

EYES ON THE PRIZE

America's Civil Rights Movement

1954-1985

A Blackside Publication

A Study Guide Written by Facing History and Ourselves





Episode 2 focuses on the struggle to enforce federal civil rights legislation across the South. During the first half of the century, the American social system was sharply segregated along color lines. Enacted into law with such Supreme Court rulings as the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case (which

sanctioned segregated seating in railroad cars), this system provided “separate but equal” facilities and services for blacks and whites.

In the 1930s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) formed a legal team to systematically challenge segregation in the nation’s courts.* The team, led first by Charles Houston and later by Thurgood Marshall, believed the best way to attack segregation was to contest the central premise of *Plessy v. Ferguson*—the idea that separate would ever be equal. By the early 1950s, the NAACP focused on segregation in US public schools. In a series of rulings know as *Brown v. Board of Education*, the US Supreme Court declared the doctrine of “separate but equal” unconstitutional. The rulings had widespread implications; activists saw it as the first step toward desegregation, but many white Southerners interpreted it as an infringement on their states’ rights. The ruling’s implications for the particularly sensitive issue of children and education ignited segregationists’ rage and fed their sense of imminent threat.

The episode begins in 1956 when Autherine Lucy, a black woman, enrolled in the all-white University of Alabama. In response to widespread hostility and mob violence, the university board suspended Lucy, ostensibly for her safety, and then later expelled her for challenging the decision in court. The struggle for school desegregation continued in Arkansas. In 1957, the Little Rock Board of Education decided to comply with the Supreme Court decision

* Under the leadership of Harvard University scholar W. E. B. DuBois and the antilynching advocate Ida B. Wells, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was established in 1909. The NAACP’s goals include the promotion of equality and justice in America and the eradication of prejudices among all its citizens. Its charter calls for the protection of the interests and opportunities of citizens of color and for the promotion of progressive policies in the fields of education, housing, and employment. For more information see “NAACP,” at Britannica.com, <http://www.britannica.com/ebc/article-9372942> (accessed April 18, 2006).

1955	
May 31	The Supreme Court issues <i>Brown II</i> proclaiming that districts must “make a prompt and reasonable start towards full compliance with our May 17, 1954 ruling.”
1956	
Feb. 3	Autherine Lucy becomes the first black woman to enroll at the University of Alabama but is soon suspended “for her safety”
1957	
Jan. 11	Martin Luther King and other religious leaders form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to lead the struggle against segregation
Sept. 4	In Arkansas, nine black students are prevented from attending Little Rock Central High School by a mob of neighborhood whites
Sept. 25	President Dwight D. Eisenhower sends federal troops to Little Rock to escort the nine black students into the school and protect them for the rest of the school year
1958	
Sept. 9	President Eisenhower signs into law the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which gave the federal government some power to enforce equal voting rights
1960	
Nov. 8	With a strong black voter base, Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy defeats Republican candidate Richard Nixon
1962	
Sept. 20	James Meredith, a black man, applies for admission to the traditionally all white University of Mississippi, but is met with opposition by school officials
Sept. 30	President John F. Kennedy sends federal troops to intervene on behalf of Meredith, forcing the school administration to allow him to enroll

and admitted nine black students to the prestigious Little Rock Central High School. Governor Orval E. Faubus, courting the segregationist vote for his reelection campaign, responded with a blatantly political decision: in defiance of federal laws, he called in the Arkansas National Guard to stop the “Little Rock Nine” (as the press dubbed the students) from entering the school. In these actions, the governor adopted extreme segregationist rhetoric, and incited a near-riot atmosphere. During the first several days, the black students were forced into the hands of the mob and only narrowly escaped physical harm. In response to the crisis, President Dwight D. Eisenhower called in the 101st Airborne Division to ensure the students’ safety and enforce compliance with the federal ruling.

The episode ends with the story of James Meredith, who successfully used the courts to fight for the right to enroll in the University of Mississippi. Despite on-campus riots, Meredith persevered and became the first black student to attend “Ole Miss” (as the university was known).