An Organized Legal Campaign

Beginning in the 1930s, African American attorneys developed a long-range strategic plan to use the legal system to weaken and destroy segregation. Their decades-long campaign demanded a powerful strategy, support from black communities across the country, and extraordinary legal expertise. Two institutions led the way: the Howard University School of Law and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Howard University School of Law had a special purpose: to produce lawyers who would use their education to help achieve equal opportunity for African Americans. One of Howard’s most distinguished faculty was Charles Hamilton Houston. Houston, who became vice-dean of the Howard University School of Law in 1929, created an accredited, full-time program with an intensified civil rights curriculum. His determination to train world-class lawyers who would lead the fight against racial injustice gave African Americans an invaluable weapon in the civil rights struggle.
Founded in 1909, the NAACP is one of the nation’s oldest civil rights organizations. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the association led the black civil rights struggle in fighting injustices such as the denial of voting rights, racial violence, discrimination in employment, and access to public facilities. In 1934, Houston left the Howard University School of Law to head the Legal Defense Committee of the NAACP in New York City. Among the lawyers recruited was Thurgood Marshall, Houston’s star student from Howard’s Law School. The Legal Defense Committee developed a long-range plan to weaken segregation without directly challenging it. Over time, through court cases focusing on segregated university education, the NAACP gradually undermined the legal foundations of segregation. By 1950, these victories, which set legal precedents that would be used later in the Brown case, served as the basis for a direct attack on the principle of segregation.

Lesson Plan Three: An Organized Legal Campaign

To the Teacher: The road leading up to the Brown decision was paved by the important legal work of several key organizations and their leaders. Researching the contributions that the NAACP, Howard University, Charles Hamilton Houston, and Thurgood Marshall made in the years prior to the Brown case helps students understand the complexity of the case itself, as well as the personal and professional challenges faced by those who brought it to the Supreme Court.

Grade Level: 4th through 6th grade; 7th through 12th Grade

Objectives: At the end of this lesson, students will be able to identify the role of Howard University as an African American intellectual center, the emergence of black lawyers as civil rights leaders, the importance of the NAACP, and the roles of significant individuals, particularly Charles Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall.

Time: 1 to 2 class periods and a research homework assignment
Materials: On the CD: Teacher Briefing Sheets on Lesson Plan Three, Howard University Law School, NAACP, Charles Hamilton Houston, and Thurgood Marshall; Student Handout: Poster Planning Sheet; twelve photographs and object images; annotated bibliography with suggested Web sites for additional research

On the Web: www.americanhistory.si.edu/brown — Go to the section of the virtual exhibition entitled “An Organized Legal Campaign.” There you will find information, photographs, and other primary source documents and objects related to the NAACP, Howard University School of Law, Charles Hamilton Houston, and Thurgood Marshall.

National History Standards: Era 9 4A

Teacher Introduction: Explain to students the lesson objectives, and introduce them to the names of the organizations and individuals that they will be researching. Use the briefing sheets on the CD for background information.

Student Activities:
For Teachers of Younger Students: Divide the class into four groups—one each for Charles Hamilton Houston, Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP, and Howard University. Explain to students that their task is to create a poster that will allow their classmates to learn more about the contribution that their person or organization made to the Civil Rights Movement. They will need to research the person’s biography, professional contributions, and character; or the history and impact of their organization. Students can use the poster planning sheet and annotated bibliography available on the CD to help them gather and present information.

For Teachers of High School Students: The poster activity suggested above can be modified for older students. In addition to researching the contribution that their person or organization made, they should also analyze the strategies that the individual or organization employed that resulted in important strides for civil rights, and convey their findings to their classmates through a poster or other visual form of presentation. Students can also undertake research papers on one of the individuals or organizations featured above, focusing on their specific contributions to the Civil Rights Movement.
**Additional Activities: Letter Writing:** After learning about these people and organizations, students can write one of the following letters. Encourage students to think critically about what information to include in their letters. What are the most significant ideas or accomplishments to communicate to their intended audience?

- A prospective student/employee writes a letter explaining why they want to attend Howard University Law School or work for the NAACP.
- A local NAACP leader invites either Marshall or Houston to speak to their group.

*Shown here are Thurgood Marshall, Donald Gaines Murray, and Charles Hamilton Houston during the 1933 suit against the University of Maryland that successfully challenged segregated education in Maryland.*

*Courtesy of Library of Congress*