a fair trial. Most African Americans lacked these basic rights during the period 1939- 1968 in the US. Civil Rights ensures one's ability to participate in the civil life of society and state without discrimination or repression. These rights reflect protection from different forms of discrimination such as race and gender. The three factors I am going to discuss are individuals, World War Two and Presidents along with their laws and I'll decide which of these factors was the most significant in the achievement of civil rights.

Individuals were quite significant to the success of civil rights in the US between the years 1939-68. Individuals who had an impact on the period include Martin Luther King and Malcolm X as well as others, who stood up to the racial discrimination in America, that was imposed by the white members of society. The white members were trying to suppress the greater freedom the Blacks were receiving as a result of the success of WW2. This would lead to vicious organisations materialising such as the KKK, who participated in gruesome events such as lynching and bombing of houses, in order to reinforce their hatred, disgust and distaste of the rights of black people improving.

Martin Luther King, the former pastor used non-violent protest to conquer racism. He participated and lead a range of different demonstrations in order to spread awareness of black people, who were no longer tolerating being in the shadow of the more dominant white people. His name would become known during the Montgomery Boycott of 1955 when he would fight for the rights of Rosa Parks, who would be arrested and fined \$10 due to her not

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giving up her seat on a bus to a white person. As a result King would walk to work, encouraging other black people to do so also. This was very damaging to the bus company as African Americans made up about 75% of passengers. The boycotters would endure being made fun of and would remain calm and dignified. This boycott lasted until December 1956, when the efforts of the black people paid off and the Supreme Court ruled segregation on buses as illegal. It still took other bus companies in the Southern states a while to change their racist policy. So, this first major act of defiance by King would show blacks that if they cooperated together they could bring about drastic change.

King's most notable demonstration was the Washington March of 1963, which took place in order to pressure Kennedy's government to move further to the direction of civil rights for all, including African Americans. He would say his "I have a dream" Speech at the Lincoln Memorial, which had dual significance as it was named after the first US President and the President that ended slavery. This event was symbolic as civil rights would be high on the agenda for government action after this event and a year later the civil rights act would be passed.

King's opposite and rival to start with Malcolm X, initially used violent methods to bring about civil rights. Malcolm challenged the nonviolent approach of integration champion Martin Luther King and urged followers to defend themselves against white aggression "by any means necessary".

[1] He would make this clear in the Hinton Johnson incident, which was when a Nation of Islam member was beaten by two police officers in New York. Once informed of this incident Malcolm would visit the police station and demand

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to see Johnson, who had been arrested. Malcolm rallied a crowd of roughly 500 people and would be allowed to arrange for an ambulance to deal with Johnson's injuries and take him to Harlem hospital. This was despite the officers at first trying to stop him. This event was important as it conveyed Malcolm X as a leader, who would use numbers as threats to get what he wanted. An effective leader as well as a large support meant that civil rights could one day be achieved.

Therefore, individuals were quite significant to the achievement of Civil Rights because if they did not intervene through violent and non-violent methods, the White members of society wouldn't have seen the need to seek reform and desegregate. The blacks would have also lacked leaders to guide them through this rough period.

I feel the War in comparison to the other two factors played the smallest role in the achievement of civil rights in the US. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the US would make their entrance in the war. The following four years had a large effect on race relations in the US. There was increased demand for production from war industries and over 2 million black people would migrate to the North in order to get a job. Initially, it caused tension between White and Black Americans in cities such as Detroit as competition for housing leading to race riots.[2] Philip Randolph, a key leader in the civil rights movement, would persuade Roosevelt to issue executive order 8802 in 1941, banning discrimination in the defence industries and also setting up the Fair Employment Practice Committee. Gradually, black and white Americans found themselves working side by side together in factories as well as on the battlefield, but not always in harmony.

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African Americans would become more aware of their unequal status in society and saw the possibility of change. The demand for their labour gave them greater bargaining power for better wages and working conditions and this would also elevate their economic status. The war gave the black people in the army and those in the factories a brief taste of what it was like to have the upper hand against the more dominant white people and it resulted in them experiencing improved civil rights for a change. Unfortunately, this freedom would be short lived as the reaction to black Servicemen returning from the war was extremely violent. This was displayed by the assault and blinding of a black soldier in South Carolina, which was one of 56 attacks, which would be carried out on African Americans between June 1945 and September 1946. Even after the success and sacrifice of the African Americans in World War Two, these attacks showed that more intervention was needed to achieve civil rights in the US.

Therefore, the war was not very significant in achieving civil rights as it only gave the black people a temporary glimpse of what civil rights actually was. Black and white Americans were all fighting for the same goal, which was freedom, and this cooperation made the idea of civil rights a possibility one day in the future. The end of World War Two meant the end of this temporary improvement in civil rights. It was now up to Presidents and their laws and also individuals to take action and make this fantasy a reality for all black people lacking rights.

Presidents and their laws was the most significant influence on the achievement of civil rights in the period as it came down to these

men entirely whether things would remain the same or major reform would
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take place within the US through new laws. Harry S. Truman had a mixed opinion on black people and his views in private drastically differed from his views in office. Truman's biographer said Truman had "moved to establish himself as a friend of the Negro", after coming in to power due to the death of Roosevelt (Hamby 1973). But although he favoured some legislative help for blacks, Truman's support for African Americans never matched his support for Jewish Americans and his unwillingness to act decisively was characteristic of white liberals, both Republicans and Democrats, after the war. Truman in his private life could still reference "niggers" and in the 1920s he had paid the \$10 membership to the KKK, portraying himself as supportive of their cause.[3] Despite this, as President Truman did speak to an NAACP rally and establish a civil rights committee in 1946, who was tasked to examine the violence against the African Americans. The committee consisted of known liberals who Truman knew would produce a report that would shock mainstream America.

The report was called "to secure these rights". Some of the things the report requested was the federal government should use its authority to end segregation in the US; lynching should be made a federal offence and voting rights to be introduced for African Americans as well as other things.[4] In a special message to Congress, Truman would say "we cannot be satisfied until all our people have equal opportunities".[5] Truman would act upon his words during election year in 1948, when he would issue two executive orders, banning segregation in the armed forces and generating fair employment practices in the civil service. This order would lead to an increase in the number of front line troops, which were African American in

the Korean War. It was a major victory for civil rights advocates as they had won the President's support and had got him to take action. This made it clear to the advocates that to achieve civil rights in the long run they must get the President on their side.

Another instance where presidents and their laws were significant was shown by Lyndon B. Johnson, who would complete Kennedy's civil rights wishes when he put the presidential signature on the 1964 civil rights Act and later the 1965 voting rights act. Johnson's was an Idealist, who dreamed of making America a "great society" and by signing these acts Johnson was effectively bringing the civil rights movement to a close in the 60s. He would be able to achieve this, despite being faced with opposition from the Southern states. The civil rights act would lead to greater rights such as the desegregation of schools and racial discrimination to be outlawed in almost all aspects of society as private clubs could still be "whites only", whereas the voting rights act halted all racial discrimination in terms of voting.

So, this made Presidents and their laws significant to the achievement of civil rights as they could successfully challenge major opposition; the South from interfering with the freedom of the black community in the US.

In conclusion, Presidents and their laws would be the most significant factor for the achievement of civil rights as these men ultimately influenced desegregation around the US due to the high position they were in. World War Two and its aftermath were arguably the main catalysts for launching the civil rights movement but did not really contribute to the achievements over the period. Therefore, it was more of a short term cause

that assisted African Americans, thus allowing the civil rights movement to begin. It was up to the Presidents with assistance from the individuals from the civil rights movement to transform this movement into a reality.

Individuals such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X's ambition would pay off in the long run as they would massively contribute to bringing about civil rights and freedom with their determination, despite their conflicting methods to start with. Though, their achievements would not have been possible without the assistance of the Presidents such as John F. Kennedy, who would at long last propose legislation in the Oval office, in favour of those who lacked civil rights. This would later take the form of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 enforced under Lyndon Johnson, who made it clear he would support voting reform. Undoubtedly, the Presidents above all were the most relevant factor to achieving civil rights between the years 1939-1968.

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