

# EUR6. The United States and the World |

## Sample answer

### **How important was the Montgomery Bus Boycott to the American Civil Rights Movement? (2009)**

Although the bus boycott did not end violence or segregation in Montgomery, it achieved other important results.

It undermined the smug Southern white idea that black people were 'happy' with their status as second-class citizens. The tenacity and courage of ordinary black people, and the skill with which they organised the boycott, showed that white claims about black inferiority were untrue. Media coverage, and especially TV images, made many white Americans aware of the deprivation and indignities suffered by Southern black people and the violence and harassment that followed every attempt to demand equality.

It produced a new black leader in Martin Luther King. His adherence to the nonviolent tactics would largely characterize the entire civil rights movement and inspire large-scale participation by whites as well as blacks. Following the Montgomery bus boycott, King had created the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957. Consisting mainly of Black ministers, the organization operated as "*the political arm of the Black church*" and reflected King's commitment to nonviolent direct action as a technique to battle all forms of racism. By the early 1960s King was clearly the accepted leader of black America, and this was cemented by his 'I have a dream speech' at the end of a peaceful march in Washington.

The boycott demonstrated that the black community, through unity and determination, could make their voices heard and effect change. Picketing, boycotting, and other forms of resistance spread rapidly to communities throughout the South. The tactics used – local boycott, non-violent protest, and legal action – became the model for successful civil rights campaigns in many parts of the South over the next ten years.

The success of the boycott instilled a new sense of pride in the black community in the USA and inspired other minority groups to struggle for equality. It created a new generation of southern blacks who wanted to change their situation and were willing to stand up for this change. They knew not only how to achieve their goals but how to deal with the backlash along the way. It provided the vital foundations for the voting protests and many other moves towards gaining other civil liberties.

Montgomery was an important start to ending segregation and white supremacy in the south. With its church-based mass mobilisation, its black ministerial leadership, its cultivation of the idea of non-violence, and its projection of Martin Luther King, Jr, onto the national stage, the Montgomery bus boycott provided the blueprint for what would follow. Not least, it proved that segregation could be overcome by black action, a fact that inspired many others. "*Somewhere in the universe,*" Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver later wrote, "*a gear in the machinery had shifted*".