

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER IN POWER (1953-1961)

Cours HD

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2. THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

But young whites were not the only ones to start rebelling against the complacency of the 1950s, black people launched what was to become the greatest movement of the 20th century, the black struggle for equality.

1) The origins of the movement for equality

Several factors can explain it :

- . the destabilization of the racial system during WWII
- . the migration en masse of the segregated south that made black voters an increasingly great part of the Democratic Party coalition
- . the rise of independent states in the Third World and the Cold War
- . the gap between America's rhetoric and its racial reality (which was an international embarrassment)

In his book, *An American Dilemma* (1944), the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal had suggested that racial equality would first be challenged in the North where blacks had more opportunities to organize politically than in the South. But political organization demanded new tactics since the NAACP was concentrated on court battles, blacks' traditional allies on the left had been decimated by McCarthyism and most union leaders were unwilling to challenge racial inequalities inside their ranks. In fact, it was in the southern black church that the movement found the organizing power for a militant, non violent struggle against segregation.

In the 1950s, the US was still a segregated and unequal society where half of the nation's black families lived in poverty. Labor contracts linked promotions and firings to seniority so non-white workers who had joined the industrial labor force later than whites were often the first ones to lose their jobs when there was an economic downturn. In the South Jim Crow laws (= Jim Crow laws were state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States. All were enacted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by white Democratic-dominated state legislatures after the Reconstruction period. The laws were enforced until 1965. Wikipedia) were enforced in many places where signs reading « white » and « colored » flourished on buildings, in trains and restrooms. Such laws were not enforced in the North and West but customs barred blacks from many public places, including restaurants and suburban housing.

In 1950, 17 southern and border states, plus Washington DC segregated public schools, on the basis of race and several others did not oppose it. In the end, most schools were segregated even if it was not in the law to do this, and very few Americans challenged racial inequalities.

2) Legal action against segregation

Solving the problem of racial segregation fell to the courts. The equivalent of the NAACP in the South, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) challenged restrictive housing, employment discrimination and the segregation of Latino students. In 1946, they took a case to the Supreme Court of California-*Mendez v. Westminster* - which put an end to segregation in the schools of Orange County. The governor who signed the measure was Earl Warren who had supervised the internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII as the state's attorney general (= procureur général). He was appointed Chief Justice at the Supreme Court by Eisenhower in 1953. He believed racial inequality had no place in American life and played a key-role in deciding *Brown v. Board of Education*, the case that outlawed school segregation.

The NAACP first tried to gain admission to white institutions of higher learning for which no black equivalent existed. In 1938, the University of Missouri Law School was ordered by the Supreme Court to accept Lloyd Gaines, a black student because the state had no school like that for blacks. Missouri responded by setting up a segregated law school to satisfy the courts.

3) *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*

Thurgood Marshall (Thurgood Marshall was an American lawyer who served as Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States from October 1967 until October 1991. Marshall was the Court's first African-American justice. He founded the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. Wikipedia), decided to launch an assault on segregation itself. Whenever possible, he brought the NAACP's support to local cases when black parents challenged unfair school policies. Several cases of unfair inequality in several schools were combined in a single one that reached the Supreme Court at the end of 1952.

When cases are united like this, they get listed alphabetically and the first case gives the entire decision its name. The first case arose from a state outside the old Confederacy. Oliver Brown went to court because his daughter (a third grader = élève de CE2) had to walk across dangerous railroad tracks to go to school which she would not have to do if she were allowed to attend a nearby school restricted to whites. This case came to be known as *Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.

Thurgood was now convinced that the doctrine of « separate but equal » itself should be attacked. He pointed to the fact that segregation was inherently unequal since it stigmatized one group of citizens as unfit to associate with others, and that it did lifelong damage to black children- as it undermined their self-esteem. Although the Eisenhower administration did not openly support Marshall's position, it urged the justices to consider « the problem of racial discrimination... in the context of the present world struggle between freedom and tyranny. » It also noted that other peoples « cannot understand how such a practice can exist in a country which professes to be a staunch supporter of freedom, justice, and democracy. »

Earl Warren managed to create unanimity on a divided court, even if some judges feared a decision to outlaw segregation might result in widespread violence. On May 17, 1954, segregation in public education was made unlawful by the Supreme Court as it violated the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the 14th Amendment. He declared that « In the field of education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. »

The *Brown* decision was hailed by the black press as a « second Emancipation Proclamation. » The decision addressed segregation in public school only and did not address it in other institutions or ban all racial classifications in the law, such as statutes prohibiting interracial marriage. It did not address the school segregation that was taking place in the North due to housing patterns. The case, however, was responsible for the emergence of the « Warren Court » regarded as an active agent of social change. It also led to a wave of optimism that discrimination would disappear in its wake. For all the good that it brought to the black community, *Brown* was also followed by massive resistance from the whites in the South, a resistance that lasted well into the sixties

4) The bus boycott in Montgomery

The *Brown* case led blacks to believe that if mass action took place it would be backed by the federal courts.

On December 1st 1955, Rosa Parks, a black tailor's assistant, who was coming home on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, after her day's work in a city's department store, refused to give her seat to a white rider as required by local law. She was arrested and this triggered a year-long bus boycott which was the beginning of the mass phase of the civil rights movement in the South. Within a decade, the movement had overturned the structure of legal segregation and regained the right to vote for black southerners. In 2000, *Time* magazine declared Rosa Parks to be one of the 100 most significant persons of the 20th century.

Although Rosa Parks is remembered today as a « seamstress (= couturière) with tired feet », a symbol of black resistance to the Jim Crow South, she was a veteran of black politics. She had served as secretary to the local leader of the NAACP. In 1943, she tried to register to vote but was turned away because she supposedly failed a literacy test. She eventually managed to become one of the few blacks who could vote in Montgomery later on. No one actually knows why Parks refused to give her seat on that particular day but since 1954, Jo Ann Robinson, a professor at the all-black State University had been calling for a boycott of public transportation. So, when Parks was arrested black people reacted by refusing to ride the buses until they got equal treatment. They decided to walk to where they worked instead. The movement lasted till November 1956 and ended when the Supreme Court declared segregation in public transportation unconstitutional.

5) King's leadership

The Montgomery bus boycott represented a milestone in postwar American history. Among other things, it marked the emergence of Martin Luther King Jr who was only 26 years old at the time. King had recently arrived in

Montgomery to become pastor of a Baptist church. King's call to action had a deep impact on his audience when he declared : « We, the disinherited of this land, we who have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the long night of captivity. And now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality. »

For adults, freedom meant enjoying the same rights as whites that the latter took for granted. It also meant getting respected like being addressed as « Mr. » or « Miss, » and « Mrs » instead of « boy » or « auntie.»

« Freedom » was a leit-motiv in most of King's speeches and writings. King called his first book relating the boycott's history, *Stride Toward Freedom*, and his most famous speech, the « I have a dream » oration of 1963, started with an invocation of the unfulfilled promise of emancipation (« one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free ») and ended with a line borrowed from a black spiritual : « Free at last ! Free at last ! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last. »

King got his inspiration from the writings on peaceful civil disobedience of Henry David Thoreau and Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, as well as from the nonviolent protests the Congress of Racial Equality had organized in the 1940s. His philosophy was based on responding to evil with good, to hate with Christian love, and to violence with peaceful demands for change. He repeatedly invoked the Bible to preach justice and forgiveness even toward those « who desire to deprive you of freedom. » Like Frederick Douglass in the 19th century, he appealed to white America by stressing the protesters' love of country and devotion to national values. And just like W. E. B. DuBois, he linked the American « color line » with the degradation of non-white peoples overseas. In a sermon, in 1956, he declared : « If Africa was gaining its freedom, why must black America lag behind ? »

Conclusion

Foreign nations were quite attentive to the unfolding of the civil rights movement in the United States at the time and reacted positively to the *Brown* decision. A newspaper in Senegal, West Africa proclaimed : « At last ! Whites and Blacks on the same school benches ! »

However, the slow pace of change was much criticized and embarrassed American diplomats trying to win the loyalty of people in the non-white world.

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