Your notes

GCSE History: revision notes

The USA, 1954–75: conflict at home and abroad

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The civil rights movement, 1954–60

- In the South, **Jim Crow laws** enforced **segregation**, which the Supreme Court had allowed as 'separate but equal' in Plessy v Ferguson (1896). Literacy tests and poll taxes stopped most black people voting, and the Ku Klux Klan used violence. The **NAACP** (1909) and CORE (1942) campaigned for change.
- Brown v Board of Education (1954) ruled school **segregation** unconstitutional. The murder of Emmett Till (1955) shocked the nation. The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–56), after Rosa Parks' arrest, made Martin Luther King a leader and ended with the Supreme Court ruling bus **segregation** illegal (Browder v Gayle, 1956).
- At Little Rock (1957), President Eisenhower sent troops to protect nine black students at a white school. The Civil Rights Act (1957) was a small step to protect voting rights.

Protest, progress and radicalism, 1960–75

- **Sit-ins** began at Greensboro (1960), and students formed SNCC. The Freedom Rides (1961) tested bus desegregation. James Meredith enrolled at the University of Mississippi (1962).
- In Birmingham (1963), police used fire hoses and dogs on peaceful protesters, including children. The March on Washington (August 1963) heard King's 'I have a dream' speech. The Civil Rights Act (1964) banned **segregation**, Freedom Summer (1964) registered voters, and after the Selma marches (1965), the Voting Rights Act (1965) was passed.

- Malcolm X (Nation of Islam) rejected non-violence and integration, and was assassinated in February 1965. **Black Power** (Stokely Carmichael, 1966) stressed black pride and self-reliance. The Black Panthers were founded in 1966. There were riots in cities such as Watts (1965) and Detroit (1967). King was assassinated in April 1968, and the Civil Rights Act (1968) banned discrimination in housing.

US involvement in Vietnam, 1954–68

- Reasons: containment and the **domino theory**. After the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu (1954), the Geneva Accords divided Vietnam, and the USA backed Ngo Dinh Diem's government in the South.
- Kennedy sent military advisers. After the Gulf of Tonkin incident (August 1964), Congress passed a resolution giving Johnson power to take military action. Operation Rolling Thunder, bombing the North, began in 1965, and the first US combat troops landed at Da Nang in March 1965.
- US tactics included search and destroy missions, napalm and Agent Orange. The Viet Cong used guerrilla tactics and supplies from the Ho Chi Minh Trail.
- The **Tet Offensive** (January 1968) was a military defeat for the Viet Cong, but a turning point in American opinion. The My Lai Massacre (March 1968) later shocked the public.

The end of the war, 1969–75

- Nixon's policy of **Vietnamisation** handed the fighting to South Vietnamese forces as US troops withdrew, but he also bombed and invaded Cambodia (1970) and Laos (1971). At Kent State University (May 1970), the National Guard shot dead four students at an anti-war protest.
- Opposition grew: students and anti-war protests, draft-card burning, TV coverage (the 'living room war'), veterans' protests and the Pentagon Papers (1971).
- The Paris Peace Accords (January 1973) ended US involvement. Saigon fell to North Vietnam in April 1975.
- The USA failed because of guerrilla tactics, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Chinese and Soviet support for the North, weak South Vietnamese governments, US tactics that turned villagers against them, low morale, and the loss of support at home.

Key terms

Segregation	Keeping people of different races apart.
Jim Crow laws	Laws in the Southern states that enforced segregation.
NAACP	The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a civil rights organisation.
Sit-in	A protest where people occupy seats and refuse to leave.
Black Power	A movement stressing black pride, self-reliance and self-defence.

Your notes

Domino theory	The idea that if one country fell to communism, its neighbours would follow.
Guerrilla warfare	Fighting in small groups using surprise attacks.
Tet Offensive	The Viet Cong attacks of January 1968 that turned US opinion against the war.
Vietnamisation	Nixon's policy of handing the fighting over to South Vietnamese forces.

Your notes

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What did Plessy v Ferguson (1896) allow?
2. Why did the murder of Emmett Till (1955) matter?
3. Why did Eisenhower send troops to Little Rock in 1957?
4. What was the Greensboro sit-in (1960)?
5. What were the Freedom Rides (1961)?
6. What happened in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963?
7. What did Black Power emphasise?
8. What was the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (1964)?

Answers

1. 'Separate but equal' segregation
2. It shocked the nation and inspired civil rights activists
3. To protect nine black students attending a white school
4. Black students sat at a whites-only lunch counter and refused to leave
5. Mixed groups travelling on buses to test desegregation in the South
6. Police used fire hoses and dogs on peaceful protesters, including children
7. Black pride and self-reliance, and self-defence if necessary
8. It gave the President power to take military action in Vietnam

What to do next

Practise 13 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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