***T***

***he development of changing attitudes towards civil rights, 1890–1945***

**Background**

Africans were imported into North America as slaves from the seventeenth century onwards. Although the white colonists were keen to be free from British rule, they allowed slavery to continue. Some were aware of the irony of their contradictory position. By the mid-nineteenth century, slavery had ended in the Northern states. Some Northern abolitionists criticised the South’s retention of slavery, but many Northerners disliked and discriminated against free blacks.

Northerners and Southerners disagreed over the extension of slavery to newly acquired Western territories. The Republican Party opposed the expansion of slavery, and the election of the Republican Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1860 prompted the South to secede from the Union. Lincoln raised Union armies to defeat the South, and accomplished this in the Civil War years of 1861–5. However, Northern racism flourished throughout the war and Lincoln’s emancipation of the slaves was controversial. The black military contribution to the Union war effort impressed some Northerners, but white fears of and hostility toward black Americans continued.

In 1865, moral and practical pressures led to the 13th Amendment to the American Constitution. It prohibited slavery and was a first step toward black equality in the South. By virtue of the 14th and 15th Amendments, Congress ensured that black Americans became citizens and were able to vote.

Black Southerners did not gain equality after the Civil War. Although free to sell their labour, many struggled as sharecroppers. Whites still regarded them as inferior in every way, and although many black were elected to office, whites dominated Southern politics. The development of a white backlash further limited black advances.

The white backlash took several forms. First, white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan used violence and intimidation against black people. Although the Ku Klux Klan was crushed, others continued the violence and intimidation. Second, Northerners grew tired of the South and black problems. In 1877 federal troops were withdrawn from the South. With the end of Northern interest in the South, white supremacy was restored there.

The impact of the Jim Crow laws and the erosion of black freedom

**How and why were the Jim Crow Laws established?**

Although black Americans had not attained full social, political and economic equality after the Civil War, Southern whites remained fearful and hostile. The solutions to the race problem suggested by white politicians included the deportation of black Americans, mass black castration, and even ‘utter extermination’ (the suggestion of a Georgia Congressman). However, white Southerners were for the most part reasonably content with the spread of laws that enforced segregation.

The reassertion of white supremacy in the South was facilitated by the federal government’s loss of interest in protecting the black population of the South and by the powers given to individual states under the Constitution. With those powers, which included control of voting, education, transportation and law enforcement, Southern states introduced and sustained discriminatory **Jim Crow** laws that enshrined social divisions in law.

Prior to the Civil War, slavery enabled white Southerners to control the movements of most of the local black population. When slavery was abolished, whites quickly moved to continue such control through the ***de facto* segregation** of schools, housing and public facilities. At the same time as it passed the 14th Amendment (which did not plainly proscribe segregation), Congress had authorized segregated schooling in the nation’s capital, demonstrating that it did not interpret that Amendment as anti-segregationist. Segregation spread quickly and was soon reinforced by law. Historians have disagreed over why ***de jure* segregation** was suddenly so consistently applied by the 1890s. Amongst their suggestions are:

• the support of the Supreme Court;

• white anxiety over the rising proportion of black farm owners in the Deep South between 1880 (3.8%) and 1900 (25%). Black success necessitated segregation, which would reaffirm white supremacy;

• the railroad expansion in the South in the 1870s, which forced railroad companies to consider the significance of the black and white races sitting in close proximity.

Railroad expansion was certainly significant. The legalisation of a ‘color line’ was first implemented in public transport. The history of the Florida railroad provides an early example of *de jure* segregation.

In 1887, the Florida state legislature passed a law mandating segregation in the first-class cars on Florida’s railroads. The law said that ‘all respectable Negro persons’ were to be sold first-class tickets at the same rate as white passengers, and given a separate car ‘equally as good and provided with the same facilities for comfort as for white persons.’ Black ministers in Jacksonville urged their congregations to boycott lines that did not provide equal accommodation for all passengers, suggesting that separation was acceptable to the black community so long as provision was equal. The Florida state legislature suggested that black or white persons who entered railroad cars reserved for the other race could be sentenced to the pillory or whipped 39 times — or both. Other states soon followed Florida’s example.

** Key terms**

**Jim Crow**An early 1830s’ comic, black-faced, minstrel character developed by a white performing artist that proved to be very popular with white audiences. When, in the 1880s, the Southern states introduced laws that legalized segregation, these were known as ‘Jim Crow laws.’

***De facto* segregation** Separation of the races in fact if not in law.

***De jure* segregation** Separation of the races imposed and supported by law.

**How were they applied in different southern states?**

Although Florida was the first state to legally segregate black and white people on railways, it was quickly followed by other southern states introducing similar laws. During the period 1888–1891, *de jure* segregation was introduced by Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Kentucky, Arkansas and Georgia.

Finally, in 1898 and 1899, the other former Confederate states followed suit, with South Carolina, North Carolina and Virginia introducing legal segregation in railway travel. In 1900, the first non-Confederate state, Maryland, introduced legal segregation, with the western state of Oklahoma following when it became a state in 1907. The details of the Jim Crow Laws regarding railroads are very nearly the same in all these states. They required white people, on the one hand, and ‘Negroes’, ‘persons of color’ or ‘persons of African descent’, on the other, to occupy separate seats, compartments or coaches.

**The extension of segregation to other social areas**

Legal segregation of black and white Americans was extended across a wide variety of social and recreational areas in the years from 1887 to the beginning of the twentieth century. On the railway system, legal segregation was expanded to having separate black and white waiting rooms. This process was begun in Mississippi in 1888 by the local railroad commission and was later introduced in Arkansas and Louisiana. In 1906, South Carolina extended legal segregation to all restaurants and eating houses at railway stations. Another area where legal segregation affected public transportation was in street cars, known as trams in the United Kingdom. Legal separation of the races occurred in Georgia in 1891, followed by Louisiana in 1902, Mississippi in 1904, and Florida and Tennessee in 1905.

By the early twentieth century, much of the former Confederacy had two separate societies living side by side, one black and one white. As well as legal segregation on public transportation, other public facilities were racially separated, including schools, libraries, hospitals, hotels, restaurants, public houses, prisons, theatres, churches and even cemeteries. Textbooks for use in white schools were not to be stored in the same place as those for black schools. Black and white people were forbidden to play checkers (draughts) together. Even prostitution was segregated in some areas. The city of New Orleans in Louisiana had separate areas for black and white prostitutes.

In addition to legal segregation, enacted by state law, *de facto* segregation also developed. This was segregation done by individuals. Racially segregated regulations also affected private organizations. Only white people could use certain baseball parks and swimming pools. A new zoo in Atlanta opened in 1890 and featured cages in the middle of the building, with an aisle on one side for white people and an aisle on the other side for black people.

These segregation laws were introduced for a variety of reasons. Among them were claims of the scientific proof of the inferiority of the black race, known as social Darwinism. Also, some northerners saw segregation as a way of ending the sectional divisions between north and south that existed during the Civil War and Reconstruction. These northerners were concerned that the Civil War and Reconstruction had increased divisions within the USA, and they were willing to see a reduction in civil rights for black Americans if it led to improved relations between northern and southern white Americans.

Even prominent members of the southern black community accepted the onset of segregation. In 1895, Booker T. Washington, a leading black American civil rights leader, delivered a speech in Atlanta, Georgia, in front of a segregated audience of black and white Americans, and with reporters from national newspapers present. In his speech, known as the Atlanta Compromise, Booker T. Washington put forward his view of race relations. He stated that he was willing to accept racial segregation in the South if it still allowed black Americans to acquire education and skills to improve their standard of living.

**How did the Jim Crow laws influence attitudes and developments in the Southern states over the longer period?**

By the 1930s, racial segregation had become a dominant feature of American life, not

just in the southern states. Racial segregation took two distinct forms:

• *De jure* segregation referred to specific laws passed by state and city government which created separate facilities for black Americans.

• *De facto* segregation referred to the provision of separate facilities for black Americans by private organizations or citizens in areas such as housing.

**Legal (*de jure*) racial segregation**

At the national level, the US armed forces were racially segregated. In the US army, separate black American units existed with white American officers. This situation lasted until 1948. In federally administered national parks in southern states, legal segregation in the form of separate catering, camping and hotel accommodation was provided for black Americans.

At state level, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ pervaded nearly all aspects of life. Separate public schools existed for black and white children, not just in the southern states.

However, it was in the former Confederate states where Jim Crow Laws enforcing racial segregation were most pervasive. The state of Alabama, in the heart of the former Confederacy, gives an indication of the divisive way in which race relations were organized. Under Alabama state law at that time, no white female nurses were allowed to nurse in wards or rooms in hospitals where black American men were placed. Also, in railway stations, separate waiting rooms had to be provided for black and white railway travellers. Even on the trains, separate railways carriages had to be provided for black and white passengers.

In the neighbouring state of Georgia, similar restrictions were placed on all black Americans. In restaurants, black and white Americans could not be served with food in the same room. At amateur baseball matches, black and white baseball teams not only could not play each other, but were forbidden from playing near each other’s neighbourhoods. Even public parks were racially segregated, with black and white park areas.

Even outside the former Confederate states, black Americans faced racial discrimination. The mountain state of Wyoming, which called itself ‘The Equality State’, outlawed intermarriage between black and white Americans. In Oklahoma, black Americans suffered discrimination where public recreational facilities, such as fishing, boating and bathing were racially segregated. There were even separate telephone booths.

In addition to legal racial segregation across the USA, black Americans found restrictions on what houses and flats they could buy or rent and which clubs and social organisations they could join. The most popular sports game in the 1930s was baseball. The national professional baseball leagues were all white. There was a separate Negro Baseball League.

**Southern white methods for the exclusion of black voters**

*How were black Southerners disfranchised?*

Southern whites used a variety of methods to exclude black voters:

• White supremacist groups used **violence** to stop black voting.

• **Gerrymandering** by manipulating electoral boundaries.

• **Fraud**, e.g. in Mississippi white voting officials claimed that mules ate ballot papers from black-majority counties.

• **Poll taxes** meant would-be voters had to pay in order to register to vote. This deprived impoverished whites of the vote, but it disproportionately affected black Americans. In Arkansas, 71% of the black electorate voted in 1890, but only 9% voted after a poll tax was introduced.

• **Literacy tests**, e.g. in 1890, Mississippi introduced both literacy and income qualifications. Other Southern states soon followed.

• In 1898, the state of Louisiana sought to assist poor white voters who could not pay the poll tax or pass the literacy test. Louisiana did this through the introduction of ‘**grandfather clauses**’: a man could vote if it were proved that an ancestor had voted before 1867. Other states followed suit. As the vast majority of the South’s black population had been enslaved, grandfather clauses ensured the exclusion of most black voters.

The impact on voter numbers in the South in the 1890s was huge. By 1900, only 3% of black Southern males could vote.

However, in 1915, an NAACP legal challenge to the ‘grandfather clause’ was upheld by the US Supreme Court and it was declared unconstitutional. This was one of the first legal victories achieved by black Americans against Jim Crow Laws.

**The response of the Supreme Court**

*To what extent was the Supreme Court responsible for Jim Crow?*

In 1890, the black American leader, Booker T. Washington, gave the distinct impression. in his Atlanta Compromise speech, that he was willing to accept a racially segregated south. However, his views were not shared by other black Americans. Several cases against the segregation and voting laws of southern state governments were submitted to state and federal courts. However, the US Supreme Court reinforced the new reality of legal segregation and ensured that a segregated society between black and white persisted into the middle of the twentieth century.

*Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)

One of the most important cases to be decided by the US Supreme Court was *Plessy v Ferguson*. The case challenged the Louisiana law of 1890 which demanded ‘separate but equal’ accommodation on railroads for black and non-white people. The Supreme Court ruled that ‘separate but equal’ facilities for blacks and whites on public transportation did not contravene the 14th Amendment of the Constitution. Although provisions were ‘separate’ in the South, they were never ‘equal’ and the Supreme Court did not seek to ensure that they were.

*Plessy v. Ferguson* proved to be a landmark US Supreme Court decision. It supported legal segregation and this remained the Supreme Court view until the 1954 case of *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas*.

*Williams v. Mississippi* (1898)

In *Williams v. Mississippi*, a black defendant challenged his indictment for murder by an all-white jury on the ground that Mississippi unconstitutionally excluded black Americans from juries. Under Mississippi law, jurors had to be qualified voters. Henry Williams challenged the suffrage qualifications in Mississippi’s 1890 constitution, claiming that they had been adopted for purposes of discrimination. The Supreme Court ruled that the 1890 Mississippi state constitution was not discriminatory when it required all voters to pass a literacy test and to pay the poll tax.

Supreme Court rulings such as *Williams* did not initiate or even promote discrimination against black Americans. Rather, the rulings played a confirmatory role. Even if the Supreme Court had ruled other than it did in Williams, there was no way that the federal government could have protected black voters. Northern whites had lost interest in black Americans and even if they had not, the federal government as yet lacked the necessary national bureaucratic apparatus to monitor and enforce any voting rights legislation.

*Cumming v. Richmond County Board of Education* (1899)

Given the obstacles, it is surprising that black litigation against the Jim Crow laws happened as often as it did. J.W. Cumming and his black co-litigants found it very difficult to obtain a lawyer willing to argue their case in the Supreme Court, and other litigants were disheartened by their poverty, the lack of black success in the law courts, and the likelihood of white violence and intimidation. Bravely, Cumming and the other black litigants objected to the fact that a Georgia county had continued to fund a white high school but stopped funding a black one (there were only four black high schools in the whole of the South). The county argued that it was better to concentrate the limited funds available for black education on primary schools, where more black students could be aided. The Supreme Court unanimously rejected a 14th Amendment challenge to this county’s activity as promoting separate and unequal, because the justices deemed inequality reasonable under the circumstances. The court thereby approved segregated schools. As always in the *Plessy* era, much depended upon the justices’ personal views, and their views reflected white attitudes. Northern whites agreed with Southern whites that the Southern black population needed only a limited education. At the all-black Tuskegee Institute, the curriculum focused upon industrial education and avoided academic subjects. President McKinley visited Tuskegee and praised that focus and the school administrators who ‘evidently do not believe in attempting the unattainable’.

*Cumming* was yet another demonstration that the South, with the collusion of a Supreme Court that gave federal sanction to the Jim Crow laws, was able to ignore constitutional amendments.

Summary diagram: The response of the Supreme Court

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| --- | --- |
| **Ruling** | **Support for Jim Crow** |
| *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) | Separate but equal was not against the 14th Amendment |
| *Williams v. Mississippi* (1896) | Literacy tests and poll tax acceptable |
| *Cumming v. Richmond County Board of Education* (1899) | *De jure* school segregation acceptable |

**Black resistance**

*How and with what results did black Americans resist Jim Crow?*

The black response to the deterioration of their condition in the South varied. Most just accepted the situation; others were more proactive and left the South or engaged in some other form of protest.

**Protest versus accommodationism**

In the late nineteenth century, some black leaders thought it better to quietly accommodate oneself to segregation in the South. Accommodationists believed that the best way forward was to accept segregation and make the most of economic opportunities through the development of black educational and vocational skills. The most famous accommodationist was Booker T. Washington. His stance was considered demeaning by members of the black élite, especially in the North, but given the situation in the South, Washington and the accommodationists had little choice. As it was, Southern white supremacists thought he sought too much.

In contrast, other black Americans held meetings, formed equal rights leagues, filed lawsuits to combat discrimination, and boycotted newly segregated public transport in twenty-five states. One of the most vociferous and active of protesters was Ida B. Wells, who gained fame through her opposition to lynching.

**Black reactions to lynching**

Most historians believe the number of lynchings increased after 1877. Between 1880 and 1900, there were 1,678 known lynchings of black Americans, mostly in the South. Lynchings revealed a great deal about race relations. Law enforcement officials, politicians, editors and jurors colluded and/or participated in lynchings and those responsible for the crime were never brought to justice. This suggests widespread support for the act of lynching and demonstrates how black Americans had no legal protection. Those who were lynched were usually accused of rape. Southern whites contended that the end of slavery had allowed the reversion of black males to savagery and made them desirous to demonstrate their social equality through sexual relations with white women. While Southern whites defended lynching as a necessary defence of Southern white women against black rapists (that ‘black rapist’ myth was also used to justify segregation and economic discrimination), lynching was also another means of race control.

** Key term**

**Accommodationists** Those who favoured initial black concentration upon economic improvement rather than upon social, political and legal equality.

Many black organizations hesitated to campaign against lynching. First, they were already on the defensive against accusations of the high black crime rate (the judicial system treated white criminals more leniently so statistics suggested that black criminality was greater than white). Second, such a campaign could get black males killed in the South. However, those black activists who chose to protest against lynching in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century represent, according to the historian Adam Fairclough (2001), ‘the starting point of the modern civil rights struggle — the beginning of the fight back against white supremacy’.

**Urban lynching**

Lynchings usually occurred in rural areas and small towns. The preferred mode of murderous race control in urban areas was the race riot, as in 1906 when black males in Atlanta were reported in the press as being ‘uppity’, which inspired thousands of whites to enter Atlanta’s black district and kill around thirty black Americans.

**Booker T. Washington (1856–1915)**

Born a slave in Virginia, with a black mother and a white father (whom he never knew), Washington became the most well-known leader of Afro-Americans before the First World War. After emancipation, he quickly realized the importance of education and struggled through great poverty to attend college. His commitment and enthusiasm led to him setting up the respected Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, in 1881. It became a model for education linked to vocational training for black students. Later, he helped set up the National Urban League to help black workers adjust to industrial, urban life. He believed that hard work and financial success would weaken discrimination — that there was no racial prejudice in the American dollar. In *Up From Slavery* and his speeches, he urged acceptance that change was a slow process; as in this speech in 1895, which critics called the ‘Atlanta Compromise’:

‘Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the production of our hands … No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities.’

**W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963)**

As a free black man born in the North, Du Bois had a very different life from Washington. After gaining degrees at Fisk (an all black college), at Berlin and from the prestigious Harvard University, he became a lecturer in sociology. Although initially sympathetic to incremental change, by 1900 he was arguing for active resistance to discrimination. He urged the use of legal and political processes through unceasing agitation. He helped to organize the Niagra Conference of 1905, which pledged the militant pursuit of civil rights and helped to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, the most important American civil rights organization of the twentieth century. Du Bois continued to write powerfully against discrimination, particularly through his editorship of the journal *The Crisis*. His frustration at the slow pace of change eventually resulted in him moving to Ghana where he died in 1963.

**Ida B. Wells (1862–1931)**

A journalist and militant campaigner, she too was a founder member of the NAACP. Her writings were particularly directed against lynching after having seen two friends murdered. However, her fierce condemnations led to her being forced out of Memphis by a mob.

Recognizing the power of women’s protests, she encouraged more aggressive demands by women’s and church groups. She travelled to Britain and wrote articles there that were critical of the Southern states. She helped to establish to establish community institutions and local and national organizations that helped both poor and middle-class black. She helped to empower black women by encouraging them to join such organizations. Her favourite strategies of litigation, journalism and organization were adopted by subsequent activists.

Some believed that Washington did more harm than good for his fellow blacks. The Northern black press attacked Washington after the ‘Atlanta Compromise’ speech. One black journalist called him ‘the greatest white man’s nigger in the world’. Tension rose between Washington and the friend who was to become his most bitter rival, W.E.B. Du Bois.

**Who Was Right — Booker T. Washington or Du Bois?**

Du Bois and Washington initially worked together for the repeal of railroad segregation laws in Tennessee and for a New York conference to discuss black voting rights in the South (1904). They sought the same ultimate goal of equality for blacks, but advocated different tactics to achieve it. Why? They had very different backgrounds. Du Bois was born a free man in the North. He experienced relatively little racial prejudice until he attended Fisk, a Southern black university. He gained degrees from Harvard and Berlin, and in 1897 became professor of sociology at Atlanta University. Du Bois typified the élitist Northern black intellectuals, Washington the more pragmatic and lower class Southerners who had to coexist with whites. Washington believed whites would come around to accepting equal rights if blacks were peaceful, reasonable and made it clear they meant whites no harm. He wanted blacks to concentrate on improving their economic position, Du Bois believed that civil rights must be obtained first. He thought that without legal and political equality, economic prosperity could not be attained. Washington favoured ‘separate but equal’ as yet, while Du Bois at this stage sought rapid integration. Washington, frightened by the increasing number of lynchings, felt that Du Bois’ more aggressive approach would only serve to alienate whites. The majority of blacks at the New York Conference supported Washington. In 1905 Du Bois called black leaders to a conference in Buffalo, New York. A racial incident in their Buffalo hotel caused them to move to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls where they established the Niagara Movement. The movement aimed to end inequality. Led by Du Bois, it pointedly excluded Washington. Washington was being superseded as a universally acknowledged black leader. The rivalry between the erstwhile friends became increasingly bitter. Washington employed detectives for protection and he and Du Bois had spies in each other’s camp.

Some blacks felt that divisions among people like Du Bois and Washington were damaging the black cause, but Washington stressed that Northern and Southern states required very different handling. His sharp distinction between racial problems in the North and the South meant that it was difficult to sustain his position as a national black leader. He was excluded by Du Bois from the National Negro Committee, which joined with the Niagara Movement in 1909 to become the most famous black organization of the twentieth century, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP’s declared aims were:

‘to make 11,000,000 Americans physically free from peonage, mentally free from ignorance, politically free from disfranchisement, and socially free from insult.’

Relations between the new organization and Booker T. Washington were not good. The NAACP concentrated on political and legal matters, while Washington helped to establish the National Urban League (1911) to help blacks adjust to urban life and to employment there.

The increasing number of race riots across America worried Du Bois. In Springfield, Illinois, six blacks were killed by a white mob, and around 2,000 more were driven out of Springfield (1908). Events such as the Springfield Riot moved Du Bois toward more confrontational strategies. As editor of the NAACP’s newspaper *The Crisis*, Du Bois publicized riots and lynchings. He also tried to promote racial change through the law courts, all in a manner which Washington considered provocative. Du Bois considered Washington to be a self-seeking political in-fighter and master manipulator.

Washington’s disagreements with Du Bois continued to the bitter end. In 1915, the film *The Birth of a Nation* was a great box-office success. It glorified the Ku Klux Klan. Du Bois and the NAACP called for a boycott of the movie, for which they blamed an upsurge in lynching. However, Washington said the call only gave the movie welcome publicity. He died soon after. By this time, most articulate blacks favoured Du Bois’ social and political activism rather than Washington’s accomodationism. Who do you think was right?

**What was the significance of Washington’s life and career?**

Historians and contemporaries disagree over whether the situation of blacks deteriorated during the lifetime of Booker T. Washington, and whether he contributed to any deterioration by a misguided stance.

There was indeed ‘disappointment’ in the South. After emancipation, blacks had been given political equality, but disfranchisement and social segregation soon followed. Black leaders were divided over how to regain the rights fleetingly held during Reconstruction. Those divisions probably weakened their cause. Du Bois favoured vociferous campaigning for the full restoration of civil rights. Washington preferred to reassure and conciliate whites, while quietly campaigning against segregation and discrimination through the law courts, and stressing economic advancement.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois acknowledged that Washington’s rise to the position of ‘the one recognised spokesman of his 10 million fellows’ was ‘the most striking thing in the history of the American Negro’ since the end of Reconstruction. Du Bois said that while the elements of Washington’s philosophy of ‘industrial education, conciliation of the South, and submission and silence as to civil and political rights’ were not original, Washington welded them into an incredibly influential and coherent programme. Writing in the 1960s, African-American scholar Langston Hughes noted:

“historical and contemporary judgements affirm that Washington was in reality ‘a great accomodator’. But to create Tuskegee in Alabama in that era he could hardly have been otherwise.”

There in perhaps lies a key to any assessment of Washington’s contribution to black advancement: ‘he could hardly have been otherwise.’ His private papers reveal that while he gave whites the impression that he favoured segregation, he secretly financed and directed several court suits against segregation in Southern railroad facilities, wherein blacks were relegated to the worst carriages and rest rooms. He worked similarly against disfranchisement. Given the degree, extent and longevity of white hostility to blacks, ‘accommodationism, probably stood more chance of consolidating black gains in America than confrontation — in his lifetime at least. He had impressed many whites with his achievements and moderation and won important recognition if inconsistent support from presidents and other politicians. He had increased the self-confidence of blacks by demonstrating that a black born in slavery could become a nationally and internationally respected figure, mixing with statesmen and monarchs. He had helped many individual blacks more directly through the Tuskegee Institute, and had encouraged white Southern acceptance of black access to education. His writings and actions artfully, carefully and patiently advertised black and white co-operation. His *Up From Slavery* deliberately avoided any residual bitterness about slavery and emphasized how many whites had helped and befriended him throughout his life. His life and career demonstrated that the situation of black Americans definitely improved after the Civil War.

**How should a black leader behave at the end of the nineteenth century?**



Was it sufficient that Washington

•was a respected leader (the only black leader to dine with President T. Roosevelt and take tea with Queen Victoria)

•gained the financial support of white industrialists

•made the Tuskegee an effective institution for improving the knowledge and skills of hundreds of black students and the communities to which they returned

•subtly raised black pride in work well done

•was pragmatic at a time of violent reaction and white intransigence?

Or should he have

•fought for political change to end discrimination

•used his oratory and organizational skills to encourage the majority black population in the South to react in a more aggressive way

•challenged the segregation laws

•raised the expectations of black people?

The consensus view is that:

• in the circumstances of the time, his behaviour and beliefs were the most appropriate and possibly the only possible stance to take

• self-help may not have been the most dramatic or the quickest route to equality, but at least it did give individuals pride and some economic power.

**Were the years 1890–1915 the ‘decades of disappointment’?**

The early years after the Civil War seemed highly promising for Southern blacks, freed from slavery and supposedly guaranteed the right to vote and equal citizenship. However, during the last years of the nineteenth century, the Jim Crow laws eroded those constitutional rights. From 1880 to 1915, Booker T Washington was the leading black spokesman, but blacks such as Ida B. Wells and W.E.B. Du Bois felt that he was insufficiently assertive with regard to civil rights. For Wells and Du Bois these years were definitely decades of disappointment, but this was probably also the case for Washington, who worked secretly against Jim Crow. On the one hand, Washington had the ear of successive presidents, but on the other, they usually failed to do what he desired. It could be argued that, even in these ‘decades of disappointment’, the foundations were laid for future black advancement. Slowly, blacks were developing and organizing into a pressure group to which some presidents listened. The black situation was certainly far better than it had been under slavery, although, disappointingly, not as good as had seemed likely during Reconstruction.



**The Formation of the NAACP**

Following the race riots in Springfield, Illinois, in August 1908, William Du Bois, Ida Wells and other black activists formed the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) in 1909. It had its own magazine which Du Bois edited until 1934. The aims of the NAACP were ‘to make 11 million Americans physically free from **peonage**, mentally free from ignorance, politically free from disenfranchisement, and socially free from insult.’

In 1915, the NAACP attained its first success through litigation when the Supreme Court ruled against the ‘grandfather clause.’

During the First World War, the NAACP promoted the involvement of black Americans in the US military. It successfully campaigned for black Americans to be commissioned as officers in the army and by the end of 1918, 600 black Americans had gained commissions. More than 350,000 served in segregated units during World War I, mostly as support troops.

By 1919 the NAACP had nearly 90,000 members in 300 branches. The NAACP challenged white supremacy, especially the segregation laws, and made black Americans much more aware of their civil rights, especially the right to vote. The NAACP also campaigned against the practice of lynching in the southern states. It investigated and publicized the number of lynchings. When the film *The Birth of a Nation* came out in 1915 the number of lynchings increased noticeably. The NAACP campaigned against the film and asked people to boycott it.

Although its attempts to secure federal anti-lynching legislation were unsuccessful, the Association’s nationwide and interracial fight against lynching eventually helped reduce the annual number of lynchings in the United States. Despite constant campaigning, the NAACP was unable to pressure any president into introducing civil rights legislation.

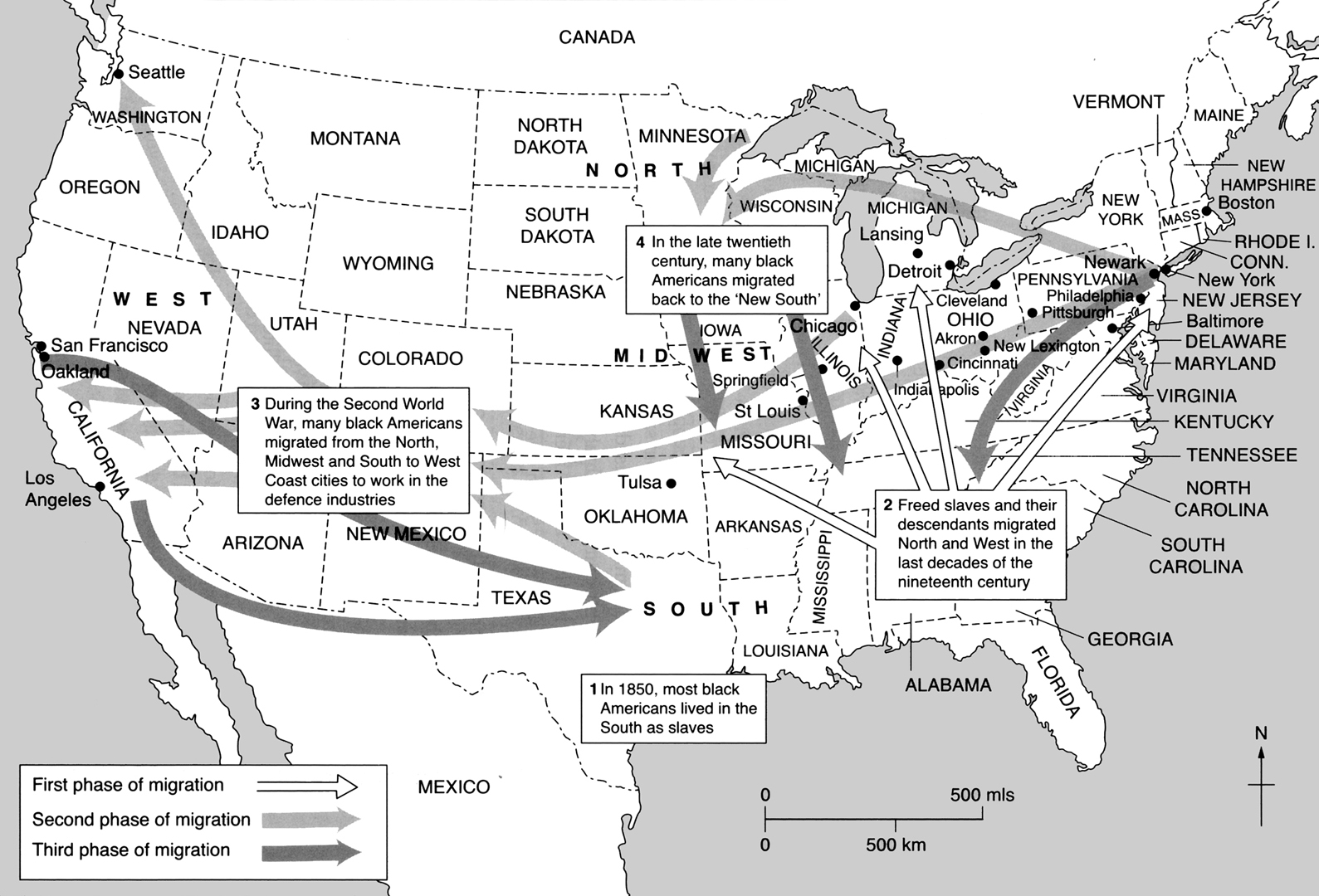
Membership of the NAACP was small at this stage mainly because most black Americans’ existence was defined by securing and keeping a job. In addition, there was virtually no tradition of black Americans being involved in politics.

In 1930, Walter White became the new leader of the NAACP. He was able to raise the profile of the NAACP but anti-lynching bills were rejected by the Senate in 1937 and 1940. Walter White encouraged blacks to challenge discrimination through the courts and he also challenged the unequal funding in education. The NAACP employed the black lawyer Thurgood Marshall to fight against segregation in education and he was able to secure equal salaries for teachers in many states across the country.

During the 1930s, the NAACP also began to focus on economic justice. After years of tension with white labour unions, the Association co-operated with the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations in an effort to win jobs for black Americans. Walter White was a friend and adviser to Eleanor Roosevelt, and he met her several times in attempts to convince President Roosevelt to outlaw job discrimination.

The formation of the NAACP was a turning-point. Under Du Bois’s leadership, *The Crisis* became the leading principal instrument of black opinion. Leadership passed from Booker T. Washington and those who preferred accommodation with the South’s Jim Crow policies, to the militant activists of the North. The NAACP became *the* primary black organization.

**The ‘Great Migration’**

Life was hard in the segregated South. There were limited opportunities for black economic advancement in what was already one of the poorest parts of America. One solution was the ‘Great Migration’. Over 6 million blacks emigrated from the rural South to the great cities of the North, Mid-West and West between 1910 and 1970. In 1910, 89% of blacks lived in the South; by 1970 it was 53%. Some blacks sought labouring jobs in Southern cities. However, the industrial North offered greater economic opportunities, especially as European immigration decreased and World War One (1914–18) generated jobs. Southern blacks flocked to Northern cities like New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and the car-manufacturing centre of Detroit. The overall population of the latter grew by 300% during the period 1910–30, but its black population increased by 2,400%.

A map of the USA showing black migration.

Given that black people could vote in the North, the NAACP argued that ‘the greatest significance of this migration is the increased political power of black men in America’. However, migration to the North brought some problems. The influx of blacks caused the deterioration of race relations in Northern cities where the revived Ku Klux Klan now appeared. Racial prejudice sometimes made it difficult to obtain employment, the cost of living was higher and urban accommodation was often hard to find, crowded and expensive. Northern **ghettos**, such as Harlem in New York, had high rates of tuberculosis and crime. Competition for jobs and housing, along with resentment at increasing black political influence in local elections, led to serious racial violence in many cities. A primarily Southern race relations problem now become a national one. The worst riots were in Chicago (1919) and Tulsa (1921). Nonetheless, urbanization contributed greatly to the increase of black consciousness and a sense of community.

**The impact of the Depression and the New Deal**

The New York stock market crash of 1929 triggered several years of economic depression which had a tremendous impact on black Americans. Two million black farmers and sharecroppers were forced off the land. If they went to the northern cities they found that unemployment among blacks was as high as 60 per cent. There were even white vigilante groups set up to prevent blacks from getting jobs. As unemployment increased whites were forced to take the menial jobs that had previously been taken by blacks and this only worsened the situation for black people.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) became president in 1933, his New Deal proposals aimed to lift the nation out of the economic depression and ameliorate suffering. While the New Deal did not bring radical changes and huge improvements for black Americans, there was some progress. One key change was the inclusion of black Americans in the government. About 50 black Americans served in various branches of the Roosevelt administration — nicknamed the ‘Black Cabinet’. The most famous was Mary McLeod Bethune who was Head of the Negro Affairs Division of the National Youth Administration. She became a prominent figure during the Roosevelt administration. Eleanor Roosevelt, the President’s wife, helped to raise awareness of black problems and was a close friend of Bethune.

The number of black Americans employed by the government rose from 50,000 in 1933 to 200,000 in 1945. The New Deal provided 1 million jobs for black Americans and training for 500,000. The Public Works Administration (PWA) allocated funds for the construction of black hospitals, universities and housing projects. PWA building contracts also contained clauses requiring that the number of blacks hired be at least equal in proportion to the number of blacks in the local population. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and other relief agencies granted aid to 30 per cent of all black American families.

Black people began to shift their voting allegiance. Most had previously supported the Republicans but they now began to support Roosevelt’s Democrats.

However, Roosevelt did little to eliminate unfair hiring practices and discriminatory job conditions and he failed to support anti-lynching bills. Some government agencies such as the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) often refused to hire black workers. The TVA new model town of Norris would not allow blacks to live there. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), not only paid black people lower wages than whites but forced them to live in segregated camps.



Evicted black sharecroppers, 1936

The New Deal’s Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) attempted to raise disastrously low crop prices by authorising the federal government to pay farmers to grow fewer crops. These crop reduction subsidies enabled landlords to dispossess so many black American tenants and sharecroppers that the AAA was often referred to sarcastically as the ‘Negro Removal Act’.

**Impact of the Second World War**

**The Jim Crow army**

The war highlighted the racism and discrimination in the armed forces, especially as the USA was fighting against a racist state, Nazi Germany. Many black Americans enlisted and formed the Jim Crow army. They were aware that they would have to serve in segregated units. It was only towards the end of the war that black servicemen saw much action.

• Black soldiers stationed in Britain were treated far better than back home. In the army, there were black-only units with white officers.

• Before 1944, black soldiers were not allowed into combat in the Marines.

• Black people were employed to transport supplies, or as cooks and labourers.

• Many black women served in the armed forces as nurses but were only allowed to treat black soldiers.

• The US Air Force would not accept black pilots. In each armed service, black Americans performed the menial tasks and found promotion difficult.

• When black soldiers were injured, only blood from black soldiers could be used; many whites felt that to mix blood would ‘mongrelize’ the USA.

Discrimination was worst in the navy, with black soldiers given the most dangerous job of loading ammunition onto ships bound for war zones. For example, in 1944 a horrific accident killed 323 people — most of them black sailors.

• The Tuskegee airmen (332nd Fighter Group — all black Americans) won great acclaim acting as fighter escorts for US bombers.

• The 761st Tank Battalion also won acclaim in the Battle of the Bulge and received praise from General Patton. The battalion’s nickname was the ‘Black Panthers’.

**Progress**



Two black American soldiers pose with ‘Easter eggs for Hitler’ during WWII. Easter Sunday, 1945

However, progress was evident as the US Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower, supported integrated combat units. By the end of 1944, black soldiers were fighting in these units (as seen during the Battle of the Bulge) and there were hundreds of black officers in the army and the Marines. There were also fighter squadrons of black pilots, although they were not allowed to fly in the same groups as whites and by the end of 1945 some 600 black pilots had been trained. By the end of the war, 58 black sailors had risen to the rank of officer.

Desegregation in the navy came in 1946 and the other services in 1948. By 1955, the army had changed from being one of the most segregated organizations in the country to the most successfully integrated.

**Black Americans and employment during the Second World War**



Bertha Stallworth inspecting a 40mm artillery cartridge case at Frankford Arsenal.

As more and more men were conscripted, job opportunities in factories for black American women and older black American men increased. Despite the valuable contribution these people made they were often treated poorly. A newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, created the ‘Double V’ campaign after readers began commenting on the second-class status of black workers during wartime. ‘Double V’ meant victory at home in terms of improved civil rights as well as victory abroad against fascism on the battlefield.

In 1941, A. Philip Randolph, a leading black activist, sought to remove discrimination in the armed forces and the workplace. He organized a March on Washington movement. President Roosevelt feared the possible consequences of the march and met Randolph to discuss the issues. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 which stopped discrimination in industrial and government jobs and also set up the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). The FEPC could not force companies to employ black people, but it could use the threat of withdrawing government contracts to encourage them to do so.

During the war, over 400,000 black Americans migrated from the South to the USA’s industrial centres. The number of black Americans employed in government service rose from 50,000 to 200,000 and by the end of the war there were more than 2 million black Americans involved in industry. The war also meant a broadening of opportunities for black American women. Many became nurses but were only permitted to help black American soldiers.

**What was the impact of the war on the civil rights issue?**

The Second World War period had seen some progress made by black Americans in employment and in the armed forces, and many blacks had become more active in campaigning for civil rights. However, discrimination and segregation remained a way of life in the southern states, whilst the migration of many black Americans to the industrial cities of the North had created greater racial tension.



Military police stand guard outside a shop in Detroit to deter looters.

This increase in racial tension led to race riots in 47 cities. The worst of these was in Detroit in June 1943 when 25 black people and nine white people were killed. More than 700 people were injured and there was $2 million worth of damage to property. In the same year, nine black Americans were killed in riots in Harlem, New York. There were also riots at nine black army training camps, where the soldiers resented their unequal treatment.

Awareness of discrimination and its injustice led to a growth in the membership of the NAACP during the war — from 50,000 to 450,000. Many of the new members were Southern professionals, but there were also many new urban workers.

A new organization called the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was founded by James Farmer in 1942. CORE was inspired by the non-violent tactics of Mahatma Gandhi in India. It used the idea of sit-ins at cinemas and restaurants; this did lead to the end of segregation in some northern cities. There was increased interest in politics in the South among black Americans and the numbers of registered voters rose from 3% to 12% in the years 1940–7.

The issue of civil rights split the Democrats in the 1948 presidential election. Truman wanted to introduce a civil rights bill (which would ban poll taxes) and also proposed an anti-lynching bill which the Dixiecrats (southern Democratic Party politicians) rejected.

**The situation by the end of the 1940s**

President Truman’s ‘Fair Deal’ programme had offered hope, but by the end of the 1940s only modest gains had been made by those seeking improved civil rights. Truman set up a Committee on Civil Rights in 1946, and though it recommended laws to prevent lynching, a permanent commission on civil rights and the prevention of segregation in housing, nothing was done. Republicans and the Dixiecrats continued to block reforms. The most important reform came when the armed forces were desegregated in 1948.

Nevertheless, because of their contribution during the war, black Americans were now better placed to demand their full rights as American citizens. Their plight was constantly recognized by President Truman who made countless speeches and though no new laws were introduced, he did raise the nation’s awareness of the problems of civil rights.

The confidence of the NAACP was sufficiently high by the late 1940s that it felt able to challenge some states about the education of black students. The NAACP was able to show that in some states students in white schools had more money spent on them than students in black schools. This eventually led to the key case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954. There was also some increase in voter registration for black Americans in the 1940s.

Most of these gains seemed irrelevant as yet to the majority of Southern blacks. They watched the increased activism with interest, but rejected militancy, lest it alienate Southern white liberals. However, things would never be the same again. In a war against a racist, Nazi regime, black Americans fought in a segregated American army, frequently led by white officers. As demobilized white servicemen returned, disproportionate numbers of blacks were fired from their wartime jobs. The segregated armed forces damaged the morale of some blacks but increased the incentive for change for others.

**Conclusions**

In 1900 blacks constituted an economic and social under-class throughout America, but particularly in the South where they lacked any political power. Blacks lacked nationally known and recognised organizations and leaders, apart from Booker T. Washington. By 1945 there had been a clear and dramatic increase in black consciousness and activism. Although segregation and political inequality remained in the South, Southern white supremacy was being slowly and painfully eroded by a series of legal decisions. Now black organizations used a combination of co-operation, coercion and confrontation when dealing with whites. The number of significant black leaders was increasing, although they had frequent disagreements over the means to the commonly desired end of greater equality for blacks. All these improvements were due to several factors.

➊ *Important individuals*

The African American situation had improved partly because of the work of individuals, such as Booker T. Washington. A. Philip Randolph, W.E.B. Du Bois, Walter White, Ida Wells and Eleanor Roosevelt. Washington had shown what a black person could achieve. When his achievements, writings and speeches made him the recognized spokesman for his race, he gained access to successive presidents. As time passed, and there was no marked improvement in the position of blacks, leading spokesmen became more militant. However, the early twentieth century was not ready for Du Bois’ calls for greater civil rights activism. Other black leaders preferred to work through organizations, for example Randolph and trade unions, and Walter White and the NAACP.

➋ *NAACP*

It was perhaps the organizations, rather than the individuals, which had the greatest potential to mobilize black people. The NAACP worked with quiet tenacity in the first half of the twentieth century, gaining increased membership and respectability over the years. The NAACP increased the awareness and activism of many blacks.

➌ *American ideals*

Given that white Americans always considered their country the home of freedom, democracy and equality, the position of blacks was inevitably perceived as anomalous.

➍ *External events*

Under the impact of two world wars, blacks moved into the cities where there was greater opportunity for economic gain and for education in political and social inequalities and ways to combat them. The wars and the Depression finally galvanized the federal government into actions that benefited blacks.

➎ *The federal government*

Perhaps the involvement of the federal government was the single most important factor in improving the black situation. While individual states continued to decide the fate of Southern blacks in particular, there was little hope for improvement. However, once the federal government took upon itself clear and consistent responsibility for that improvement, the days of state power would be limited. The increased federal intervention was triggered by the Depression. Federal aid to the poor in the 1930s inevitably meant federal aid to a great many blacks, most of whom were amongst the poorest of Americans.

Thus, due to a combination of factors, the foundations of the great civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century had been laid.

**Summary diagram: comparing 1900 and 1945**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **1900** |  | **1945** |
| Jim Crow in the South |  | Same |
| Discrimination in the North |  | Same |
| Economic opportunities |  | Slow improvement |
| Black consciousness |  | Dramatic increase |
| Black activism |  | Slowly increasing |
| Federal government uninterested |  | Slightly more interested |