

Thurgood Marshall and the Path of Civil Rights Court Cases

Put the following quotes from Thurgood Marshall on the board and discuss them with your class. How do they relate to the Civil Rights Movement? Ask students if they know who Thurgood Marshall is.

A child born to a black mother in a state like Mississippi... has exactly the same rights as a white baby born to the wealthiest person in the United States. It's not true, but I challenge anyone to say it is not a goal worth working for.

Sometimes history takes things into its own hands.

Today's Constitution is a realistic document of freedom only because of several corrective amendments. Those amendments speak to a sense of decency and fairness that I and other blacks cherish.

In recognizing the humanity of our fellow beings, we pay ourselves the highest tribute.

None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We got here because somebody—a parent, a teacher, an Ivy League crony or a few nuns—bent down and helped us pick up our boots.

Point out that when we think of the Civil Rights Movement, we tend to think about protest marches, bus boycotts, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream Speech." These are all very important, but one of the key paths to civil rights for African Americans was a series of legal cases, many of them filed with the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and a group of bright young lawyers including Thurgood Marshall. The most important case that Marshall argued before the US Supreme Court was the famous *Brown v. Board of Education*. The court's historic decision overturned "separate but equal" to require school desegregation throughout the country.

Divide your class into groups and have them research online or at the library to find out more about the following:

- The series of important court cases along the road to the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968
- The NAACP and its work in the Civil Rights Movement
- Thurgood Marshall's childhood and education
- Marshall's early career and work as a lawyer with the NAACP
- Marshall's later career, especially as the first black justice on the US Supreme Court

Students will make an annotated timeline of the court cases that can be posted in the classroom. They should also prepare video or other creative oral presentations about several of the most important cases as well as the NAACP and Thurgood Marshall's life to share with the class. Which cases were won? Which were lost? How did the court cases build over time to give civil rights to African Americans?

Here are some links to get you started:

Key Supreme Court Cases for Civil Rights (The Leadership Conference)

<http://www.civilrights.org/judiciary/supreme-court/key-cases.html>

The Supreme Court: Expanding Civil Rights—Landmark Cases (PBS)

<http://www.pbs.org/hwnet/supremecourt/rights/landmark.html>

NAACP: 100 Years of History and Legal History

<http://www.naacp.org/pages/naacp-history>

<http://www.naacp.org/pages/naacp-legal-history>

EXTENSION: Have students research other Civil Rights figures who are less well-known than Martin Luther King Jr. or Rosa Parks and create biographical presentations to share with the class. As African American leaders have pointed out, there were many people who worked hard in the Civil Rights Movement, but students don't always learn about them.