

# A Boycott That Changed a Nation

**M**artin Luther King Jr. said it marked “the birth of a new age.” Historian C. L. R. James described it as “one of the most astonishing events in the history of human struggle.” Sparked by a simple “no,” the Montgomery bus boycott redefined citizenship in Alabama and culminated in the end of segregation on the state’s buses.

This guide is designed to provide educators with resources and strategies for classroom viewing and discussion of *Boycott*. A dramatic film based on historical events, *Boycott* depicts the inception and first three months of the protest in Montgomery. Watching this film can heighten your students’ understanding of the nature of leadership, the power of nonviolent protest, and the role of the civil rights movement in transforming American society. Indeed, this inspiring story—presented in an innovative style that combines scripted scenes with documentary footage—is likely to captivate even reluctant learners.

## VIEWING STRATEGY

*Boycott*’s running time is 1 hour, 52 minutes. The program can be viewed in three roughly equal segments as follows:

**PART ONE** Start: opening; End: 40:41 (King and Abernathy exit city hall).

**PART TWO** Start: 40:42 (shoeshine scene); End: 01:20:00 (Dr. King says: “They bombed the house”).

**PART THREE** Start: 01:20:01 (neighbors help repair the Kings’ home following bombing); End: program credits.

## BEFORE VIEWING

You might begin by distributing the *inTIME* magazine produced to accompany *Boycott*. Direct the class to page 2 and have students read aloud the quotes in the Verbatim section. Taken together, what story do these statements tell? Which statistics in the Numbers section do students find most surprising? Read the profiles on page 3, and ask students to consider how the groundwork was laid for the boycott. According to the civil rights

timeline on page 4, what key Supreme Court decision preceded the boycott?

## DURING VIEWING

As students watch the film, encourage them to focus on the following questions:

- Who led the boycott? What forms did leadership of this protest take?
- What impact did segregation have on citizens, both black and white?
- Why did the boycott succeed?

## AFTER VIEWING

*Boycott* offers myriad opportunities for class discussion and writing. Topics to explore include:

### The nature of segregation

How does the film open? What is revealed about Montgomery and its bus system?

### Varieties of leadership

1. What forms did leadership take during the boycott? What roles did Rosa Parks and Jo Ann Robinson play in launching the protest? Could the boycott have succeeded if ordinary people had not decided to take charge of their own lives and stay off the buses?

2. What risks did citizens face by taking part in the protest? Ask students to imag-



ine that they have just received the flyer that Jo Ann Robinson wrote calling for a boycott. How would they respond?

### The emergence of Dr. King

How do the filmmakers portray Dr. King? Is he superhuman? Immune to fear? Why was King surprised to be named president of the Montgomery Improvement Association? What parallels does King draw between slavery and segregation in the sermon he delivers?

### Demands for change

What reforms did the boycotters initially ask for? How did the city respond? When and on what grounds did boycott leaders decide to challenge the constitutionality of Alabama’s segregation law?

### Opposition and resistance

Who opposed the boycott? Why? What tactics did opponents use?

### Nonviolent protest as a strategy

Why did Bayard Rustin accuse King of “straying from the principles of nonviolence”? What did King mean when he said: “We must meet their hate with our love”?

### The role of the Supreme Court

See page 3 of this guide for *TIME*’s 1956 article on the Supreme Court decision banning segregation on Alabama buses. This reproducible worksheet can serve as an effective follow-up to viewing the film. ■



## THE HBO BROADCAST OF BOYCOTT

Premiere: Saturday, February 24, 2001 at 8 p.m. (ET), 9 p.m. (PT) | Running time: 1:52

Encore dates: Tuesday, February 27 and Sunday, March 4. (Check local listings.)

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# Why the Boycott Matters

Two eminent scholars share their thoughts on the Montgomery protest—and its value in the classroom

**Stewart Burns** is the editor of *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* and co-editor of *Birth of a New Age: Volume 3 of The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* He is currently at work on a full-length historical narrative on the Montgomery boycott.

## Q: How significant was the Montgomery bus boycott within the broader context of American history?

**A:** I see the bus boycott as what I call the “third founding” of American democracy: the first being with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and the second being with the Civil War, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and the emancipation of slaves. The Montgomery bus boycott was the third founding in that it ignited the modern civil rights movement, which brought about the greatest expansion of freedom and equality in the nation’s history. It was the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s that implemented the 14th and 15th Amendments, and in some ways the 13th Amendment that abolished slavery. More changed during the civil rights movement in terms of democratic reform and progress, broadly defined, than at any other period in American history.

## Q: Was the boycott an aberration, or did it fit into a larger pattern of protest?

**A:** The boycott was not an aberration. A great deal was going on in the country and in the world, with colonized nations like Ghana rising up against colonial rule.

In fact, a struggle against white supremacy was starting to sweep the globe, and Montgomery was one aspect of this, as King eloquently pointed out during the boycott. He constantly talked about the boycott as being an important front in the worldwide struggle against white supremacy and domination.

## Q: What opportunities does the boycott offer to classroom teachers?

**A:** I think the key thing is for students to put themselves in the position of black people in Montgomery, and try to imagine how they would have responded. Remember, the boycott started when ordinary people—including young people like Claudette Colvin, a high school junior who was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a segregated bus—stood up bravely against injustice: they started this nonviolent protest before King took over its leadership. They found King and chose him as their leader. As Claudette Colvin testified in federal court: “Our leaders is just we ourself.” That’s probably the most important lesson of all: we have to be leaders ourselves. We can’t count on anybody else. We all need to see ourselves as leaders, and act as leaders, in making this a better world. ■

**Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr.**, chairman of Harvard University’s Afro-American Studies Department, is co-editor of *Encarta Africana*, among numerous other works.

## Q: Why didn’t the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown* decision abolish segregation on buses?

**A:** *Brown* was an official pronouncement abolishing “separate but equal”—but in the schools. People like Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP attorney who argued the *Brown* case and later became a Supreme Court justice himself, was so optimistic that segregation would be abolished quickly on the strength of that decision. But there was enor-

mous resistance. Montgomery built on the energy, and the desire for change, that *Brown* unleashed; Montgomery inaugurated a new era in the civil rights movement. With Montgomery came a new kind of organized protest and a new level of national attention. Never before had there been that kind of national attention.

## Q: What do you see as Dr. King’s primary contribution to the movement?

**A:** I think King’s greatest contribution was his belief that nonviolent protest would yield results. That’s counter-intuitive. Most people say, “You step on my toe, I’m going to step on yours.” And King said, “Let them beat us and this will all work out—if it doesn’t kill us.” That was a very real question: Would it kill us before it became efficacious? But it turned out to be an enormously efficacious strategy, and he was the architect of it. Every time I look at the footage, I think, “No way! Dogs, firehoses, nightsticks on my head? No, I don’t think so.” But if I had been there, I would have submitted to the will of Dr. King, too. When I listen to his speeches, I still get goosebumps.

## Q: What are your thoughts on the portrayal of King and the protest in *Boycott*?

**A:** The film is very faithful to the historical record; it’s also gripping entertainment. The film particularly stresses Mrs. King’s role as the intellectual equal of Dr. King. He needed her, and she was his partner. They talked about every aspect of the movement together. In one of the film’s most moving moments, King’s father is urging Coretta to leave Montgomery for her own safety. And Martin tells Daddy King, “No. I need her here in Montgomery, with me.”

The film also emphasizes the crucial role of women. It was a movement of equals: men and women came together to fight for change. I was glad to see that *Boycott* highlights the strength of the everyday people who walked or carpooled. After all, the boycott would have been over in five minutes if folks had gotten back on the buses. But people stuck it out for a year—and they prevailed by working together. ■



Gregg DeGuire/TIME PIX

**A COMMUNITY UNITED:** Mass meetings like this one played a key role in sustaining the boycott.

# Back with Humility



**T**O THE 50,000 NEGROES\* OF MONTGOMERY, Ala., the week dawned (as one of them put it) “darker than a thousand midnights.” For more than eleven months, in a mass movement combining Christian fervor with Gandhi-like passive resistance, they had mounted and sustained in the “Cradle of the Confederacy” an almost total boycott of the city’s segregated buses. Led by a handful of well-educated and young Negro leaders—notably by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 27, pastor of a local Baptist church—they had efficiently put together and operated a car pool of some 200 vehicles to ferry themselves to and from work. Now the leaders and lawyers sat glumly in the Montgomery County courthouse waiting for the state circuit court to outlaw the Negro car pool on the charge—made by the city commission—that it was actually a business enterprise operating without a franchise.

In the middle of the proceedings they saw an Associated Press reporter hand a piece of paper to their white opponents, who promptly hustled outside. Minutes later the news was out: the Supreme Court, ruling on the Montgomery case, had unanimously upheld a district court’s ruling that the “separate but equal” doctrine was now as legally dead for segregated public transportation as it had already been declared dead for public schools

and public recreational facilities. The effect of the decision: to invalidate Alabama’s intrastate Jim Crow bus laws and to set the grounds for invalidating similar laws in eleven other Southern states.

**“Joyous Daybreak.”** The next night 10,000 Negroes jammed two of Montgomery’s largest churches and adjacent streets to savor their triumph. Appearing before each group in turn was the spiritual architect of that triumph, the Rev. Dr. King. He was too wise to be triumphant; he read to each congregation a statement that should loom large in the Negro’s long, patient fight for equality:

“All along, we have sought to carry out the protest on high moral standards...rooted in the deep soils of the Christian faith. We have carefully avoided bitterness. [The] months have not at all been easy...Our feet have often been tired and our automobiles worn, but we have kept going with the faith that in our struggle we had cosmic companionship, and that, at bottom, the universe is on the side of justice. [The Supreme Court’s decision was] a revelation of the eternal validity of this faith, [and] came to all of us as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of enforced segregation in public transportation.”

**“Just Sit Down.”** When the court order comes through, Dr. King urged his followers, act sensibly but without

pride. On the one hand, “we have been going to the back of the bus for so long there is danger that we instinctively will go straight back there again and perpetuate segregation. Just sit down where a seat is convenient.” On the other hand, “I would be terribly disappointed if any of you go back to the buses bragging, ‘We, the Negroes, won a victory over the white people’...I hope nobody will go back with undue arrogance. If you do, our struggle will be lost all over the South. Go back with humility and meekness.” ■

*\* This term was used to refer to African Americans at the time this article was written.*

Martin Luther King Jr. photo: Cravens/TIME Pix

## Focus: Reading for Understanding

1. According to this article from TIME, why were Martin Luther King Jr. and other boycott leaders in court on November 13, 1956? What verdict was this court expected to render? What news changed the course of events?
2. The writer states that Dr. King “was too wise to be triumphant.” What does this statement mean?

**Explore** Lawyers challenged Alabama’s segregation laws on the basis of the 14th Amendment. Read the text of this Amendment (available at [www.usconstitution.net](http://www.usconstitution.net)) and explain why you think the attorneys chose this strategy.

**Connect** Would you have returned to the buses with “humility and meekness,” as King advised? Why or why not?

# For Further Exploration

## BOOKS

Anderson, Jervis. *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997). The first comprehensive biography of the civil rights activist and adviser to Martin Luther King Jr.

Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988). Contains a compelling narrative of the boycott.

Burns, Stewart (editor). *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). A rich collection of primary-source documents on the boycott.

Garrow, David. *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986). This Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of King contains a moving account of the Montgomery boycott.

Kasher, Steven. *The Civil Rights Movement: A Photographic History, 1954-68* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996). A riveting collection of photos capturing key moments in the civil rights struggle.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958). Dr. King's reflections on the boycott.

Parks, Rosa. *My Story* (New York: Dial Books, 1992). The autobiography of "the mother of the civil rights movement."

Robinson, Jo Ann. *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987). A first-hand account of the boycott by a key organizer of the protest.

Williams, Juan. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* (New York: Viking, 1987). A clear and engrossing overview of civil rights history, with a chronology and photos.

## VIDEO/MULTIMEDIA

*Encarta Africana* (third edition, 2000). A multimedia CD-ROM encyclopedia on Africa, its history, culture, geography and descendants; includes an interactive timeline on civil rights history.

*Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* (Produced by Blackside, Inc. of Boston, 1987; distributed by PBS Video). "Awakenings," the first installment of this



Boycott photos on pages 1 and 4 by Bob Greene

To further explore the historical foundation for the film *Boycott* and its learning points through a variety of Web-exclusive teaching materials, archival photographs, original documents and graphics, visit [www.timeclassroom.com](http://www.timeclassroom.com).

For movie highlights, visit [hbo.com/boycott](http://hbo.com/boycott).

acclaimed 14-hour documentary series, chronicles the Montgomery boycott through interviews with participants and archival footage. Later episodes show Dr. King's evolution as a civil rights leader.

## WEBSITES

[www.stanford.edu/group/King](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King)

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project, with documents by King and an in-depth chronology.

<http://history.searchbeat.com/civilrights.htm> An extensive collection of links to sites on civil rights history.

[www.midsouth.rr.com/civilrights](http://www.midsouth.rr.com/civilrights)

The National Civil Rights Museum's website, featuring an interactive tour.

# Starting Points for Writing, Research and Community Outreach

**1. The nonviolent tradition.** Learn more about the history of civil disobedience and passive resistance by investigating their use by Mohandas Gandhi during India's struggle to achieve independence from Great Britain. What were Gandhi's strategies and techniques? How did they evolve? What were the results? What contrasts do you see between the leadership styles of Gandhi and King?

**2. Witnesses to the civil rights era.** Conduct an oral history interview with a family member or friend who was alive

during the 1950s or 1960s. In what city did this person live? Were the city's schools, neighborhoods or transportation system segregated? What does your interviewee remember about the Montgomery bus boycott and about the emergence of Martin Luther King Jr. as a national leader?

**3. The evolution of Dr. King.** Visit the website of the King Papers Project at the address above and read one of the five "frequently requested documents" written by Dr. King. What connections do

you see to the vision Dr. King expressed during the Montgomery boycott? What new directions and themes do you note in Dr. King's thinking?

**4. Young people and civil rights.** Teenagers played a critical role in the struggle for equality, risking—and sometimes losing—their lives. Choose one of the following young people to profile, and report to the class on his or her role in the civil rights movement: Linda Brown; Claudette Colvin; Elizabeth Eckford; Emmett Till; Sheyann Webb.