**Definition:** African American from *Good Word Guide*

*African American* is the term now generally applied to Americans of African descent. It has been preferred to *Afro-American* since the late 1980s, when the latter term was judged to have derogatory overtones, and is often used in place of *black*. *Black American* is also widely used today. Equivalent coinages recorded in other countries, such as *African Canadian*, are known but are not yet widely familiar.

**Summary Article:** AFRICAN AMERICANS

From *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*

African Americans are a people whose ancestors are from Africa. Although there are obvious mixtures among African Americans, the dominant ancestry of the people is from Africa. African Americans first used this term to define themselves, but for various reasons they have also used terms such as Negro, Colored, Afro-American, and Black at various times in their history. The most frequently used terms now are *African American* and *Black*, which are used interchangeably. The term *African* by itself is, to a lesser extent, used interchangeably with African American and Black by more culturally conscious African Americans.

Approximately 35 million African Americans reside in the United States, constituting 12.3% of the total population, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. Most of them (88%) live in metropolitan areas. Approximately half of all African Americans live in the South. This entry reviews their history, from slavery through emancipation and ongoing struggles for equity and civil rights.

**African Background**

The majority of the ancestors of African Americans came from areas of West Africa that were home to various social and political formations, from small ethnic groups and city-states to large states and empires. Among these were the states of Ashanti, Benin, Dahomey, and Oyo and the major empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. These latter empires existed from approximately 300 BC to the early 1600s and were defined by their efficient government, great wealth, commitment to education and scholarship, international trade, and strong armies. Songhai, the last of these empires, was conquered in 1596 by forces from North Africa and was in decline when Europe initiated its international traffic in humans variously called the *African slave trade* or—by an increasing number of African American and Continental African scholars—the *Holocaust of African enslavement*.

**Enslavement**

Although the Founding Fathers of the United States spoke and wrote extensively about freedom and human rights, they held Africans as slaves in all thirteen of the British colonies. Moreover, although Africans fought in the War of Independence (1775–1783), it did not change White Americans’ attitudes toward enslavement. Enslavement did, however, begin to decline in the North due to changing economic conditions. It began to grow rapidly in the South with the increase of cotton cultivation and the desire for enslaved labor after the invention of the cotton gin. Sugar plantations in the South also contributed to the demand for enslaved labor.

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It is in this context that the massive violent process called the European slave trade takes root. Some authors have argued that, due to the massive violence, destruction of human life and culture, and interruption of African history, trade is too limited a term and hides the catastrophic impact of the process. They argue that when one considers the massive destruction of human life—in the millions—and the destruction of villages, towns, cities, states, and whole civilizations, as well as great works of art, literature, and the people who made them, trade is not a category capable of defining such a catastrophic event. Thus, some scholars prefer the term Holocaust of African enslavement. By this term is meant “a morally monstrous act of genocide that is not only against the targeted peoples but also a crime against humanity.” In fact, such a definition undergirds the basic modern claim of reparations for African Americans and other Africans—both continental and diasporan.

How the System Worked

The U.S. system of enslavement was defined first by its physical, psychological, and sexual brutality. Physically, it was a violent domination by various forms of punishment and terror, including whipping, mutilation, torture, murder, and deprivation. Psychologically, it involved daily humiliation, coerced protocols of submission, religious and social doctrines of White superiority and Black inferiority, and processes to deculturalize and dehumanize the enslaved Africans. Sexual brutality was imposed mostly on women but also on children and men; it involved both forced breeding and rape. These practices and the system itself were further enforced by law, armed bodies of various official and unofficial kinds, and other institutions.

Resistance to Enslavement

Africans’ resistance to enslavement began in Africa and continued throughout the period of enslavement in the United States in various forms. Cultural resistance involved maintaining cultural views, values, and practice in changed forms and creating new cultural forms that reaffirmed African dignity and humanity and sustained them. Day-to-day resistance was another form of resistance and included strikes, arson, attacks of various kinds on the enslavers, suicide, infanticide, and flight. Abolitionism—various efforts to end enslavement—was another form of resistance and involved petitions to the government, fund-raising, legal defense, educational efforts through writings and lectures, security provisions for formerly enslaved Africans who escaped or were rescued, and the building of an Underground Railroad to free and support resettlement of enslaved Africans. Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Frances Watkins Harper, and Robert Purvis were prominent abolitionist leaders.

Another form of resistance was emigrationism, which involved efforts to return to Africa, Haiti, South America, or elsewhere where Africans could have freedom, self-determination, and justice. Paul Cuffee, Martin Delany, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, James Holly, and Alexander Crummell were very active in this movement. Moreover, the Negro Convention Movement, which was both abolitionist and emigrationist, played an important role in ending enslavement and exploring the possibilities of a free and good life elsewhere.

Finally, Africans also resisted enslavement through armed struggles. This included ship mutinies, guerilla warfare conducted by marooned and independent communities, alliances and common struggles with Native American and Mexican allies from societies to which they escaped, and armed revolts. The most important of the revolts were those led by Gabriel and Nana Prosser in 1800, by Denmark Vesey in 1822, and by Nat Turner in 1831. More than 250 of these revolts are recorded in U.S. history, and they
clearly had a significant impact on the enslaved Africans as well as on their enslavers. Laws were passed, punishments were handed out, and the system was tightened. But the revolts continued, revealing an unquenchable thirst for freedom and a profound political commitment to struggle for it against overwhelming odds by the enslaved Africans.

Freed Africans in the North

Although enslavement gradually disappeared in the North, Africans were not totally free or equal there. Indeed, they were not allowed to worship freely with Whites, did not receive equal justice before the law, and were segregated in housing, education, and other areas of social life. Thus, they began a long struggle to improve their lives and win freedom for their enslaved sisters and brothers in the South. During the early postcolonial period, African Americans began to build major institutions, self-help and benevolent societies, Masonic lodges, and other voluntary associations as well as intellectual and literary societies, medical facilities, and businesses. In addition, several African American newspapers were established, the first of which was the Freedom's Journal, founded in 1827 by John Russworm and Samuel Cornish. The great abolitionist and leader Frederick Douglass also established the North Star in which he, like others, argued forcefully and meticulously against enslavement.

There was also development of a rich body of literature, including novels, plays, short stories, and social commentaries, criticizing enslavement and calling for struggle and the freedom and upliftment of African people. David Walker’s Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World (1829) and Maria Stewart’s Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart (1832) are examples of this literature. Autobiographies by formerly enslaved persons also emerged. Frederick Douglass’s Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1854) and Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) are representative of this genre.

The Civil War Era

Although numerous factors can be cited as causes of the Civil War, the question of enslavement, and thus the future and place of Africans in the United States, was at the core of its causes. African Americans volunteered quickly, but Whites resisted their service, fearing changes in the relationship during and after the war and possible rebellion and armed struggle for their rights. But by the summer of 1862, after a series of military defeats of Union forces, Congress passed the Confiscation and Militia Act to open service up to free and freed Africans in the war effort. In addition, to lend moral weight to the cause and to further inspire and involve Africans in the war effort, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862. It was not a blanket declaration of freedom but rather limited itself to those states in rebellion. Also, it was clearly unenforceable in the South, which was in rebellion, but it gave the war a moral character it previously lacked and contributed to an increase in volunteers among free Africans and those who escaped from enslavement.

Africans, who were eager to fight for freedom, respect, and equality in society, enlisted in large numbers and served in various capacities— as regular soldiers and sailors, guides, scouts, intelligence agents, engineers, nurses, surgeons, chaplains, construction workers, teamsters, cooks, carpenters, miners, farmers, commandos, and recruiters. An estimated 186,000 Africans participated as soldiers and 29,000 participated as sailors, accounting for 25% of U.S. sailors. The real number of participants is probably much higher but was distorted by many racially mixed people being registered or “passing” as Whites. Blacks served in every theater of operations and won seventeen Congressional Medals of Honor on land and four on sea in spite of vicious racism exhibited in treatment, pay and time
differentials, poor equipment, bad medical care, excess fatigue details, and reckless and hasty assignments.

The Civil War ended April 9, 1865. Although it won Blacks new respect, it also meant the beginning of a new struggle to secure economic and political rights that did not come automatically with emancipation. Thus, the nation and the national African American community entered into a period called Reconstruction.

_Reconstruction_

The period of Reconstruction (1865–1877) was a time of great leaps forward and hope as well as of great possibilities to realize the ideals of freedom, justice, and equality for all. But after a strong start, the country failed in solving the problems that the postwar period posed—the problems of Reconstruction. These problems essentially revolved around integrating the freed Africans into the social fabric, especially in the South; protecting them from reenslavement, exploitation, and abuse; and providing them with the economic and political bases to live lives of dignity and decency.

Congress passed three amendments directed toward integration of Blacks into the social fabric on the basis of equality. Essentially, the Thirteenth Amendment (in 1865) freed Africans, the Fourteenth Amendment (in 1868) made them citizens, and the Fifteenth Amendment (in 1870) gave them the right to vote. Congress also passed several civil rights acts to strengthen and enforce the civil rights of Africans and their rightful participation in the body politic.

However, Congress did not give Blacks the economic foundation they needed, and so Blacks were essentially reintegrated back into the southern economy under semienslaved conditions as sharecroppers. Threatened with imprisonment and terror by the new legal Black codes passed by the South and with no protection or land, the majority of freed Africans slowly but inevitably returned to the plantations more or less at the mercy of their employers.

The Reconstruction period did, however, provide some short-lived political gains for African Americans. During this period, twenty-two African Americans served in Congress. Two served in the Senate (Hiram Revels and Blanche K. Bruce, both from Mississippi), and twenty served in the House of Representatives. Under the Hayes–Tilden Compromise, the federal troops that protected African American rights were withdrawn, and the future of African Americans was literally turned over to their former enslavers. Thus, Reconstruction came to a tragic end with the rise of White terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), violent resubordination of African Americans, and the establishment of legal segregation.

_Migrations North_

The worsening situation in the South led to migration from the rural areas to the cities of the Midwest and West and finally of the North. The greatest waves of migrants were to the North so as to escape the political oppression and economic disaster and suffering in the South. The North promised opportunities for jobs in steel mills, railroads, the automobile industry, and meat-packing plants, especially during World War I. Black newspapers, labor scouts, and relatives who had gone ahead encouraged southern African Americans to come north.

However, once in the North, Africans were shut off into ghettos and the racial violence, discrimination, segregation, and inequality persisted. Lynching and race riots were major problems in both the South and North. Also, after World War I, their new jobs were eliminated and the living standards declined. The
Great Depression of 1929 aggravated the situation, but through a system of sharing, bartering, self-help, mutual aid, and (eventually) forms of federal and state relief and public works projects, African Americans demonstrated impressive resiliency and durability.

During the 1920s, in the midst of some of the most difficult times for African American people, African American intellectuals initiated a period of extraordinary aesthetic creativity called the Harlem Renaissance. Producing some of the country’s and the African American community’s best literature, writers, poets, and painters developed a new discourse on the meaning of being both African and American and of having African and southern roots and living a northern ghetto life. They also addressed the expansive meaning of being in oppression and in struggle in various creative ways. Alain Locke spoke and wrote about “the New Negro” as a creative and social conception. Some of the other major names during the Renaissance were Jean Toomer, W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, Zora Neal Houston, and Claude McKay.

Renewed Resistance

The racist violence, discrimination, and disappointment in the North and the continuing oppression in the South gave rise to the formation of organizations and movements to challenge and resist the state of things. The system of segregation established by the Supreme Court decision in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) enshrined in law a doctrine of “separate but equal” that ensured racial inequality and discrimination. Also called Jim Crow, the system limited and denied Africans access to public facilities and established a racial protocol of subordination and subservience for them.

One of the first movements to resist segregation and engage in organized efforts of self-help was the Black Women's Club Movement, which had emerged among African American women during the 1890s. It rose out of African cultural traditions that stressed collective concern and responsibility to family and community, and this led to free Black women and men establishing numerous mutual aid societies during the period of enslavement and afterward. In 1896, the First National Conference of the Colored Women of America convened and established the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) with Mary Church Terrell as its first president. The concerns of the NACW included issues and activities around education, lynching, White sexual abuse and character assassination of Black women, health care, child care and care for orphans and the elderly, job training, and the struggle for social justice.

Within 20 years of its founding, the NACW represented more than 1,000 clubs and 100,000 Black women. Some of the major figures in this movement were Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Anna Julia Cooper, Charlotte Brown, Fannie Barrier Williams, Margaret Murray Washington, and Mary McLeod Bethune. Working within the NACW as its president from 1924 to 1929, Bethune had a vision of a larger and more powerful organization, the National Council of Negro Women, which she organized and founded in 1935.

In addition to the Black Women's Club Movement, the Niagara Movement, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Urban League were very active. The Niagara Movement was formed in 1905 by Du Bois and others to fight against injustice. It demanded the right to justice, the vote, and education; the abolition of Jim Crow; equal treatment in the armed forces; and enforcement of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments. It gave way to the NAACP, which was formed in 1909 by African Americans and White liberals. The NAACP, which absorbed many of the Niagara Movement's members (including Du Bois), adopted much of the movement's philosophy. In fact, Du Bois was the only African American among its original executive officers. However, the
NAACP went on to launch and win effective legal campaigns against lynching and Jim Crowism and to secure the vote. Also, the Urban League was founded in 1911 and dedicated itself to social service programs for jobs, housing, recreation facilities, health clinics, and the like, shunning politics and the social struggles of African Americans. African Americans created institutions to sustain and enhance community life and maintain a decent measure of independence and self-reliance. They established educational, cultural, political, economic, and financial institutions to serve the needs of the community and to participate more effectively in the larger society.

Finally, in the midst of this period, in addition to major women leaders such as Bethune and Wells-Barnett (a writer and social activist), three male leaders were key in helping to shape the vision and activities of the African American community. The first was Booker T. Washington, who is known for building Tuskegee University and whose stress was on agricultural and industrial education, accommodationism, avoidance of political participation, and quiet lobbying and support for causes in the background.

Du Bois was one of the greatest intellectuals in U.S. history and a scholar-activist deeply engaged in the African American struggle for freedom, justice, and equality. As mentioned, he was a founder of both the Niagara Movement and the NAACP and the editor of its magazine, *The Crisis*. He was also a pan-Africanist and a major organizer of the modern Pan-African Movement. In addition, he was Washington's most insistent critic, arguing for political participation, the struggle for civil rights, and advanced education as well as for agricultural and industrial education.

Marcus Garvey was the founder and leader of the largest mass movement of African people in history, involving millions in the United States, Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and elsewhere. His organization was the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Born in Jamaica, he came to the United States in 1916 hoping to see Washington, whose stress on economic foundation and self-reliance was embraced by Garvey. But he believed that Washington should have also stressed building a political base. Both Garvey and Du Bois were pan-Africanists, but Garvey was interested not only in freeing the continent of Africa but also in building a power base there to develop the continent and serve as a source of protection and development for Africans everywhere.

**The New Deal**

The New Deal, under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, held out hope and relief for Blacks through its focus on social welfare and public work programs. Blacks, recognizing the importance of this new focus, shifted dramatically from their traditional Republican voting to support Roosevelt and the Democratic party by 1936. Also, the New Deal marked a significant turning point in Black–White relations for the better. This was due to the continuous struggle of Blacks for equality and the end of discrimination as well as to the humanitarian focus of the administration.

Moreover, Blacks achieved increased respectability in the Roosevelt administration as specialists and advisers in various governmental departments. This marked a change in the Washington model of an unofficial adviser whose relationship with the president, more than his or her skill, fitted him or her for the job. These were highly respected specialists and advisers who were civil servants. They were called the “Black Cabinet” and the “Black Brain Trust” due to their academic and professional achievements. Among the most notable of this brain trust were Robert Weaver, Mary McLeod Bethune, Eugene Jones, Ralph Bunche, and Abram Harris. Although these positions were not Cabinet level, they were a breakthrough in appointment by merit and paved the way for advances during the
The Freedom Movement

The Black Freedom Movement (approximately 1955 to 1975) flowered during the 1960s. This period may also be called the Reaffirmation of the 1960s because it was a time when African Americans reaffirmed both their Africanness and social justice tradition in an intense struggle for freedom, justice, equality, cultural integrity, power over their lives, and a just and good society that offered a context for these goods. The movement left an important legacy of struggle and achievement through expanding the realm of freedom in this country, and it served as an inspiration and model of struggle for human freedom for other oppressed and marginalized peoples and groups in the United States and around the world.

The Civil Rights Movement, although clearly a continuation of African Americans’ ongoing freedom struggle, emerged in the South against segregation as well as in the interest of freedom, justice, dignity, and equal access and opportunity. Its pivotal moment was the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 and the emergence of leaders such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., who became national symbols of the Civil Rights Movement. Also, the boycott, the demonstrations, and cooperative effort became models for other struggles. Clearly, the NAACP's winning the Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education (1954), which outlawed segregation in schools, was an important development in civil rights history and helped to give momentum to the movement. It put an end to Plessy v. Ferguson's “separate but equal” doctrine, reaffirmed the rightness of the struggle, and served as support and encouragement to attack segregation in all areas.

The civil rights struggle was led by major groups, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the NAACP, the National Council of Negro Women, and the Urban League, although countless smaller groups played fundamental, and indeed indispensable, roles in the civil rights struggle. Likewise, major personalities, such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Bob Moses, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Ruby Doris Robinson, Dorothy Height, Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), and Jamil Abdullah al-Amin (Rap Brown), were key to the civil rights struggle, but there were countless less known freedom fighters who also played an indispensable role in the movement.

The Civil Rights Movement employed numerous nonviolent forms of active resistance to segregation and oppression. In addition to boycotts and demonstrations, there were marches, sit-ins, freedom rides to challenge segregationist laws and practices, legal and legislative battles, and economic initiatives of resistance and construction. The Civil Rights Movement had impressive gains in its legal and legislative struggles. These include the 1954 Brown decision, the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the Civil Rights Bill of 1960, the Interstate Commerce Commission ruling in September 1961 against racial segregation on interstate carriers and terminals, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which was the most far-reaching and comprehensive civil rights law passed by Congress), mass voter registration, the Voting Act of 1965, and widespread desegregation of public facilities.

The Black Power Movement

The Black Power Movement from 1965 to 1975 began in the midst of the urban rebellions and the decline of the Civil Rights Movement. Its beginning was marked by the Watts Revolt in 1965, and it continued until 1975. Although the call for Black Power was not made until 1966, its history had already begun during the early 1960s with the resurgence of the Black nationalist sentiment among African
Americans. The movement was influenced by Marcus Garvey, the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, especially its national representative Malcolm X (in 1965), and smaller nationalist organizations in the urban areas of the United States. But it is from the SNCC that the call for Black Power emerged and was embraced nationally as a fundamental focus. Willie Ricks (Mukasa) first made the direct call on an SNCC march, but it was Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) who raised it to a national battle cry. And it was Ture and Charles Hamilton who wrote the essential book on Black Power titled *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. In their book, Ture and Hamilton stressed the need for Black power to overcome racist oppression, making a clear distinction between individual acts of discrimination and racism as an institutional arrangement.

In 1966, Adam Clayton Powell called a group of leaders to plan a series of National Black Power Conferences to develop and carry out an agenda to achieve Black Power in the United States. The meeting established a Continuations Committee to organize the conferences. Nathan Wright of Newark, New Jersey, was elected chair, and Maulana Karenga of Los Angeles was elected vice chair. The second conference was held in Newark in 1967, and the third was held in Philadelphia in 1968. Komozi Woodard reported that although Wright was the leader of the National Black Power Conference Continuations Committee, by 1968 Karenga was its chief organizer and theoretician. Karenga asserted that the struggle for Black Power had three fundamental goals: self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense. To elaborate, he meant that Black people (a) should control their communities, destiny, and daily lives through institutional strength; (b) should be culturally grounded with a sense of expanded self-worth and ability rooted in culture and struggle; and (c) should be able to exercise their right to defend themselves against attacks of racism, especially by the police, “by any means necessary,” as Malcolm said. During the Black Power conferences, Karenga also introduced the concept of operational unity, which he defined as “unity in diversity and unity without uniformity”; this became a standard reference and call to unity in the Black Liberation Movement.

As the Black Power Movement developed its conference process, it also engaged in electoral politics and embraced and nurtured the Black Arts Movement, the Black Studies Movement, and the Black Student Movement. It helped to inspire and build Black United Fronts, the Modern Black Convention Movement, the National Black Assembly, the Congress of African Peoples, and the African Liberation Support Committee.

The Black Power Movement also launched a massive political and cultural education process linking the African American struggle with Continental African and Third World liberation struggles and introduced the concept and practice of armed struggle in the urban centers. As an expression of nationalism, the Black Power Movement can be divided into three basic tendencies or thrusts—religious, cultural, and political—represented by major groups such as the Nation of Islam and the Shrine of the Black Madonna; Us and the East; and the Republic of New Africa and the Black Panther Party, respectively. However, the Nation of Islam and Us had elements of each of these.
The 1970s

The decline of the Black Freedom Movement ushered in an era of retrenchment and resurging racism and a countermove in the African American community to resist this and continue to push forward. The Black Freedom Movement had declined partly of its own initiative but also due to the massive suppression by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) launched against the movement to “discredit, disrupt, destroy, and otherwise neutralize” all real and potentially threatening leadership and organizations. This included groups such as the Nation of Islam, the Black Panthers, Us, the CORE, the SNCC, the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), and leaders as moderate as Martin Luther King, Jr. From this, violent internecine struggles were provoked; activists were shot and murdered, put in prison on trumped-up charges, or driven into exile; and families as well as organizations were disrupted and destroyed.

The violence and shock of the suppression destroyed morale, provoked both critical and uncritical reassessment, and made many wonder whether organized activism was any longer a valid strategy for social change. Much of what passed as a critical assessment of the 1960s was in fact Black self-condemnation and reflected both a loss of heart and vision of what the 1960s decade was all about and certainly what was achieved. The 1960s represented one of the most important decades in Black history, and its achievements were substantial. Even though Blacks lost ground during the 1970s, they also made gains.

Easily the greatest gains of African Americans during the 1970s were their penetration and victories in electoral politics. Taking advantage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Blacks went to the polls in great numbers, especially in the South. Whereas in 1966 there were only six Blacks in Congress, ninety-seven Blacks in state legislatures, and no Black mayors, by 1976 eighteen Blacks had been elected to Congress and several hundred had been elected to state legislatures. Lieutenant governors in California...
and Colorado were Black, as were mayors of several major cities, including Los Angeles, Atlanta, Washington, Newark, and Cleveland. Moreover, thousands of Blacks had been elected to other state and local offices.

Also, Blacks sought to build national independent power structures throughout the decade, beginning in 1972 with the first National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, the formation of the Black political agenda, and the National Black Assembly for collective planning and strategy directed toward social policy and social change. The 1970s also brought a resurgence of pan-Africanism and the formation of two key organizations to advance its principles and practice: the African Liberation Support Committee, dedicated to supporting liberation struggles on the continent of Africa, and TransAfrica, an African American lobby for Africa and the Caribbean.

Affirmative action was another major issue and struggle during the 1970s. Growing out of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it was extended and reinforced by executive orders and the Equal Employment Opportunities Act of 1972. Although a number of court cases challenged affirmative action, terming it “reverse discrimination,” no case was as well known as the Bakke case, which originated in California as opposition to the special admissions policy of the medical school at the University of California, Davis. The Bakke case brought to a head the struggle over the questions of numerical goals versus quotas, preferential treatment versus corrective measures for historical injustices, and racially weighted criteria versus race-conscious criteria for school admissions as well as employment. The Supreme Court seemed to straddle and ruled in 1978 that reservation of places for people of color and uncompetitive evaluation was prohibited but that consideration of race and ethnic origin as one criterion for selection as well as consciously seeking diversity was permissible.

**The 1980s and 1990s**

The 1980s began with the challenges to African Americans of continuing struggle to rebuild a Black mass movement and appropriate alliances and coalitions so as to defend Black gains, win new ones, and minimize losses. In this context, there were increased efforts to build united fronts to maximize strength and cooperation. In this way, the Black Leadership Forum, made up of approximately sixteen national organizations and the Congressional Black Caucus, was created. This was a means to gather; to get briefings on the latest governmental policies, decisions, and proposals; and to discuss possible defensive and development strategies.

The 1980s also witnessed a heightened level of electoral/political activity among African Americans. In Chicago, Harold Washington waged a brilliant campaign to become mayor. He put together a coalition of Blacks, Latinos, workers, professionals, nationalists, White liberals, and leftists to achieve his victory. Jesse Jackson ran for U.S. president in 1984 and 1988, mobilizing and registering millions of voters, and this was instrumental in getting other Blacks and progressives elected. Although Jackson himself did not win office, his campaigns were seen as an important tool in mobilizing, organizing, and politically educating Blacks and progressives and in building the Rainbow Coalition for the inauguration of a new progressive politics.

The 1990s featured carryover problems from the 1980s that required sober assessment. Among these problems were (a) an increasing negative attitude of the Supreme Court toward racial justice and affirmative action, (b) a continuation of hate crimes against African Americans (which tripled in the seven years from 1983 to 1990), (c) a veto and later passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1991, and (d) an increase in poverty among Blacks and in the country as a whole.

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The 1990s also began with a revolt in Los Angeles in April 1992 that grew out of smoldering resentment of oppression in the Black and Latino communities. But it was triggered by the acquittal of four White Los Angeles policemen who brutally beat a Black man, Rodney King, while he was on the ground and incapacitated. The rebellion was the most destructive in recent U.S. history, leading to the loss of 58 lives and millions of dollars in property. King became a symbol of police brutality, and the rebellion became a reminder of the injustice faced by Black people. It also had a Latino dimension and reflected similar injustices that are suffered by them and that they too will dare to struggle to correct.

Clearly, one of the most impressive and memorable events during the 1990s was the Million Man March/Day of Absence (MMM/DOA). The MMM/DOA was clearly an event of major importance not only because of the vast numbers of its participants but also because of its social policy and social practice emphasis and the effect it had on Black men, Black people in general, and the country. Called for by Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam, the MMM/DOA was a joint project of hundreds of organizations and was one of the most massive organizing efforts for a demonstration in the history of the country. It brought together Africans from all over the country and world and from all spiritual traditions through the efforts of local organizing committees in more than 300 cities. Held in Washington, D.C., on October 16, 1995, it assembled more than 1 million persons and was the largest demonstration in the city’s history.

The MMM/DOA was directed first and foremost as a call to Black men, although women also participated and attended. A second aspect of the project was the Day of Absence in which women would take the lead in organizing the communities to stay away from businesses, school, and work in support and observance, to register people to vote, and to hold teach-ins around social policy initiatives to improve and empower the community.

The mission statement represented the collective position of the leadership of the march, a broad-based group representing various political, religious, and economic affiliations and interests. Maulana Karenga was selected to draft the collective mission statement, pulling together the common grounds for a joint set of policies and initiatives directed toward the community, government, and corporations.

The statement began by registering consciousness “of the critical juncture in which we live and the challenges it poses for us” and “concern about increasing racism and continuing commitment to White supremacy in this country, the deteriorating social conditions, degradation of the environment, and the impact of these on our community, the larger society, and the world.” Moreover, the mission statement noted that African men and women came to the capital “reaffirming the best values of our social justice tradition which require respect for the dignity and rights of the human person, economic justice, meaningful political participation, shared power, cultural integrity, mutual respect for all peoples, and uncompromising resistance to social forces and structures which deny or limit these.” In this spirit, they also came to “declare our commitment to assume a new and expanded responsibility in the struggle to build and sustain a free and empowered community, a just society, and a better world.”

The MMM/DOA was followed by the Million Woman March (MWM) on October 25, 1997, and the Million Youth Marches (MYMs) in 1998, building on and expanding themes from the MMM/DOA. These included unity, family and community building and strengthening, pan-Africanism, education, reparations, human rights, and struggle. The MWM included more than 2 million persons from around the world and specifically stressed issues of sisterhood, child and elder care, human rights, and honoring African women’s tradition of social activism.
In conclusion, the history of African Americans in the United States from the beginning has been a struggle for freedom, justice, equality, and power over their destiny and daily lives. It has been a history of rising from catastrophic oppression to achieve impressive gains against overwhelming odds and of struggling relentlessly to expand the realm of human freedom and human flourishing in the United States and the world.

See
Appendix A

See also
Abolitionism: The Movement; Affirmative Action in the Workplace; African American Studies; African American Women and Work; Back to Africa Movement; Black Bourgeoisie; Black Cinema; Black Nationalism; Black Panther Party; Black Power; Congress of Racial Equality (CORE); Ghetto; Jim Crow; Ku Klux Klan; Lynching; Military and Race; Nation of Islam; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); Racial Profiling; School Desegregation; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); Underclass; Urban League; Voting Rights; Washington, Harold; White Supremacy Movement

Further Readings

Maulana Karenga

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

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Chicago

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