

Thurgood Marshall

(1908-1993)

Thurgood Marshall had a major impact on the American way of life. He fought tirelessly for integration until he banished the legality for it forever in 1954. He was one of the major driving forces behind the civil rights movement and the push for equality. Later, he advocated the rights of all Americans through his opinions while on the Supreme Court.

In the fight for racial equality, there were several key figures. One of these important men often goes unnoticed in history. The unknown author of a Washington Afro-American editorial wrote this, "We make movies about Malcolm X, we get a holiday to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, but every day we live with the legacy of Justice Thurgood Marshall" (www.thurgoodmarshall.com).

In 1940, Marshall, aged 32, revealed in his first Supreme Court victory called *Chambers v. Florida*. Over the next 21 years, Marshall would argue 32 Supreme Court cases, winning 29 of them, effectively eliminating segregation one case at a time.

In 1944, Marshall argued *Smith v. Alwright*. After his convincing case, the Supreme Court overturned a Texas law that prevented blacks from voting in primary elections. Marshall was awarded the Spingarn Medal in 1946 by the NAACP. This medal marks the highest achievement by a black American. Marshall, however, was far from finished.

Over the next three years (1948-1950), Marshall turned his attention to the education system. In three cases, *Sipuel v. University of Oklahoma*, *Sweatt v. Painter*, and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents*, Marshall argued that it was unconstitutional for these graduate schools to continue the practice of segregation. Again, the Supreme Court sided with Marshall.

After these victories, Marshall lit a fuse that would eventually turn into a bomb called the civil rights movement of the 1960's. In 1954, Marshall took on and won what has been called the most important case of the century, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Marshall charged that the segregation of all public schools was unconstitutional. This case changed the face of America. This decision demolished all basis for legal segregation in the country.

In 1961, Marshall was appointed to the US Court of Appeals. In his time on the bench (1961-1965), he made 112 rulings, all of which were later upheld by the Supreme Court. President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed Marshall as the U.S. solicitor general in 1965. During this time, Marshall argued 19 cases for the U.S. government. He won all but five. In 1967, President Johnson appointed Marshall to succeed Justice Tom Clark on the United States Supreme Court.

Justice Marshall, at only 59 years old, was the first African-American to be appointed to the Supreme Court. Marshall was a leader of the liberal voices on the Supreme Court, especially during the first few years that he served. Though he was usually quiet while hearing arguments on the bench, Marshall managed to write several majority opinions for the court.

Marshall defended civil rights protestors in 1972 when writing the opinion in *Grayned v. City of Rockford*. This decision struck down an ordinance which would make picketing illegal.

Marshall retired in 1991 at age 82. The controversial Clarence Thomas, another black man, replaced Marshall on the bench. Marshall died two years later in 1993.

Best Sources

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