FEBRUARY IS AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY MONTH:
50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1964 CIVIL RIGHTS ACT

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was one of the most important pieces of domestic legislation of the post-World War II era. Congressional concern for civil rights lessened after Reconstruction and the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in 1883 to nullify the constitutionality of the Civil Rights Act of 1875. The U.S. Congress did not address the issue again until 1957, when it was under pressure from the modern Civil Rights Movement, and then it was only a feeble attempt to redress civil wrongs. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957 was a modest statute that created the Civil Rights Commission with the authority to investigate civil rights violations; however, it lacked enforcement provisions and it was a weak corrective for voting rights violations.

Congress enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1960, which only slightly reinforced the voting rights provision. However, when it came to addressing civil rights at the federal level, advances had been limited mostly to the judicial branch of the government. The NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund brought forth numerous victories that declared racial discrimination to be unconstitutional when engaged in by government. With the Supreme Court's Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954, the Legal Defense Fund succeeded in overturning Plessy v. Ferguson's doctrine of "separate but equal," which had consequences far beyond educational arenas.

In 1963 the compelling images of the South's racial system of apartheid was made known both in the print and electronic media, as Birmingham, Alabama, steadfastly held to the Old South ways in an attempt to maintain segregation. Images of Eugene "Bull" Connor's use of attack dogs and fire hoses against peaceful civil rights activists, including children, were shown nationally and begged the question: would the American principle of equality and justice for all incorporate black Americans in the nation's southern region?

In May 1963, President John F. Kennedy proposed a new civil rights act that languished in the House of Representatives until Kennedy's assassination (November 22, 1963), when President Lyndon B. Johnson adopted the civil rights agenda as his own commemoration to Kennedy. He enlisted assistance from the NAACP and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. The civil rights legislation passed the U.S. House of Representatives in February 10, 1964. However, it ran into strong opposition in the U.S. Senate, where southern senators mounted a filibuster. Overcoming the filibuster, the act finally won approval in the Senate. President Johnson signed the civil rights act into law on July 2, 1964.

The 1964 Civil Rights Act had eleven main provisions or titles. Several strengthened the Civil Rights Commission and the voting rights provisions of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, including a provision authorizing the U.S. attorney general to sue states that violated voting rights. However, the act's other provisions were far more important. They dealt with discrimination in public accommodations and employment and with discrimination by agencies, both public and private, that received federal funds. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 is among the Civil Rights Movement's most enduring legacies. While the legislation was directed specifically at removing barriers to equal access and opportunity that affected American blacks, it greatly extended the reach of federal protection. It led to a major restructuring of the nation's sense of justice and expanded legal protections to other minority groups. Beneficiaries of the American black struggle for freedom included women, the disabled, gays and lesbians, the elderly, and others who experienced discrimination. However, concerned that the issue of voting rights would defeat the legislation, the president and his allies in Congress deferred action on that matter.

Rarely did whites, northern or southern, capitulate to blacks who sought housing in their communities and neighborhoods.

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