

# MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS FROM THE CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE AND THE REELECTION OF PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

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## Abstract

This paper presents remarkable events that occurred in the decade of the 1940s and the 1950s related to the struggle for equality between blacks and whites in the United States of America (USA). Rosa Parks, who with her husband worked for this cause, became famous in 1955 when she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white person on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other partners took advantage of this fact to begin in this city a famous boycott that lasted a little over a year. From then on, there were many achievements for black people. People like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks, who fought for many years in favor of civil rights in the USA, perhaps never imagined that an African American could be president of this country. To this date, Barack Obama has been elected twice as President of the USA.

**Keywords:** Montgomery Bus Boycott, Civil Rights Movement, reelection of the President of the USA

## Resumen

En este artículo se presentan eventos notables que ocurrieron en la década de los años cuarenta y de los años cincuenta del siglo pasado relacionados a la lucha por la igualdad entre negros y blancos en los Estados Unidos de América. Rosa Parks, quien luchó junto a su esposo por esta causa, se volvió famosa cuando en 1955 fue arrestada por negarse a dar su asiento a una persona blanca en un autobús de Montgomery, Alabama. El Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. y otros colaboradores tomaron ventaja de este hecho para comenzar en esta ciudad el famoso boicot que duró un poco más de un año. De aquí en adelante, hubo muchos logros para la gente negra. El Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. y Rosa Parks, quienes lucharon por muchos años en favor de los derechos civiles en los Estados Unidos de América, quizás nunca se imaginaron que un afroamericano pudiera llegar a ser presidente de este país. Para esta fecha, Barack Obama ha sido electo dos veces como Presidente de los Estados Unidos de América.

**Palabras claves:** Boicot del Autobús de Montgomery, Movimiento de los Derechos Civiles, reelección del Presidente de los Estados Unidos de América

## INTRODUCTION

**A**lthough the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama officially started on December 1, 1955, several facts had occurred before that could have caused this important event for black people. In 1945, Rosa Parks paid her bus fare and then watched the bus drive off as she tried to re-enter through the rear door, as the driver had told her to do. Later, in 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man even though the bus driver ordered her to do that. As a result of the behavior of Parks at the time, the Montgomery Improvement Association was created and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the president. In that historic day, blacks of Montgomery, Alabama, decided that they would boycott the city buses until they could sit anywhere they wanted, instead of being relegated to the back when a white boarded (Cozzens 55). Decisions made by the leaders and participants of the Montgomery Improvement Association, led to the start and end of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which achieved a very important legal change issued by the Supreme Court in November 1956.

According to Rosa Parks' biography, the Montgomery city code operated in relation to the treatment of blacks and whites when they used the Alabama buses as a means of public transportation, the code required that all public transportation was segregated and that bus drivers had the powers of a police officer to carry out the provisions of the code. Also, the Rosa Parks' biography said, that "while operating a bus, drivers were required to provide separate but equal accommodations for white and black passengers by assigning seats" (2). This was accomplished with a line roughly in the middle of the bus separating white passengers in the front of the bus and African-American passengers in the back. When an African-American passenger boarded the bus, they had to get on at the front to pay their fare and then get off and re-board the bus at the back door. When the seats in the front of the bus filled up and more white passengers got on, the bus driver would move back the sign separating black and white passengers and, if necessary, asked black passengers to give up their seat (Rosa 3). The era of slavery that existed for hundreds of years, and by which blacks had to tolerate more discriminatory laws in Alabama, caused black people seeking their civil rights equality with whites to rebel. For this reason, Montgomery's black residents had prepared the ground for the bus

boycott long in advance; many had boycotted the buses on their own, or threatened to do so (“Montgomery”).

### **Development of major incidents that led to the start of the Montgomery Bus Boycott**

As Steward Burns pointed, in 1949, the newly formed Women’s Political Council (WPC) of Montgomery, an activist group of black professional women, began organizing the black community and lobbying white officials to modify Jim Crow restrictions in public transportation, with little success (35). Also, Burns said, in May 1954, WPC president Jo Ann Robinson, an English professor at

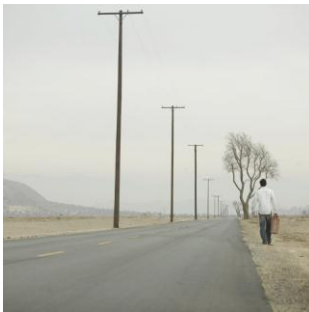


Alabama State College, warned the mayor in a letter that a bus boycott might be imminent (35). A year later (1955), Claudette Colvin, a 15-year-old high school junior, refused to give up her bus seat to a white person. She was arrested for violating the segregated seating ordinances and mistreated by police (Burns 35). “This angered the black community and sparked a brief, informal boycott of buses by many black residents. In August of the same year, Montgomery’s black community was shaken by the brutal lynching of Emmett Till in Mississippi.” (Burns 35). Two months later, 18-year-old Mary Louise Smith, a house maid, was arrested for refusing to give up her seat.

African Americans in Montgomery felt beleaguered and the protest events continued. In the Montgomery’s Boycott, the person most mentioned has been Rosa L. Parks, who was tailor’s assistant at Montgomery’s largest department store. She and her husband Raymond had been civil rights activists for years. Rosa Parks served as secretary of the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) branch and as advisor to the NAACP youth council (Cozzens 55). When the bus driver, whom Parks had defied years before, ordered her to give up her seat for a white man, she said no. “Like Colvin and Smith, she was sitting in the unreserved midsection, and no vacant seat was free, so she would have had to stand while carrying her Christmas packages” (Dwyer 664). Parks was arrested and then bailed out that night by friends, who persuaded Parks to allow her arrest to be used as a test case for the constitutionality of bus segregation (“Montgomery”). At this event, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., leader

and president of Montgomery Improvement Association, led the actions to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. At the age of thirty-five, Martin Luther King, Jr. was the youngest man to have received the Nobel Peace Prize. He announced that he would turn over the prize money of \$54,123, from the Nobel Foundation, to the furtherance of the civil rights movement (“Martin”). On the evening of April 4, 1968, he was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, where he was to lead a protest march in sympathy with striking garbage workers of that city (“Martin”).

*The Long Walk Home* film, which was presented by New Visions Pictures and starred by Whoopi Goldberg, Sissy Spacek, and Dwight Schultz, dramatized the bus boycott events of 1945-1956 in Montgomery, Alabama. According to the drama of this film, Whoopi Goldberg as Odessa Cotter, worked as a black maid for a white family. In this white family, the Thompsons, Miriam Thompson always supported Odessa but her husband did not (“Long”). Given the situation at that time about the use of Montgomery buses for black people, Odessa felt it was her duty to walk to work although arrived late and exhausted to work. In this sad story, Odessa was nanny of Miriam’s young daughter, Mary Catherine, who played a very important role. Odessa was married and had three children. They had to face many problems of their race such as discrimination and violence among others (“Long”).



The first scene of *The Long Walk Home* movie that showed racism problems was a policeman that forced Odessa to leave the park. He later apologized to Odessa. The next racist scene was when a young person, along with others traveling on a bus, told Odessa’s daughter that she should have been sitting in the back. Subsequently, outside the bus, these young people beat her and her brother. When a boycott of the city buses prevented Odessa from riding the bus to work, Miriam Thompson offered to give her a ride two days a week in order to ensure she arrived to work on time and alleviate the effect the long walk home was having on her. However, as the boycott advanced, tensions rose and giving Odessa a ride to work became an issue with the white prominent members of her community, as well as, with her husband (“Long”). Miriam was faced with the choice between doing what she believed was right or succumbing to pressure from her husband

and friends. After a fight with her husband, Miriam decided to follow her heart and became involved in a carpool group for other workers like Odessa. At the end, Miriam and her daughter join Odessa and the other protesters were standing against oppression. Consequently, Miriam Thompson received insults, beatings and rejection of her family and the white community (“Long”).

Today, laws in the United States of America (USA) provide equality and non-discrimination by race. The struggle for civil rights in the USA has never stopped and the black people still struggling to excel in social, political, educational, and economic fields. In addition, each day blacks continue to gain ground as employees and as entrepreneurs. The public and private companies hire them on an equal basis with others, and to close with a flourish, the American people elected Barack Obama as president. Barack Hussein Obama, Jr. was born on August 4, 1961, in Honolulu, Hawaii. He is the 44<sup>th</sup> and current President of the USA. Obama was born to a white American mother and a black Kenyan father (“Biography”). His mother is Stanley Ann Dunham; she died in 1995. His father, who died in a car accident in Nairobi, is Barack Obama, Sr. At school, Obama excelled in basketball and graduated with academic honors in 1979. “As one of only three black students at the school, Obama became conscious of racism and what it meant to be African-American.” (“Barack”). In 1983, Obama obtained a degree in political science from Columbia University and, in 1988, he entered at Harvard Law School. In February 1990, Obama was elected the first African-American editor of the *Harvard Law Review*, and he graduated from Harvard, magna cum laude, in 1991. On October 3, 1992, he and Michelle Robinson were married and welcomed two daughters: Malia and Sasha. Obama worked as civil rights lawyer, as teacher, and helped organize voter registration drives during Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign (“Biography”).

The political career of Barack Obama began just after publishing the book *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, in 1995, for which he received two awards. In 1996, Obama won a seat in the Illinois State Senate. “During these years, Obama worked with Democrats and Republicans to draft legislation on ethics, and expand health care services and early childhood education programs for the poor. He also created a state earned-income tax credit for the working poor.” (“Barack”). Obama opposed the war in Iraq, but despite his protests, the war began in 2003. In November

2004 general election, with the 70 percent of the vote, Obama became only the third African-American elected to the U. S. Senate since the Reconstruction. In total, he served three terms representing the 13<sup>th</sup> District in the Illinois Senate from 1997 to 2004, running unsuccessfully for the United State House of Representatives in 2000 (“Biography”).

The second book of Barack Obama, published in October 2006, was *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. It hit No. 1 on both the New York Times and Amazon.com best-seller lists. Barack Obama won the election with 52.9 percent to 45.7 percent from John McCain as President of the USA on November 4, 2008 (“Biography”). During his inauguration speech he said “Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this, America: They will be met.” (“Barack”). During his first year in office, Obama made several efforts to improve relations with other countries, ending the war in Iraq, and other peace activities. For all these efforts, he received the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize by the Nobel Committee in Norway. There have been many successes and social challenges, economic and financial, that President Obama has faced, including the death of Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden in 2011 (“Biography”). President Barack Obama won re-election in 2012. The Latino vote was one of the main factors that helped him because, just before the election, he issued an executive order that allows those who entered the country illegally as children to remain, study, and work without fear of deportation for at least two years (“Biography”).

All protest activities of black people in almost a decade (1945-1955), including the people who refused to give up her seat to a white person on the Montgomery buses, were caused by the laws and customs of discrimination against black people in the USA. Segregation on buses, in public schools and elsewhere, were very significant events for which blacks had to pass and for which they rebelled in 1955 at the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Its success led to a November 1956 Supreme Court decision overturning segregated transportation that was legalized by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling, an area left untouched by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision to desegregate public schools (Cozzens 55). Blacks returned to the buses on December 21, 1956, over a year after the boycott began. But their troubles were not over. Several blacks were victims of criminal attacks as bombs and gunfire on the buses



(“Montgomery”). To date, Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. have been the most outstanding people for their courage, their willingness, their vision, and their desire for social equality in the United States of America. They, supported by other civil rights activists, achieved their dream. Finally, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which lasted over a year, helped to launch ten years of national struggle for freedom and justice, the Civil Rights Movement, which changed the life of blacks in the USA. No doubt that a united community can make big changes in a society; the Montgomery Bus Boycott was a decent example that was successful regardless of the skin color of those who performed it. As a result, the USA is now chaired by Mr. Barack Obama.

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