

**ACTIVITY**

**11**

**Document-Based Questions**  
**The Civil Rights Movement**

**Document-Based Essay**

**Part A**

**DIRECTIONS** Analyze the following documents. Use the documents and your knowledge of American history to answer the questions that follow each document. Your answers will help you to write a short essay related to the documents.

**Document 1**

*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896)

We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff's argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it.

—Justice Henry Brown, writing for the majority

(I)n view of the constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful. The law regards man as man, and takes no account of his surroundings or of his color when his civil rights as guaranteed by the supreme law of the land are involved. . . .

In my opinion, the judgment this day rendered will, in time, prove to be quite as pernicious (very bad) as the decision made by this tribunal in the *Dred Scott Case*.

—Justice John Marshall Harlan, writing in dissent

**1a.** Why does the majority opinion maintain that the “Jim Crow law” that forbade Homer Plessy from riding in a “whites only” rail car is constitutional?

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**1b.** According to Harlan, *Plessy v. Ferguson* would someday be viewed as a bad decision on the part of the Supreme Court. Was he correct? Explain your answer.

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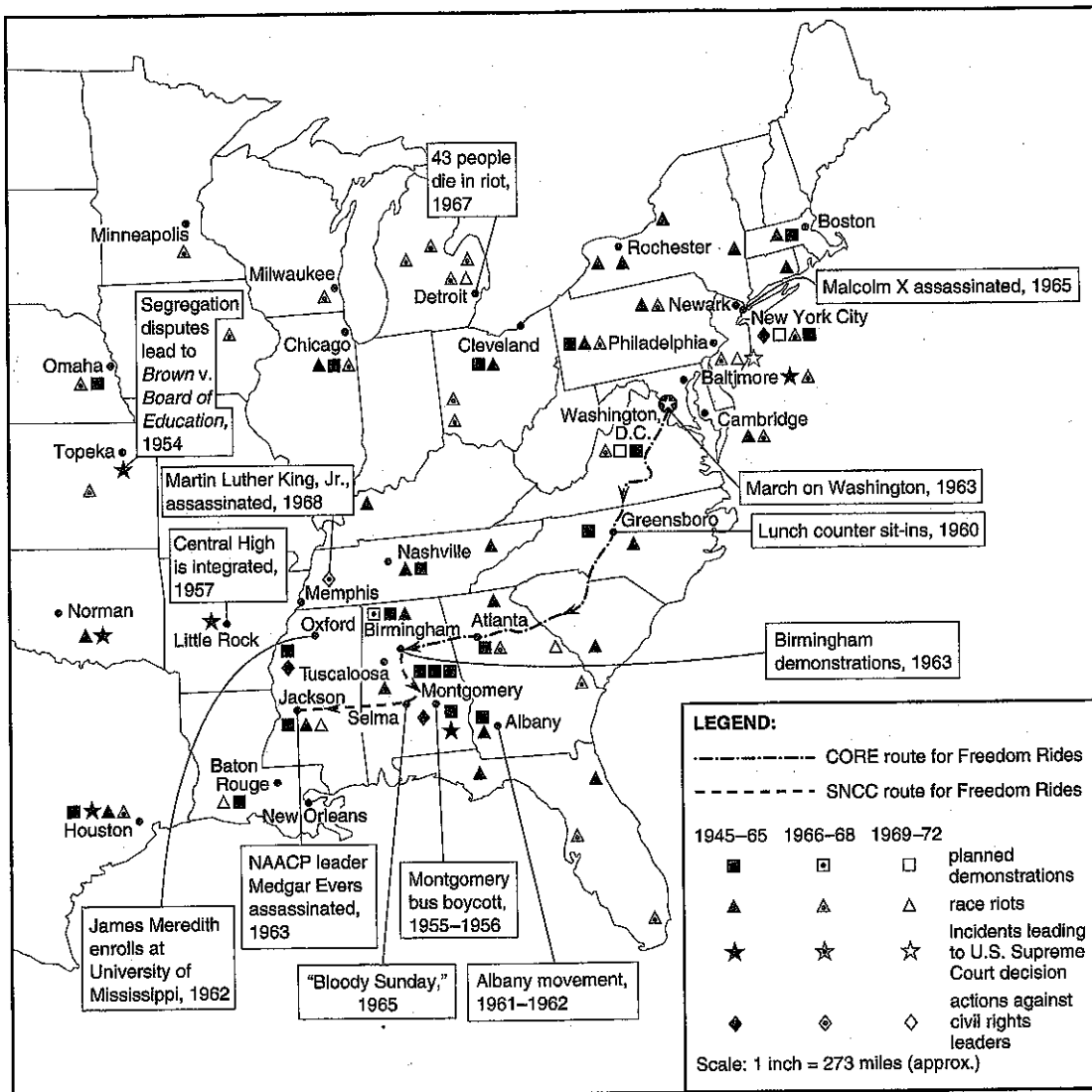


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**Activity 11, The Civil Rights Movement, continued**

**Document 2**

**THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1945-1972**



**2a.** What region of the country had the most activity with regard to civil rights activity?

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**2b.** When was Martin Luther King Jr. assassinated? In what city did it occur?

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**Activity 11, The Civil Rights Movement, continued**

**Document 3**

*Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. . . . In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.

We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other “tangible” factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does. . . .

Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racially integrated school system. . . .

We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of “separate but equal” has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

—Chief Justice Earl Warren, writing for a unanimous Court

**3a.** Why does the court’s opinion maintain that segregated schools are “inherently unequal”?

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**3b.** According to the court’s opinion, what is the most important thing that state and local governments do?

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**Activity 11, The Civil Rights Movement, continued**

**Document 4**

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. . . .

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was "well timed," according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the words [sic] "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

—Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.,  
*Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (April 16, 1963)

**4a.** What does King hope to accomplish by "direct action"?

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**4b.** According to King, what would happen if he gave up direct action?

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**Activity 11, The Civil Rights Movement, continued**

**Document 5**

This afternoon, following a series of threats and defiant statements, the presence of Alabama National Guardsmen was required on the University of Alabama to carry out the final and unequivocal order of the United States District Court of the Northern District of Alabama. That order called for the admission of two clearly qualified young Alabama residents who happened to have been born Negro. . . .

We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.

The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who will represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?

One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression. And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free. . . .

Next week I shall ask the Congress of the United States to act, to make a commitment it has not fully made in this century to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law.

—President John F. Kennedy (June 11, 1963)

**5a.** Did President Kennedy believe that the United States had achieved its full potential with regard to civil rights for all of its citizens?

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**5b.** What prompted Kennedy to make his address to the nation?

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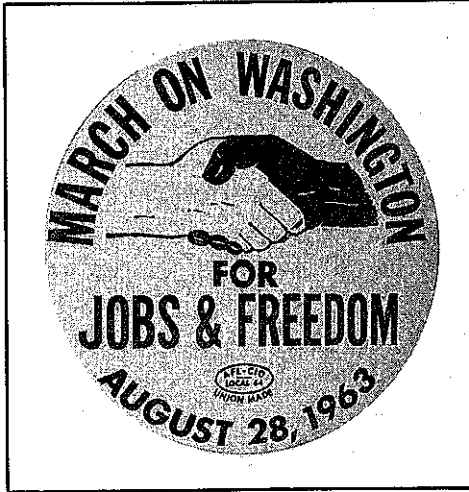
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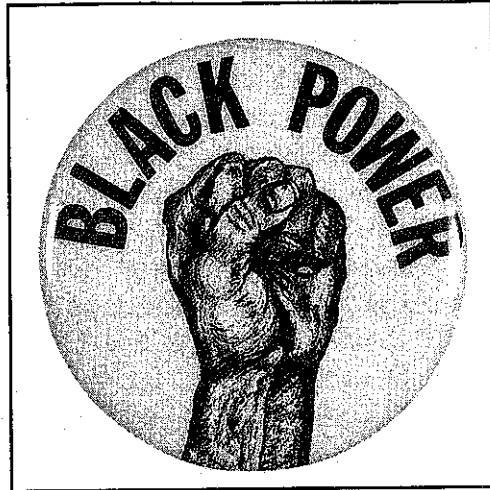
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**Activity 11, The Civil Rights Movement, continued**

**Document 6**



PRC Archive



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**6a.** What is the difference between the two buttons in the pictures above? Do they represent different approaches to the struggle for equal rights? Explain your answer.

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**6b.** Who gave a famous address at the March on Washington? What was it called?

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**Activity 11, The Civil Rights Movement, continued****Document 7**

I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of Democracy. I urge every member of both parties, Americans of all religions and of all colors, from every section of this country, to join me in that cause.

At times, history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama. There, long suffering men and women peacefully protested the denial of their rights as Americans. Many of them were brutally assaulted. One good man—a man of God—was killed. . . .

Many of the issues of civil rights are very complex and most difficult. But about this there can and should be no argument: every American citizen must have an equal right to vote. There is no reason which can excuse the denial of that right. There is no duty which weighs more heavily on us than the duty we have to insure that right. Yet the harsh fact is that in many places in this country men and women are kept from voting simply because they are Negroes. . . .

We have all sworn an oath before God to support and to defend that Constitution. We must now act in obedience to that oath. Wednesday, I will send to Congress a law designed to eliminate illegal barriers to the right to vote. . . .

But even if we pass this bill the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it's not just Negroes, but really it's all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.

And we shall overcome.

—President Lyndon B. Johnson, announcing his proposal  
for a voting rights act (March 15, 1965)

**7a.** What was the significance of President Johnson's use of the phrase "we shall overcome" in his address?

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**7b.** According to Johnson, why must government officials support the right of African Americans to vote?

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**Activity 11, The Civil Rights Movement, continued**

**Document 8**

I *am* for violence if non-violence means we continue postponing a solution to the American black man's problems—just to *avoid* violence. I don't go for non-violence if it also means a delayed solution. To me a delayed solution is a non-solution. Or I'll say it another way. If it must take violence to get the black man his human rights in this country, I'm *for* . . . violence. I tell sincere white people, 'Work in conjunction with us—each of us working among our own kind.' Let sincere white individuals find all other white people they can who feel as they do—and let them form their own all-white groups, to work trying to convert other white people who are thinking and acting so racist. Let sincere whites go and teach non-violence to white people.  
—Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

**8a.** When is violence justified, according to Malcolm X?

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**8b.** What role did Malcolm X believe white Americans should fulfill?

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