

The era of Reconstruction 1865-77

The period after the Civil War saw rapid growth of civil rights for African Americans as a result of the actions of Congress and in the face of opposition from the Southern States. Constitutional amendments indicated that change would be permanent. However, the problems of enforcing political rights were considerable, as the South resorted to violent opposition. By the 1870s, African American rights were being eroded by intimidation, and undermined by poor economic conditions.

The Gilded Age 1875-96

This was a period of economic growth when both the state and the federal governments were concerned with the social and economic impact of industrialisation and the high level of immigration. The impetus turned from reform to expansion. The South was too important as a market and as a source of raw materials for US governments to alienate, and was allowed to impose its own racial policies and restrictions on African American voting rights. Segregation was officially approved by the Supreme Court in the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling of 1896. The political gains of the post war period were largely wiped out as African American participation in political life was severely reduced.

The Progressive era 1896-1920

In this period politicians responded to rapid industrialisation and the resulting social and economic challenges. Governments were more willing to contemplate both social and political reform. However, very little was done for African Americans. The period did see the first major organisation to promote civil rights (the NAACP), although initially this was largely led by white people. Although industrial opportunities led African American workers to migrate northwards, and there were some opportunities in the armed forces, white workers and soldiers resented this. The revival of the Ku Klux Klan in 1915, growing racial tensions and policies of an avowedly segregationist president, Woodrow Wilson, culminated in the racial unrest of the Red Summer in 1919.

The Roaring Twenties 1920-9

As the name suggests, this was a time of economic boom and prosperity. The social changes of the war meant African American rights became more of a national issue than a purely Southern one. The persistence of a high level of social repression in the South (at its most extreme in the form of lynching) showed a reluctance to accept change.

The Depression and the New Deal 1929-41

The collapse of the world economy and the ensuing Great Depression ushered in a period of change; under Roosevelt the government showed an increased willingness to tackle social and economic problems. The lowest paid groups, including African Americans, felt the impact of the Depression most harshly. Although African Americans gained from aspects of the New Deal, there was little political interest in extending their civil rights.

The Second World War and the Cold War 1941-60

This period witnessed considerable changes. The government's initial concern in the early 1940s was victory in the Second World War, which required it to mobilise its domestic resources. This helped to revitalise industry, which had not yet recovered from the Depression. US forces remained segregated throughout the war. However, black troops gained new experience and confidence in the armed forces. Fighting a war against Nazi racism overseas raised the need for change at home.

Civil rights groups grew, there was more mobility between South and North, and greater economic opportunity. The South, however, remained largely opposed to change. The 1950s, with greater prosperity and a more critical outlook, were a key time for change. Conflicts over civil rights became more acute than at any time since the 1860s and 1870s.

Reform and reaction: Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon 1960-74

Some 35 million Americans were still living below the poverty line in the 1960s. Improving the lives of these people became the biggest challenge for the USA, and was part of Kennedy's 'New Frontier' and Johnson's 'Great Society'. As a result, this period was one of significant change, with an ambitious programme of social reform.

The Republican era of the 1950s had been one of social and political conservatism, but Kennedy's election marked a change of mood. This was seen in an intensification of mass civil rights activities led by stronger organisations and new leaders such as Martin Luther King. The shock of Kennedy's assassination led to support for the Civil Rights Act. This passed under Johnson, outlawing discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex, or national origin. However, by then, new demands had arisen from more radical African American leaders and a new radicalism emerged with the Black Power movement. This was a period of great change for African Americans.

Ford, Carter, Reagan and Bush 1974-92

The fall of President Nixon following the Watergate scandal created a period of uncertainty in America. The economy was depressed and under Reagan the position of labour unions declined even further.

African Americans had achieved the political aims that they had been campaigning for, but a new generation found that the more fundamental problems of social and economic inequality had not been tackled. Instead of greater harmony, there was still tension with continuing agitation by radical groups. The police brutality towards African Americans which had seemed part of an earlier era resurfaced in 1992, and is still a major problem.

An overview of civil rights for African Americans in the USA 1865-1990

Tasks

1. Read through each period and highlight in three different colours a) political b) economic and c) social factors impacting on the lives of African-Americans.
2. Use the axis below to create a line graph to track the progress of these factors across the whole period.
3. Annotate the line graph with relevant information at key points
4. Where did African-Americans see most improvement? Why? Was the pace of improvement consistent? Were there turning points? What appeared to be the reasons for these improvements?
5. Where did African-Americans see least improvement? Why? What were the reasons behind their lack of progress in this period?
6. Is it accurate to argue that the Civil Rights Movement was a success in this period? Why or why not?

