The Montgomery Bus Boycott

In addition to legal efforts during this era, some civil rights activists took direct action to end segregation. On December 1, 1955, [**Rosa Parks**](https://www.pearsonrealize.com/community/scorm/courses/6b614f295f4ce1379abe7227001fa84d/hsus_sco_na_se_en_16_01_04/01.html#ngss-aba5481e-7c95-487b-a3f7-87810df66b31), an African American seamstress, did just that. She boarded a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and sat down in an empty seat. Several stops later, the bus driver requested that she give up her seat to a white passenger. Montgomery law required African American passengers to give up their seats to whites. After Rosa Parks refused to obey the law, she was arrested. “The [policemen] asked if the driver had asked me to stand up, and I said yes, and they wanted to know why I didn’t,” Parks later recalled. “I told them I didn’t think I should have to stand up. After I had paid my fare and occupied a seat, I didn’t think I should have to give it up.”

**Rosa Parks's Act Transforms a Movement**

Parks’s action set in motion a chain of events that transformed the civil rights movement. Over the next few days, a core of civil rights activists in Montgomery organized a one-day bus boycott. They called upon the black community to refuse to ride the buses as a way to express their opposition to Parks’s arrest, in particular, and segregation, in general. Meanwhile, during the Montgomery bus boycott, the NAACP began preparing a legal challenge.

For a long while, many people thought that Parks had refused to give up her seat simply because she was tired after a long day of work. In reality, Parks had a record of fighting for civil rights. She had been active in the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP for years. This does not mean that she set out to get arrested and spark a movement. However, her choice to not give up her seat was an effective form of nonviolent protest and an influential moment in the civil rights movement's struggle for the equality of political rights.

**Martin Luther King Calls for Nonviolent Protest**

On the evening following the boycott, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the organization that sponsored the bus boycott, held a meeting. Dr. [**Martin Luther King, Jr.**](https://www.pearsonrealize.com/community/scorm/courses/6b614f295f4ce1379abe7227001fa84d/hsus_sco_na_se_en_16_01_04/03.html#ngss-11f1db01-faf6-4d67-921d-f036fbe43097), a Baptist minister, addressed the group. Though he had little time to prepare, King delivered an inspirational speech that brought the audience to its feet. Noting that African Americans were tired of segregation and oppression, King declared that there was no alternative but to protest. However, he called for the protest to be nonviolent. He urged them not to become resentful, which would lead to hatred toward whites, but rather to follow Christian doctrine and love them.

After King spoke, the MIA vowed to continue the boycott and chose King as its leader. For more than a year, African Americans in Montgomery maintained their boycott of the buses. They did so despite economic pressures from their employers and threats of violence by the Ku Klux Klan. King himself survived a bombing of his house. Fortunately, his wife and baby daughter were not home at the time.

Finally, in 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that the Montgomery city law that segregated buses was unconstitutional. After more than a year, the MIA ended its boycott, and African Americans began to ride the buses again.

**Ministers Inspire the Movement**

The bus boycott represented a tremendous victory for African Americans in Montgomery and across the nation. The boycott revealed the power that African Americans could have if they joined together. The protest also elevated King and his philosophy of nonviolence into a prominent position within the civil rights movement.

After the boycott, King and another Montgomery minister, Ralph Abernathy, established the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to continue the struggle for civil rights. Made up largely of southern African American ministers, the SCLC advocated nonviolent resistance to fight injustice. The SCLC went on to organize a series of protests, including a Prayer Pilgrimage in Washington, D.C., in 1957, which helped convince Congress to pass civil rights legislation. Still, discrimination and segregation remained widespread.

Thought over Reading

Why did Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. advocate the use of nonviolent protest to resist segregation and oppression?