

# BLACK AMERICANS

“How should we punish Hitler?” a reporter asked a young American black girl towards the end of the Second World War. “Paint him black and bring him over here,” was her bitter reply. It was the result of being treated as a second-class human being – of being told no, you can’t attend this school, have this job, live in this house, sit on this park bench. And the reason? Because your skin is black.

The official term for all this was segregation – that is, separating blacks from the rest of the community and refusing them many of the rights enjoyed by other people.

In 1940 ten million of the country’s total black population of thirteen million still lived in the southern United States, most of them in great poverty. By 1970 the situation had changed. The country’s total black population was now about twenty-four million and twelve million lived outside the South, most of them in big northern industrial cities. A mass migration had taken place. More than 4.5 million southern blacks had caught buses and trains to the North and to California.

The big attraction for the migrants was well-paid jobs in the factories of cities like Chicago, Pittsburgh and Detroit. But there was another. Taking the road north or west promised an escape not just from poverty, but from the miseries and humiliations of segregation which were a part of every southern black’s daily life. As one black migrant wrote, “I don’t care where so long as I go where a man is a man.”

During the Second World War, segregation started to break down, at least outside the South. Black workers earned more money than ever before working alongside whites in the busy wartime factories. Black servicemen not only fought and died, but ate and slept alongside their white fellow countrymen. “One thing is certain,” wrote an observer in 1946, “the days of treating negroes like sheep are done with [ended].”

The black struggle for equal treatment became known as the Civil Rights movement. An important legal turning point came in 1954. In a case called

## Black Americans at war

In 1940 the American army had only two black officers. The navy had none. That September the United States began to draft young men into the armed forces. Before this, fewer than 4,000 blacks were serving in the American army. Most were in support units – digging ditches, loading and unloading ships and trucks, serving food. Many of the young black recruits objected to this. “We want to be soldiers, not servants,” they said.

The entire black community supported the recruits. So did many whites, including Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of the President. The system was changed. On December 1, 1941, the American army and air force opened all types of positions to qualified blacks. Six months later the navy and the marine corps did the same.

During the Second World War black combat units fought in both Europe and the Pacific. One black unit in particular won great admiration. This was the 332nd Fighter Group of the United States Army Air Force. In the skies above France and Germany its pilots destroyed 261 enemy aircraft and won a total of 904 medals for bravery. In March 1945, the whole group was awarded a Distinguished Unit Citation.

The 332nd Group came to symbolize the struggle of all blacks for equality. Its wartime achievements helped to end segregation in the American armed forces. In July 1948, President Truman ordered “equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the Armed Forces without regard to race, color, religion or national origin.”

*Brown v. Topeka* the Supreme Court declared that segregated schools were illegal and ordered that black children should be allowed to attend any school as pupils. In September 1957, black children tried to enrol at the previously all white high school in Little Rock, Arkansas. An angry mob gathered to prevent them. President Eisenhower sent troops to enforce the Supreme Court decision of 1954 and the children





*Black passengers choose their own seats on buses after the success of the Montgomery bus boycott.*

were admitted. So began a long struggle for equal rights in education. It was still going on more than thirty years later.

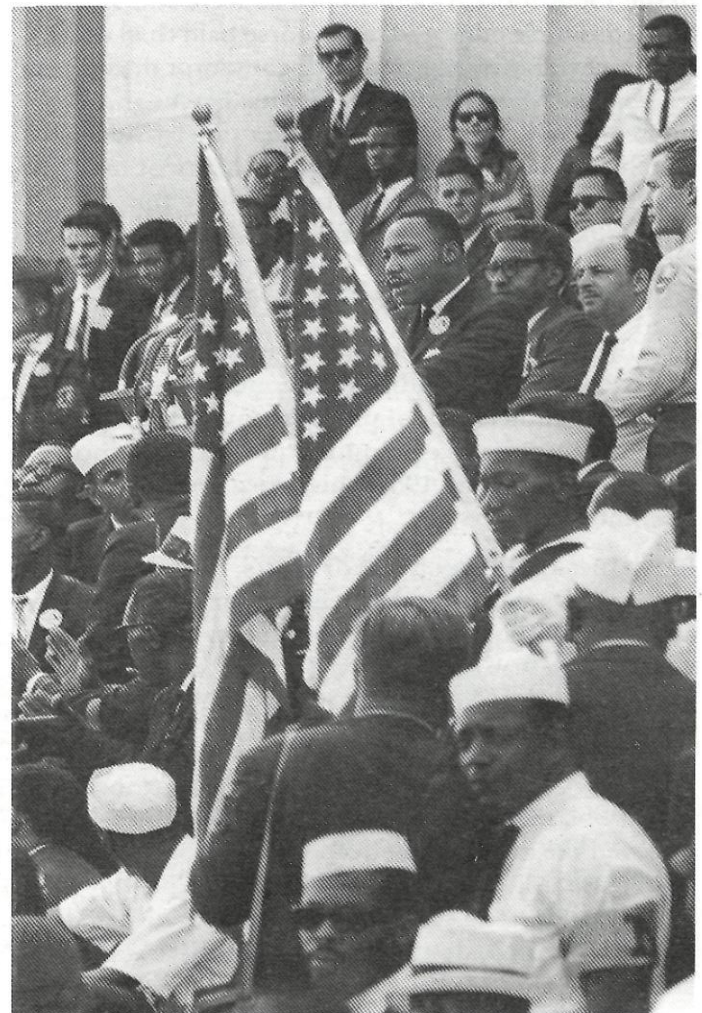
Another landmark in the black struggle came on December 1, 1955. A black woman named Rosa Parks got on a bus in the strictly segregated southern city of Montgomery, Alabama. She took a seat towards the back of the bus, as blacks were supposed to do. But then white workers and shoppers filled up the front section of the bus and the driver ordered her to give up her seat. Mrs. Parks decided that she would not be treated in that way. She refused to move.

Mrs. Parks was arrested. But the black people of Montgomery supported her. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) helped them to persuade a judge to release Mrs. Parks from jail. Then they started a campaign to end segregation on buses. Led by a young clergyman named Martin Luther King, they began to stop using, or "boycott," the city's bus services. The boycott went on for a year. Finally, in November 1956, the Supreme Court declared that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional. Montgomery's public transport system was desegregated.

The success of the Montgomery bus boycott encouraged blacks in other places to act together against segregation. They boycotted stores where black workers were refused jobs, refused to pay rent until landlords improved housing conditions, and held "sit-ins" in restaurants that would not serve black customers. They achieved many successes.

A climax of the Civil Rights movement came in 1963. On a hot August day 200,000 people, black and white, took part in a mass demonstration in Washington to demand full racial equality. In a moving and dramatic speech, Martin Luther King told millions of Americans watching their televisions all over the country:

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out these truths that all men are created equal. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveholders will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."



*Martin Luther King speaking at the Lincoln Memorial, August 1963.*



By this time John Kennedy was President. He sympathized with the blacks and worked out a plan to ensure that all Americans, of any race, would receive equal treatment. Kennedy sent his scheme to Congress to be made into a law. He was murdered before this could happen, but his successor, Lyndon Johnson, made getting the law passed one of his first aims.

In 1964 the Civil Rights Act became the law of the land. Many Americans hoped that its passing would mark the beginning of a new age of racial harmony and friendship in the United States. They were disappointed. The racial difficulties of the United States were too deep-rooted to be solved by simple alterations in the law, or by demonstrations and marches. Changes were needed in human attitudes and in underlying economic conditions.

In the 1960s most American blacks were still worse housed, worse educated, and worse paid than other Americans. Some rejected with contempt the ideas of leaders like Martin Luther King that blacks and whites should learn to live together side by side in equality and friendship. "There are many of my poor, black, ignorant brothers preaching the ignorant and lying stuff that you should love your enemy," proclaimed the leader of a group called the Black Muslims. "What fool can love his enemy?"

The Black Muslims were only a minority. But other black Americans were becoming increasingly impatient at their lack of progress towards real equality—especially economic equality. In the hot summers of the mid 1960s this impatience boiled over into violence.

In August 1965, the streets of Watts, a black ghetto in Los Angeles, became a battlefield. For six days police and rioters fought among burning cars and buildings. A large area was burned out. Thirty-four people were killed and over a thousand were injured.

The Watts riot was followed by others—in Chicago, Detroit, New York, Washington. A government inquiry blamed lack of jobs for the riots. But many believed the causes went deeper. When one black leader was asked about the violence he replied, "If a man's standing on your toe and you've petitioned, begged, pleaded, done everything possible and he still won't move—you've got to push him off."

In April 1968, Martin Luther King was murdered.

## The dream deferred

Langston Hughes is one of the best known American poets of the twentieth century. He was also black. The poem below was inspired by his experiences of life in Harlem, the black ghetto of New York. To Hughes it seemed that the people of Harlem's hopes of better treatment had been delayed—"deferred"—for too long.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes

He was shot dead on the balcony of a motel in Memphis, Tennessee, by a white sniper. Many blacks now turned to the Black Power movement. Black Power taught that the only way for blacks to get justice was to fight for it.

But in the 1970s and 1980s most blacks decided that voting was a more effective way to improve their position. Their idea was to elect blacks to positions of power—as city councilors, as mayors of cities, as members of Congress. Jesse Jackson, a former assistant of Martin Luther King's, became the chief spokesman for this idea. "We need 10,000 blacks running for office [trying to get elected]," he told them. "Just run! Run! Run! If you run you might lose. If you don't run, you're guaranteed to lose."

By 1985 more than 5,000 of the 50,000 elected officials in the United States were black. This number included the mayors of such large cities as Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia and Washington. In 1988 Jackson himself came close to being chosen as the Democratic Party's candidate in the Presidential election of that year. And whites, as well as blacks, voted for him.



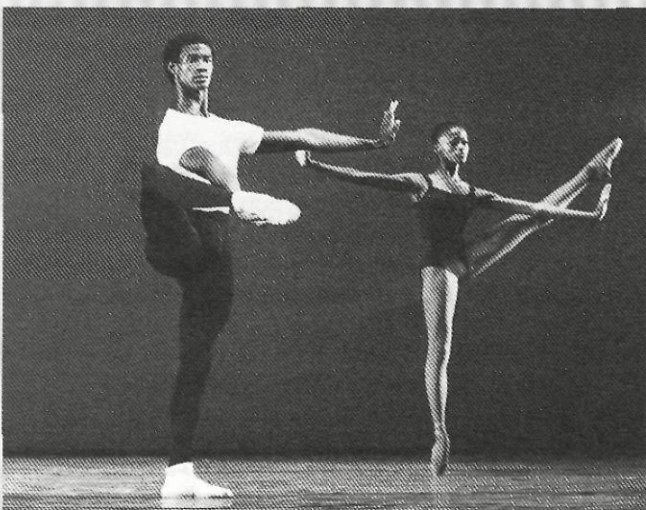
But most black Americans continued to be less well placed in life than white Americans. In the late 1980s black unemployment was still higher than white unemployment. The average incomes of black Americans were still lower than those of whites. So were their standards of health and education. Even so, their position had improved greatly since the 1960s. Large parts of Martin Luther King's 1963 "dream" had come true. Blacks and whites studied side by side in schools and colleges. They worked side by side in all kinds of occupations. Increasing numbers lived side by side in the same districts. As King had dreamed, people seemed to be learning to judge each other more by the content of their characters than by the color of their skins.

(right) Jesse Jackson announcing his candidacy for the 1988 presidential election.



## Black is beautiful

In the 1960s black Americans began taking new pride in their African ancestry. It became fashionable to take African names, to wear long African robes and short African jackets called "dashiks." Bushy African hairstyles became the fashion for black America and were even adopted by white youngsters. Before long the most frequently seen and heard slogan in America was the three words: "Black is beautiful."



The Dance Theater of Harlem.

But black pride and racial awareness showed itself in more than dress and appearance. Schools were set up to teach black children the history, languages and customs of their African ancestors. One of the most striking ventures was a ballet school founded by a young dancer named Arthur Mitchell. In Mitchell's school, youngsters from the streets of New York's Harlem learned to create new and exciting dances which combined the techniques of classical European ballet with the beat of African drums. Within a few years they had become internationally famous as the Dance Theater of Harlem, playing to full theaters all over the world.

Arthur Mitchell was a dancer, not a politician. His ways of trying to improve the position of his fellow blacks were very different from Martin Luther King's. Yet his underlying view of people, of their hopes and needs, was not so different. "I used to be full of anger," Mitchell told a reporter when the Dance Theater of Harlem visited London in 1976, "but not any more. Screams and yells don't get you anywhere. I discovered that black or white, green or purple, all kids are the same. People are the same. I don't think of myself as a black man, first and foremost. I'm just a man who happens to be black."