

The Civil Rights Act of 1964: A Long Struggle for Freedom Exhibit



The Civil Rights Act of 1964: A Long Struggle for Freedom exhibit in Washington, D.C. (until January 2, 2016) commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, and thus, explores the events that shaped the civil rights movement, as well as the far-reaching impact the act had on a changing society. The act is considered the most significant piece of civil rights legislation since Reconstruction. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in voting, public accommodations, public facilities, public education, federally funded programs, and employment. Audiovisual stations throughout the exhibition present archival footage of the era, as well as contemporary interviews with civil rights leaders and activists reflecting on the civil rights era. The exhibit (open September 10, 2014–January 2, 2016) is inside the Thomas Jefferson Building on the second floor of the Southwest Exhibition Gallery in Washington, D.C.

Exhibit Overview

Upon signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson reflected that Americans had begun their “long struggle for freedom” with the Declaration of Independence. Although that document had proclaimed that “all men are created equal,” such freedom had eluded most Americans of African descent until the Thirteenth Amendment, which formally abolished enslavement in the United States in 1865. In the years immediately following, the nation ratified two additional amendments, and the United States Congress passed a number of laws extending full citizenship rights to African Americans. After the end of Reconstruction in 1877, new discriminatory laws and practices took hold in the states and left the promise of equality languishing and unfulfilled for decades.

The social, legal, and political forces that battled discrimination for decades won a major victory with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—the most significant piece of U.S. civil rights legislation since Reconstruction. With eleven sections, the act prohibited various types of discrimination in voting, public accommodations, public facilities, public education, federally-funded programs, and employment. It was a culmination of civil rights advocates' efforts to gain federal protection for the basic citizenship rights of African Americans.

The bill that became the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was originally proposed by President John F. Kennedy on June 19, 1963. After Kennedy's assassination on November 22, President Lyndon B. Johnson pressed hard in the U.S. Congress, with support of the NAACP, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the U.S. Justice Department, and key members of Congress such as Hubert Humphrey (D-MN), Everett Dirksen (R-IL), Emanuel Celler (D-NY), and William McCulloch (R-OH), to secure the bill's passage. After eight months of congressional debate, the bill passed in the U.S. Senate on June 19, 1964. The House voted to adopt the Senate-passed bill on July 2, and that same day President Johnson signed the bill into law. The Supreme Court upheld the act, and the desegregation of public accommodations and facilities was immediately implemented.