



Civil Rights Movement: "Black Power" Era

In A Nutshell

The impressive [March on Washington](#) in the summer of 1963 has been remembered as one of the great successes of the Civil Rights Movement, a glorious high point in which a quarter of a million people-black and white-[gathered at the nation's capital](#) to demonstrate for "freedom now." But for many African Americans, especially those living in inner-city ghettos who discovered that [nonviolent boycotts](#) and [sit-ins](http://www.hunterbear.org/sitin.jpg) did little to alter their daily lives, the great march of 1963 marked only the first stage of a new, more radical phase of the Civil Rights Movement.

Why Should I Care?

You probably just finished reading the first chapter of the Civil Rights Movement. (Hint, hint.) Isn't it incredible how much had been accomplished by civil rights activists from [World War II](#) to the 1963 [March on Washington](#)? Isn't it staggering just how much had been sacrificed, how high the stakes had been raised, and how widespread the movement had become?

Let's quickly review some highlights. By the early 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement had achieved several major goals. Under the direction of captivating leaders such as [A. Philip Randolph](#), [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), [Medgar Evers](#), and [Ella Baker](#), non-violent protest [demonstrations](#) had forced many southern officials, white proprietors, and citizens to accept integration. Legal battles in favor of [desegregation in schools](#) and in [public transportation](#) had been won. And national media [coverage of violence-even murder](#)-directed toward blacks had outraged the American public. A nation that had long turned a blind eye toward the racial injustices crippling the black community in the South grew to support the self-sacrificing civil rights agitators. The non-violent protest movement and the support it galvanized helped usher in a wave of revolutionary federal reforms, including two major acts; the [Civil Rights Act](#), signed July 2, 1964, outlawed segregation and required equal employment opportunity for people of all races, and the [Voting Rights Act](#), signed on 6 August 1965, prohibited all forms of discrimination at the polls.

But do you know what happened just five days after President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law? The [Watts Riots](#), a six-day uprising in the largely black Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles. Yes, a major riot in a California city that left at least 34 people dead, 1,000 people injured, and more than 4,000 citizens arrested.

How can this be? Hadn't everything been going so well? Hadn't the 1963 [March on](#)

[Washington](#) proved that the nation-white and black-had at last come together in peace, with respect and love for one another? Hadn't Johnson's reforms proved that, after over two decades of persistent organized protest, equality had been won?

Not exactly.

Actually, not at all.

At first glance, the [Watts Riots](#) appears to have been one big, violent contradiction, perhaps one of the greatest ironies in American history. At the very height of the Civil Rights Movement, when so much had begun to give way, black communities rebelled, violently and *en masse*, against white authority. In 1965, many Americans, particularly whites, were shocked and dismayed by what appeared to be random acts of civil disobedience, destruction, and looting by blacks in poor neighborhoods.

But the Watts Riots were surprising, not because they happened, but because they hadn't happened much, much sooner. The [violence in Watts](#) revealed frustrations brewing in black communities, especially in inner-city communities in the North and the West where housing and employment discrimination, white flight, and racial bigotry kept people living in poverty.

So, no, equality hadn't been won. In fact, for many African-Americans, equality- especially economic equality-seemed increasingly unattainable.

From this perspective, the second phase of the Civil Rights Movement, a period marked by militancy, calls for "[black power.](#)" and, at times, chaos and confusion, can be better understood. It's not always a clear-cut story, and certainly not a tale with good guys and bad guys-at least not in the way the first chapter of the Civil Rights Movement seems to be. But that's why we think this is such an important topic to dig in to. (So dig, already.)