

Birth of the Civil Rights Movement, 1941-1954

By National Park Service, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.08.17

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A photo of the Zoot Suit Riots on June 7, 1943, in Los Angeles, California. Thousands of policemen, soldiers, sailors and marines roamed the streets of L.A. They were looking for Mexican-American youths wearing zoot suits. They stopped this streetcar during their search. Crowds jammed downtown streets to watch the servicemen tear clothing off the zoot suiters they caught. The mob considered the zoot suiters to be "unpatriotic" and "hoodlums" during World War II. AP Photo

World War II lasted from 1939 to 1945. Most of the world's countries fought in the war. The United States, and the world, were deeply changed. During and after the war, African-Americans were able to fight for better rights.

The South at the time was segregated. This meant that blacks and whites had to live separately. They could not sit together in restaurants. They drank from different drinking fountains. Black and white children went to different schools. Even in the North, black people were treated very unfairly. During World War II, many African-Americans fought for the U.S. In the Army, they were not allowed to be alongside white soldiers.

The war also created new jobs. Factories started making planes and weapons for the Army, but needed more workers. Women were able to get hired for the first time. Until then, most women had to stay at home. After the war, some women kept on working. Many Native Americans also went to work in wartime factories or in the Army.

Many groups were discriminated against

African-Americans and Latinos were still not being hired. They began demanding their fair share of jobs. They also asked for segregation in the Army to end. Eventually, President Franklin D. Roosevelt listened. He ordered weapons-makers to start hiring people no matter their race.

Even with the order, discrimination still existed. Banks would not give loans to many African-Americans. Without loans, black families could not own homes. Most Chinese were not allowed to move into the U.S. until 1943. Native Americans could not vote in six states.

Government starts to make changes

During World War II, America was at war with Japan. Americans worried that their Japanese neighbors would help the enemy. Thousands of Japanese-Americans were sent to camps. In these camps, they were isolated from the rest of the country.

Many groups helped fight for the rights of African-Americans. The government started feeling the pressure. In 1948, President Harry S. Truman said black and white Americans should serve in the Army together. In 1954, the highest U.S. court also made an important decision. It decided that black and white children should be in the same schools. Some say this is when the civil rights movement was born.