



# Taking on Segregation

## MAIN IDEA

Activism and a series of Supreme Court decisions advanced equal rights for African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Landmark Supreme Court decisions beginning in 1954 have guaranteed civil rights for Americans today.

## Terms & Names

- Thurgood Marshall
- *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*
- Rosa Parks
- Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)
- Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)
- sit-in

## One American's Story

Jo Ann Gibson Robinson drew back in self-defense as the white bus driver raised his hand as if to strike her. “Get up from there!” he shouted. Robinson, laden with Christmas packages, had forgotten the rules and sat down in the front of the bus, which was reserved for whites.

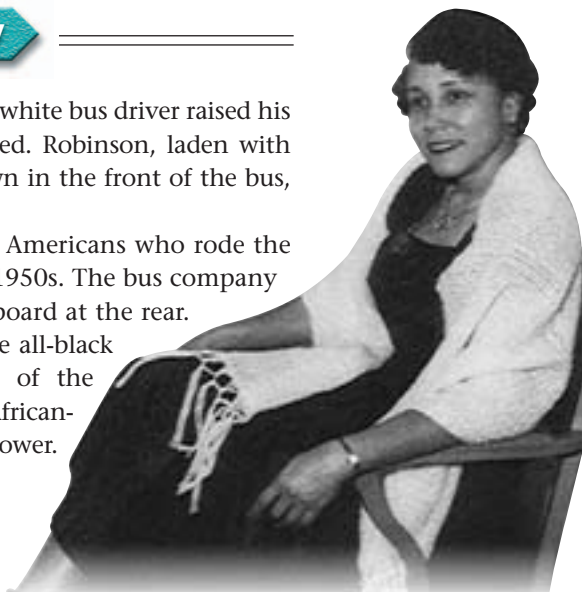
Humiliating incidents were not new to the African Americans who rode the segregated buses of Montgomery, Alabama, in the mid-1950s. The bus company required them to pay at the front and then exit and reboard at the rear. “I felt like a dog,” Robinson later said. A professor at the all-black Alabama State College, Robinson was also president of the Women’s Political Council, a group of professional African-American women determined to increase black political power.

### A PERSONAL VOICE JO ANN GIBSON ROBINSON

“We had members in every elementary, junior high, and senior high school, and in federal, state, and local jobs. Wherever there were more than ten blacks employed, we had a member there. We were prepared to the point that we knew that in a matter of hours, we could corral the whole city.”

—quoted in *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement*

On December 1, 1955, police arrested an African-American woman for refusing to give up her seat on a bus. Robinson promptly sent out a call for all African Americans to boycott Montgomery buses.

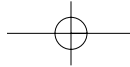


**VIDEO**

**JUSTICE IN  
MONTGOMERY**  
**Jo Ann Gibson  
Robinson and  
the Bus  
Boycott**

## The Segregation System

Segregated buses might never have rolled through the streets of Montgomery if the Civil Rights Act of 1875 had remained in force. This act outlawed segregation in public facilities by decreeing that “all persons . . . shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations . . . of inns, public conveyances on land or water, theaters, and other places of public amusement.” In 1883, however, the all-white Supreme Court declared the act unconstitutional.



**PLESSY V. FERGUSON** During the 1890s, a number of other court decisions and state laws severely limited African-American rights. In 1890, Louisiana passed a law requiring railroads to provide “equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races.” In the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896, the Supreme Court ruled that this “separate but equal” law did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment, which guarantees all Americans equal treatment under the law.

**Background**

See *Plessy v. Ferguson* on page 496.

**MAIN IDEA**

**Analyzing Effects**

**A** What were the effects of the Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*?

Armed with the *Plessy* decision, states throughout the nation, but especially in the South, passed what were known as Jim Crow laws, aimed at separating the races. These laws forbade marriage between blacks and whites and established many other restrictions on social and religious contact between the races. There were separate schools as well as separate streetcars, waiting rooms, railroad coaches, elevators, witness stands, and public restrooms. The facilities provided for blacks were always inferior to those for whites. Nearly every day, African Americans faced humiliating signs that read: “Colored Water”; “No Blacks Allowed”; “Whites Only!” **A**

**SEGREGATION CONTINUES INTO THE 20TH CENTURY**

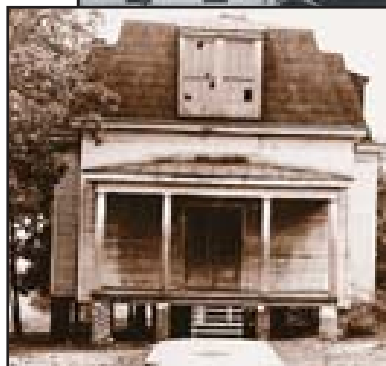
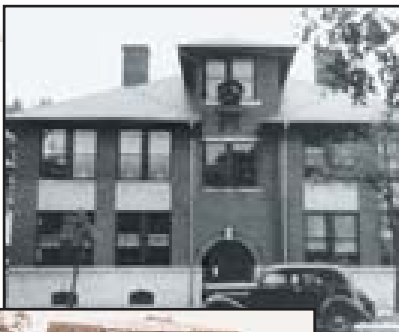
After the Civil War, some African Americans tried to escape Southern racism by moving north. This migration of Southern African Americans speeded up greatly during World War I, as many African-American sharecroppers abandoned farms for the promise of industrial jobs in Northern cities. However, they discovered racial prejudice and segregation there, too. Most could find housing only in all-black neighborhoods. Many white workers also resented the competition for jobs. This sometimes led to violence.

**WORLD STAGE**

**APARTHEID—SEGREGATION IN SOUTH AFRICA**

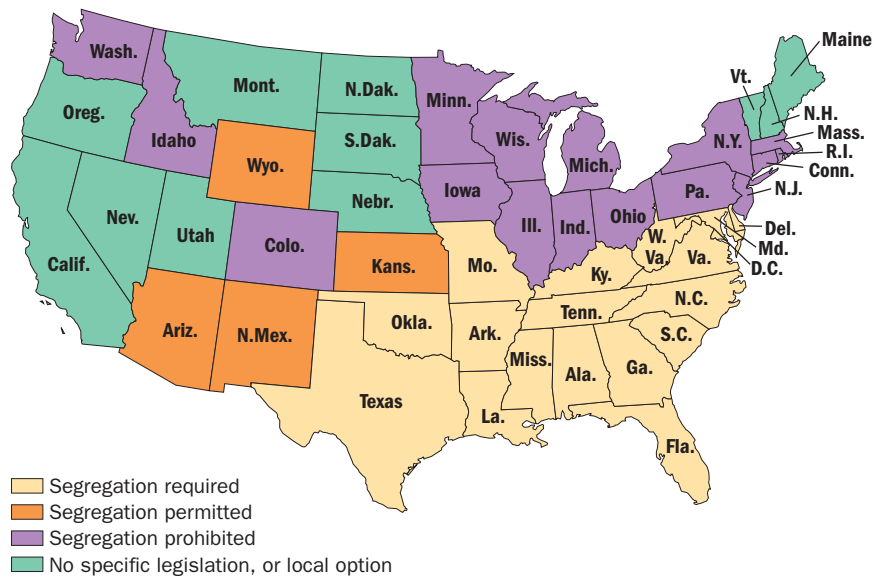
In 1948, the white government of South Africa passed laws to ensure that whites would stay in control of the country. Those laws established a system called apartheid, which means “apartness.” The system divided South Africans into four segregated racial groups—whites, blacks, coloreds of mixed race, and Asians. It restricted what jobs nonwhites could hold, where they could live, and what rights they could exercise. Because of apartheid, the black African majority were denied the right to vote.

In response to worldwide criticism, the South African government gradually repealed the apartheid laws, starting in the late 1970s. In 1994, South Africa held its first all-race election and elected as president Nelson Mandela, a black anti-apartheid leader whom the white government had imprisoned for nearly 30 years.



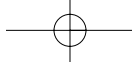
These photos of the public schools for white children (top) and for black children (above) in a Southern town in the 1930s show that separate facilities were often unequal in the segregation era.

**U.S. School Segregation, 1952**



**GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER**

**Region** In which regions were schools segregated by law? In which were segregation expressly prohibited?



**A DEVELOPING CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT** In many ways, the events of World War II set the stage for the civil rights movement. First, the demand for soldiers in the early 1940s created a shortage of white male laborers. That labor shortage opened up new job opportunities for African Americans, Latinos, and white women.

Second, nearly one million African Americans served in the armed forces, which needed so many fighting men that they had to end their discriminatory policies. Such policies had previously kept African Americans from serving in fighting units. Many African-American soldiers returned from the war determined to fight for their own freedom now that they had helped defeat fascist regimes overseas.

Third, during the war, civil rights organizations actively campaigned for African-American voting rights and challenged Jim Crow laws. In response to protests, President Roosevelt issued a presidential directive prohibiting racial discrimination by federal agencies and all companies that were engaged in war work. The groundwork was laid for more organized campaigns to end segregation throughout the United States. **B**

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Developing Historical Perspective

**B** How did events during World War II lay the groundwork for African Americans to fight for civil rights in the 1950s?

### KEY PLAYER



**THURGOOD MARSHALL**  
1908–1993

Thurgood Marshall dedicated his life to fighting racism. His father had labored as a steward at an all-white country club, his mother as a teacher at an all-black school. Marshall himself was denied admission to the University of Maryland Law School because of his race.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy nominated Marshall to the U.S. Court of Appeals. Lyndon Johnson picked Marshall for U.S. solicitor general in 1965 and two years later named him as the first African-American Supreme Court justice. In that role, he remained a strong advocate of civil rights until he retired in 1991.

After Marshall died in 1993, a copy of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was placed beside his casket. On it, an admirer wrote: "You shall always be remembered."

## Challenging Segregation in Court

The desegregation campaign was led largely by the NAACP, which had fought since 1909 to end segregation. One influential figure in this campaign was Charles Hamilton Houston, a brilliant Howard University law professor who also served as chief legal counsel for the NAACP from 1934 to 1938.

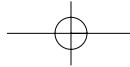
**THE NAACP LEGAL STRATEGY** In deciding the NAACP's legal strategy, Houston focused on the inequality between the separate schools that many states provided. At that time, the nation spent ten times as much money educating a white child as an African-American child. Thus, Houston focused the organization's limited resources on challenging the most glaring inequalities of segregated public education.

In 1938, he placed a team of his best law students under the direction of **Thurgood Marshall**. Over the next 23 years, Marshall and his NAACP lawyers would win 29 out of 32 cases argued before the Supreme Court.

Several of the cases became legal milestones, each chipping away at the segregation platform of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In the 1946 case *Morgan v. Virginia*, the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional those state laws mandating segregated seating on interstate buses. In 1950, the high court ruled in *Sweatt v. Painter* that state law schools must admit black applicants, even if separate black schools exist.

**BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION** Marshall's most stunning victory came on May 17, 1954, in the case known as ***Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka***. (See page 914.) In this case, the father of eight-year-old Linda Brown had charged the board of education of Topeka, Kansas, with violating Linda's rights by denying her admission to an all-white elementary school four blocks from her house. The nearest all-black elementary school was 21 blocks away.

In a landmark verdict, the Supreme Court unanimously struck down segregation in schooling as an unconstitutional violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection


**MAIN IDEA**
**Making Inferences**

**C** How did the *Brown* decision affect schools outside of Topeka?

Clause. Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote that, “[I]n the field of public education, the doctrine of separate but equal has no place.” The *Brown* decision was relevant for some 12 million schoolchildren in 21 states. **C**

## Reaction to the *Brown* Decision

Official reaction to the ruling was mixed. In Kansas and Oklahoma, state officials said they expected segregation to end with little trouble. In Texas the governor promised to comply but warned that plans might “take years” to work out. In Mississippi and Georgia, officials vowed total resistance. Governor Herman Talmadge of Georgia said “The people of Georgia will not comply with the decision of the court. . . . We’re going to do whatever is necessary in Georgia to keep white children in white schools and colored children in colored schools.”

**RESISTANCE TO SCHOOL DESEGREGATION** Within a year, more than 500 school districts had desegregated their classrooms. In Baltimore, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C., black and white students sat side by side for the first time in history. However, in many areas where African Americans were a majority, whites resisted desegregation. In some places, the Ku Klux Klan reappeared and White Citizens Councils boycotted businesses that supported desegregation.

To speed things up, in 1955 the Supreme Court handed down a second ruling, known as *Brown II*, that ordered school desegregation implemented “with all deliberate speed.” Initially President Eisenhower refused to enforce compliance. “The fellow who tries to tell me that you can do these things by force is just plain nuts,” he said. Events in Little Rock, Arkansas, would soon force Eisenhower to go against his personal beliefs.

**CRISIS IN LITTLE ROCK** In 1948, Arkansas had become the first Southern state to admit African Americans to state universities without being required by a court order. By the 1950s, some scout troops and labor unions in Arkansas had quietly ended their Jim Crow practices. Little Rock citizens had elected two men to the school board who publicly backed desegregation—and the school superintendent, Virgil Blossom, began planning for desegregation soon after *Brown*.

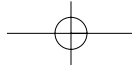
However, Governor Orval Faubus publicly showed support for segregation. In September 1957, he ordered the National Guard to turn away the “Little Rock Nine”—nine African-American students who had volunteered to integrate Little Rock’s Central High School as the first step in Blossom’s plan. A federal judge ordered Faubus to let the students into school.

NAACP members called eight of the students and arranged to drive them to school. They could not reach the ninth student, Elizabeth Eckford, who did not have a phone, and she set out alone. Outside Central High, Eckford faced an abusive crowd. Terrified, the 15-year-old made it to a bus stop where two friendly whites stayed with her. **D**

As white students jeer her and Arkansas National Guards look on, Elizabeth Eckford enters Little Rock Central High School in 1957.


**MAIN IDEA**
**Analyzing Causes**

**D** Why weren’t schools in all regions desegregated immediately after the *Brown II* decision?



The crisis in Little Rock forced Eisenhower to act. He placed the Arkansas National Guard under federal control and ordered a thousand paratroopers into Little Rock. The nation watched the televised coverage of the event. Under the watch of soldiers, the nine African-American teenagers attended class.

But even these soldiers could not protect the students from troublemakers who confronted them in stairways, in the halls, and in the cafeteria. Throughout the year African-American students were regularly harassed by other students. At the end of the year, Faubus shut down Central High rather than let integration continue.

On September 9, 1957, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first civil rights law since Reconstruction. Shepherded by Senator Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas, the law gave the attorney general greater power over school desegregation. It also gave the federal government jurisdiction—or authority—over violations of African-American voting rights. **E**

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Making Inferences

**E** What effect do you think television coverage of the Little Rock incident had on the nation?

### KEY PLAYER

#### ROSA PARKS 1913–

Long before December 1955, Rosa Parks (shown being finger printed) had protested segregation through everyday acts. She refused to use drinking fountains labeled “Colored Only.” When possible, she shunned segregated elevators and climbed stairs instead.

Parks joined the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP in 1943 and became the organization’s secretary. A turning point came for her in the summer of 1955, when she attended a workshop designed to promote integration by giving the students the experience of interracial living.

Returning to Montgomery, Parks was even more determined to fight segregation. As it happened, her act of protest against injustice on the buses inspired a whole community to join her cause.

## The Montgomery Bus Boycott

The face-to-face confrontation at Central High School was not the only showdown over segregation in the mid-1950s. Impatient with the slow pace of change in the courts, African-American activists had begun taking direct action to win the rights promised to them by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. Among those on the frontline of change was Jo Ann Robinson.

**BOYCOTTING SEGREGATION** Four days after the *Brown* decision in May 1954, Robinson wrote a letter to the mayor of Montgomery, Alabama, asking that bus drivers no longer be allowed to force riders in the “colored” section to yield their seats to whites. The mayor refused. Little did he know that in less than a year another African-American woman from Alabama would be at the center of this controversy, and that her name and her words would far outlast segregation.

On December 1, 1955, **Rosa Parks**, a seamstress and an NAACP officer, took a seat in the front row of the “colored” section of a Montgomery bus. As the bus filled up, the driver ordered Parks and three other African-American passengers to empty the row they were occupying so that a white man could sit down without having to sit next to any African Americans. “It was time for someone to stand up—or in my case, sit down,” recalled Parks. “I refused to move.”

As Parks stared out the window, the bus driver said, “If you don’t stand up, I’m going to call the police and have you arrested.” The soft-spoken Parks replied, “You may do that.”

News of Parks’s arrest spread rapidly. Jo Ann Robinson and NAACP leader E. D. Nixon suggested a bus boycott. The leaders of the African-American community, including many ministers, formed the Montgomery Improvement Association to organize the boycott. They elected the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 26-year-old **Martin Luther King, Jr.**, to lead the group. An ordained minister since 1948, King had just earned a Ph.D. degree in theology from Boston University. “Well, I’m not sure I’m the best person for the position,” King confided to Nixon, “but if no one else is going to serve, I’d be glad to try.”





◀ During the bus boycott, Montgomery's black citizens relied on an efficient car pool system that ferried people between more than forty pickup stations like the one shown.

**WALKING FOR JUSTICE** On the night of December 5, 1955, Dr. King made the following declaration to an estimated crowd of between 5,000 and 15,000 people.

**A PERSONAL VOICE** MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

“There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. . . . I want it to be known—that we’re going to work with grim and bold determination—to gain justice on buses in this city. And we are not wrong. . . . If we are wrong—the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong—God Almighty is wrong. . . . If we are wrong—justice is a lie.”

—quoted in *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63*

King’s passionate and eloquent speech brought people to their feet and filled the audience with a sense of mission. African Americans filed a lawsuit and for 381 days refused to ride the buses in Montgomery. In most cases they had to find other means of transportation by organizing car pools or walking long distances. Support came from within the black community—workers donated one-fifth of their weekly salaries—as well as from outside groups like the NAACP, the United Auto Workers, Montgomery’s Jewish community, and sympathetic white southerners. The boycotters remained nonviolent even after a bomb ripped apart King’s home (no one was injured). Finally, in 1956, the Supreme Court outlawed bus segregation. **F**

**MAIN IDEA**

**Synthesizing**

**F** Why was Rosa Parks’s action on December 1, 1955, significant?

## Martin Luther King and the SCLC

The Montgomery bus boycott proved to the world that the African-American community could unite and organize a successful protest movement. It also proved the power of nonviolent resistance, the peaceful refusal to obey unjust laws. Despite threats to his life and family, King urged his followers, “Don’t ever let anyone pull you so low as to hate them.”

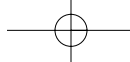
**CHANGING THE WORLD WITH SOUL FORCE** King called his brand of nonviolent resistance “soul force.” He based his ideas on the teachings of several people. From Jesus, he learned to love one’s enemies. From writer Henry David Thoreau he took the concept of civil disobedience—the refusal to obey an unjust law. From labor organizer A. Philip Randolph he learned to organize massive demonstrations. From Mohandas Gandhi, the leader who helped India throw off British rule, he learned to resist oppression without violence. **G**

“We will not hate you,” King said to white racists, “but we cannot . . . obey your unjust laws. . . . We will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And in winning our freedom, we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process.”

**MAIN IDEA**

**Summarizing**

**G** What were the central points of Dr. King’s philosophy?



King held steadfast to his philosophy, even when a wave of racial violence swept through the South after the *Brown* decision. The violence included the 1955 murder of Emmett Till—a 14-year-old African-American boy who had allegedly flirted with a white woman. There were also shootings and beatings, some fatal, of civil rights workers.

**FROM THE GRASSROOTS UP** After the bus boycott ended, King joined with ministers and civil rights leaders in 1957 to found the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)**. Its purpose was “to carry on nonviolent crusades against the evils of second-class citizenship.” Using African-American churches as a base, the SCLC planned to stage protests and demonstrations throughout the South. The leaders hoped to build a movement from the grassroots up and to win the support of ordinary African Americans of all ages. King, president of the SCLC, used the power of his voice and ideas to fuel the movement’s momentum.

The nuts and bolts of organizing the SCLC was handled by its first director, Ella Baker, the granddaughter of slaves. While with the NAACP, Baker had served as national field secretary, traveling over 16,000 miles throughout the South. From

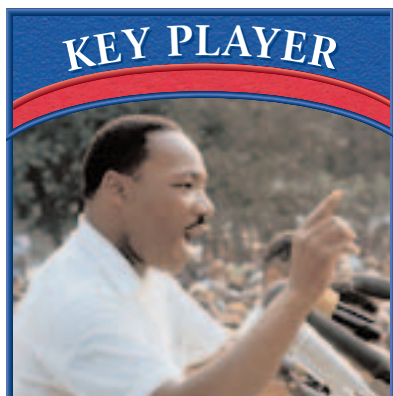
1957 to 1960, Baker used her contacts to set up branches of the SCLC in Southern cities. In April 1960, Baker helped students at Shaw University, an African-American university in Raleigh, North Carolina, to organize a national protest group, the **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee**, or **SNCC**, pronounced “snick” for short.

It had been six years since the *Brown* decision, and many college students viewed the pace of change as too slow. Although these students risked a great deal—losing college scholarships, being expelled from college, being physically harmed—they were determined to challenge the system. SNCC hoped to harness the energy of these student protesters; it would soon create one of the most important student activist movements in the nation’s history. **H**

**MAIN IDEA**

**Evaluating**

**H** What was the role of the SCLC?



**MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.**  
1929–1968

Born Michael Luther King, Jr., King had to adjust to a new name in 1934. In that year, his father—Rev. Michael King, Sr.—returned home from a trip to Europe, where he had toured the site where Martin Luther had begun the Protestant Reformation. Upon his return home, the elder King changed his and his son’s names to Martin.

Like Luther, the younger King became a reformer. In 1964, he won the Nobel peace prize. Yet there was a side of King unknown to most people—his inner battle to overcome his hatred of the white bigots. As a youth, he had once vowed “to hate all white people.” As leader of the civil rights movement, King said all Americans had to be freed: “Negroes from the bonds of segregation and shame, whites from the bonds of bigotry and fear.”

## The Movement Spreads

Although SNCC adopted King’s ideas in part, its members had ideas of their own. Many people called for a more confrontational strategy and set out to reshape the civil rights movement.

**DEMONSTRATING FOR FREEDOM** The founders of SNCC had models to build on. In 1942 in Chicago, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) had staged the first **sit-ins**, in which African-American protesters sat down at segregated lunch counters and refused to leave until they were served. In February 1960, African-American students from North Carolina’s Agricultural and Technical College staged a sit-in at a whites-only lunch counter at a Woolworth’s store in Greensboro. This time, television crews brought coverage of the protest into homes throughout the United States. There was no denying the ugly face of racism. Day after day, news reporters captured the scenes of whites beating, jeering at, and pouring food over students who refused to strike back. The coverage sparked many other sit-ins across the South. Store managers called



◀ Sit-in demonstrators, such as these at a Jackson, Mississippi, lunch counter in 1963, faced intimidation and humiliation from white segregationists.

in the police, raised the price of food, and removed counter seats. But the movement continued and spread to the North. There, students formed picket lines around national chain stores that maintained segregated lunch counters in the South.

By late 1960, students had descended on and desegregated lunch counters in some 48 cities in 11 states. They endured arrests, beatings, suspension from college, and tear gas and fire hoses, but the army of nonviolent students refused to back down. "My mother has always told me that I'm equal to other people," said Ezell Blair, Jr., one of the students who led the first SNCC sit-in in 1960. For the rest of the 1960s, many Americans worked to convince the rest of the country that blacks and whites deserved equal treatment.



## ASSESSMENT

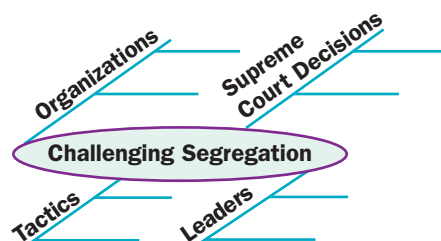
**1. TERMS & NAMES** For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Thurgood Marshall
- *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*
- Rosa Parks
- Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)
- Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)
- sit-in

### MAIN IDEA

#### 2. TAKING NOTES

Fill in a spider diagram like the one below with examples of tactics, organizations, leaders, and Supreme Court decisions of the civil rights movement up to 1960.



### CRITICAL THINKING

#### 3. EVALUATING

Do you think the nonviolence used by civil rights activists was a good tactic? Explain. **Think About:**

- the Montgomery bus boycott
- television coverage of events
- sit-ins

#### 4. CONTRASTING

How did the tactics of the student protesters from SNCC differ from those of the boycotters in Montgomery?

#### 5. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

After the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling, what do you think was the most significant event of the civil rights movement prior to 1960? Why? **Think About:**

- the role of civil rights leaders
- the results of confrontations and boycotts
- the role of grassroots organizations