**Chapter 27: Walking into Freedom Land: The Civil Rights Movement, 1941-1973**

**[[BIG IDEA:** How did the civil rights movement evolve over time, and how did competing ideas and political alliances affect the growth of this and other social movements?]]

How should we explain the civil rights movement? Was it the product of charismatic leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ella Baker? Was it made possible by the advent of television, which broadcast violence against African Americans to a stunned national and global audience? Should we emphasize the extreme bravery and courage displayed by the marchers, who so often put their lives on the line in protesting racial injustice?

This chapter looks at all those elements, and more. All were critical in the making of what is often called the black freedom struggle. Unlike many textbooks, we consider the movement in its entirety in a single chapter, from its beginnings during World War II through the struggles and triumphs of the 1960s and into the 1970s, when the Mexican American and American Indian movements reached their height. The decades-long civil rights movement challenged the racial laws and exclusions that defined the second-class citizenship of African Americans and other people of color. It also shaped every social movement that came after it, including the women’s and gay rights movement.

The battle against racial injustice proceeded along two tracks. The first was organizational. Labor unions, churches, fraternal groups, civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, and protest organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality drew thousands and thousands of people out of the rhythms of their ordinary lives into activism. This organizational structure was key to the movement’s success. The second track was government: in state legislatures, the United States Supreme Court, and in Congress, civil rights groups argued, lobbied, and demanded the social and political equality of equal citizenship.

As we have done in other chapters in *America’s History*, we invite you in this chapter to consider important political changes alongside the social history of individual people and communities. That relationship is truly at the heart of the great civil rights struggle.