

The Civil Rights Act of 1957



Image at left includes President Dwight Eisenhower (center), Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (to his right), and A. Philip Randolph (to his left)

In 1957, President Eisenhower sent Congress a proposal for civil rights legislation. The result was the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first civil rights legislation since Reconstruction. The new act established the Civil Rights Section of the Justice Department and empowered federal prosecutors to obtain court injunctions against interference with the right to vote. It also established a federal Civil Rights Commission with authority to investigate discriminatory conditions and recommend corrective measures.

It was primarily a voting rights bill, but it was also a show of support for the Supreme Court's *Brown* decisions (1954).

It eventually led to the integration of

public schools. Following the 1954 Supreme Court ruling, Southern whites in Virginia began a "Massive Resistance." Violence against blacks rose there and in other states, as in Little Rock, Arkansas, where that year President Dwight D. Eisenhower had ordered in federal troops to protect nine children integrating a public school, the first time the federal government had sent troops to the South since Reconstruction. There had been continued physical assaults against suspected activists and bombings of schools and churches in the South. The administration of Eisenhower proposed legislation to protect the right to vote by African Americans. The Act was a monumental turning point, however it was weakened due to lack of support among many Democrats.

The Civil Rights Act of 1960-Statement by the President Dwight D. Eisenhower Upon Signing the Act

I have today signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1960. It is only the second civil rights measure to pass the Congress in 85 years. As was the case with the Act of 1957, recommendations of this Administration underlie the features of the Civil Rights Act of 1960. The new Act is concerned with a range of civil rights problems. One title makes it a crime to obstruct rights or duties under Federal court orders by force or threat of force. That provision will be an important deterrent to such obstruction which interferes with the execution of Federal court orders, including those involving school desegregation. Provision is also made to assure free public education to all children of Armed Forces personnel in the United States where local public school facilities are unavailable. By authorizing the FBI to investigate certain bombings or attempted bombings of schools, churches and other structures, the Act will deter such heinous acts of lawlessness.

The new Act also deals significantly with that key constitutional right of every American, the right to vote without discrimination on account of race or color. One provision, which requires the retention of voting records, will be of invaluable aid in the successful enforcement of existing voting rights statutes. Another provision authorizes the use by federal courts of voting referees. It holds great promise of making the Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution fully meaningful. While I regret that Congress saw fit to eliminate two of my recommendations, I believe the Act is an historic step forward in the field of civil rights. With continuing help from all responsible persons, the new law will play an important role in the days ahead in attaining our goal of equality under law in all areas of our country for all Americans.