

### 3f – A Second Revolution

Some historians have called the period of Reconstruction that followed the Civil War the "second American Revolution" and the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments a "second Bill of Rights" for African Americans. The aim of Reconstruction and these amendments was to free Black Americans from White oppression and to give them full citizenship rights in the country they had helped build.

This second revolution would ultimately fail, however, although the scholar and civil rights activist W.E.B. DuBois would call it "a glorious failure." Reconstruction's glory rested in the fact that the rights of African Americans were finally written into the Constitution of the United States. However, these rights largely remained promises on paper only.

The 14th Amendment, ratified in 1868, guaranteed Blacks "equal protection of the laws." But states routinely disregarded the amendment's "equal protection" provision. The Supreme Court itself stripped the law of impact when it ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 that segregated facilities were not by nature unequal, and the system of Jim Crow segregation flourished in the South.

Voting rights were guaranteed to Blacks under the 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870, which said that citizens could not be denied the vote on the basis of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." But states found ways around this law, too, instituting poll taxes, literacy tests and grandfather clauses (which stipulated that a man could vote only if his father or grandfather had voted).

All of these measures were designed to prevent Black men from voting. But because the language of the state laws did not explicitly target African Americans, the courts upheld them. Violence and intimidation were also used to keep Blacks away from the polls, and thus shut them out of the political process.

African Americans' efforts to secure their rights did not die with the unfulfilled promises of Reconstruction, however. Black men and women and their White allies continued to organize and agitate for change, voicing their demand for racial justice in the Black press and forming civil rights organizations of local and national scope, including the Niagara Movement in 1905, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 and the National Urban League in 1911.

The diverse and persistent efforts of many individuals and groups would coalesce in the modern Civil Rights Movement of 1954-1965. During this period, widespread legal action, sit-ins, marches and other nonviolent protests pressured the courts and federal government to enforce the guarantees of the Reconstruction amendments.

In fact, some historians have called the Civil Rights Movement the "second Reconstruction" because it finally realized the promises made to Black Americans after the Civil War.

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court nullified the doctrine of "separate but equal" in its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, restoring the power of the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause. A decade later, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made it illegal to discriminate against Blacks in employment and accommodations and put the last nails in the coffin of Jim Crow.

In 1965, the Voting Rights Act outlawed poll taxes, literacy tests and other discriminatory practices, finally allowing African Americans to fully exercise the right to vote that the 15th Amendment had promised them nearly a century earlier.

The sweeping civil rights changes of the 1950s and '60s were the victories not only of celebrated heroes such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. but of the countless foot soldiers such as Robert Fox who fought the early battles of our nation's civil rights revolution.

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