

### What were the main developments in race relations in the US, 1945-1968?

America could've been a very different society today without the significant efforts that were made in the development of race relations in the US between the years 1945-1968. This time frame saw many changes, developments and saw many questions being asked. Prior to these developments, America was a divided, segregated society. Jim Crow Laws made racism a 'normal' 'standard' way of acting. White supremacy was something that was rarely questioned while many black citizens lived in fear of their lives. This society was eventually questioned and began to change of the course of time thanks to the efforts of many leaders such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Without many of these efforts would America be a different society entirely?

The questioning of race relations began with the efforts made during the **Montgomery Bus Boycott**. Rosa Parks was a valued member of the NAACP. One day on travelling by bus she refused to offer her seat to a white person, which was state law at the time. Parks was arrested for her actions under breaking city law. Ed Nixon, an NAACP

member, wanted to start a protest and felt Parks case was the perfect way to start. He felt that she would represent the liberation that he wanted to achieve. Rosa Parks agreed that her case could be used and Nixon, along with fellow NAACP member Martin Luther King began organising a significant event that would greatly develop race relations in the US.

Martin Luther King started organising a bus boycott scheduled for the day of Parks' trial. He and Jo Anne Robinson issued over 30,000 flyers to promote the boycott while raising awareness. The bus boycott involved African Americans refusing to use public transport as a method of protest. Thousands did this by using a cheap taxi service set up by Martin Luther King, carpooling (more than one passenger sharing the drive) and cycling. They wanted their protest to be a non violent one but one that could achieve a successful, positive development in race relations in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The demands of the boycott were that African – American bus drivers would be employed, that black passengers would be treated as equals and that white bus drivers would remain courteous to all passengers. Their demands were extremely reasonable and they promoted their views in an orderly, non violent, well organised manner. Martin Luther King used his church group to promote and encourage his beliefs while

others continued by peaceful means in an attempt to encourage freedom in American society and to therefore create a more positive change in race relations.

However the whites counteracted using violent means. The Ku Klux Klan continued to work against them by pouring acid over car pooling cars, bombing churches and houses of boycott leaders and shooting at pedestrians who they felt were protesting by avoiding the use of public transport. The police force also worked against them, shutting down the cheap taxi services stating that they were breaking old laws that forbade taxis from operating too cheaply. They also arrested several leaders such as Martin Luther King for offences he didn't commit. The white's violence was discouraging any development for the future of race relations.

Leaders of the boycott continued to be arrested under old laws that forbade boycotts. A total of 88 leaders were arrested. However, the Supreme Court finally ruled against this and attempted to improve the state of public transport. Despite achieving success, the Ku Klux Klan continued to counteract violently. Many areas remained segregated under Jim Crow Laws but the African-American community continued their efforts in attempt to make further developments in race relations. The boycott had many positive and negative effects but was definitely the first and most influential step amongst

many others in the questioning and improvement of race relations throughout America.

**John F. Kennedy** also promoted Civil Rights throughout his political career. On June 11, 1963 he gave one of the most important, influential speeches on the future of civil rights. Peniel E. Joseph repeatedly refers to this day as 'one of the single most important days in civil rights history.' The evening of June 11 was the NAACP's first engagement with Louise Day Hicks, the chairwoman of the Boston School Committee. They came together to discuss the changes that could not be obtained from the buss boycott; the segregation of schools. Little did they know that the struggle was far from over and just after midnight in Jackson, a white segregationist murdered the civil rights leader of the time, Medgar Evers.

A few hours before the brutal murder, Kennedy made an inspirational yet hastily arranged speech. He wanted to improve his efforts in race relations after being repeatedly criticized by black leaders for being too timid on civil rights. He began his speech with a plea for national unity on what he called "a moral issue". He plead with "every American, regardless of where he lives", to "stop and examine his conscience". He attempted to convince American citizens that they would be a better nation as equals and stated that American "will not be fully free until all it's citizens are free".

His speech was initially overshadowed by Ever's murder but it later achieved real consequences. Little over a week later, Kennedy submitted strong civil rights legislations to Congress, which he pushed aggressively until his assassination in November 1963. He made significant efforts to improve race relations in America, these efforts were later extended by his successor Lyndon B Johnson.

**Lyndon Johnson** Lyndon Baines Johnson has been credited with being one of the most important figures in the civil rights movement. After the assassination of Kennedy, Johnson announced a plan for a "Great Society", "with an end to poverty and racial injustice". He felt his owed it to Kennedy to see his civil rights bill passed. In 1964 he signed the Civil Rights Act. He was looked at as a leader after his speech on the Civil Rights Act while referring to freedom, morality and unity and managed to persuade two thirds, a majority in favour. The 1965 Voters' Registration Act outlawed literacy tests and abolished letters and the poll tax. It also featured the establishment of voter registration offices around the country. This led to fantastic results such as the black voter turnout tripling and black politicians starting to be elected. Johnson even appointed the first black Supreme Court judge in 1967. Johnson undoubtedly created a huge development for race relations during the late 1960's.

Taking a look at America today, we see an African American president, many black and respected leaders and a vast decline in racism. While there is no doubt that racism is still encountered today, it is now frowned upon and is not 'legal' anymore under Jim Crow Laws or anything as ridiculously cruel as that. Thanks to various black representatives such as Martin Luther King, the African American community eventually gained more respect and proved themselves as a community built around great leadership. The efforts of many white leaders such as John F. Kennedy proved you did not have to black to support race relations. Thanks to the efforts Montgomery Bus Boycott, the influence of Kennedy and the actions of Johnson, it can definitely be argued that the great developments have taken place in the history of race relations.