Passing the Torch, 1961-1963

The young president, with his intense blue eyes, his thick head of hair, and his engaging smile, stepped up to deliver his inaugural address:

*Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage, and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed... And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.*

Kennedy entered the presidency and was shocked to learn 1/5 of Americans lived below the poverty line and was convinced of the need for new civil rights laws. **What did Kennedy mean when he said, “the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans?”**

**LBJ's "Great Society," 1964**

Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson took over the Presidency after JFK’s assassination and was determined to carry out JFK’s civil rights initiatives. He wanted to create a “Great Society” as described below:

*The challenge of the next half century is whether we have the wisdom to improve our national life, and to advance the quality of our American civilization. Your imagination, your initiative, and your indignation will determine whether we build a society of progress, or a society where old values and new visions stunt our growth. For in your time we have the opportunity to achieve the Great Society.*

*The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice. The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents. It is a place where leisure is a welcome chance to build and reflect.*

According to Johnson, what should the “Great Society” be like?

### Woolworth Lunch Counter Sit-In, Greensboro, NC, 1960

1. Before the sit-in protests, who was allowed to sit at the Woolworth lunch counter? Who wasn’t allowed to sit at the Woolworth lunch counter?

2. Why did the students choose to stage their protest at the Woolworth lunch counter?

3. On what date did the protest start?

4. What hypocrisy did the students hope to highlight by staging the protest?

5. Did the media cover the protest? Do you think that helped spread it to the 54 other cities in the south? Why or why not?

6. How long did it take for the protest to succeed?

7. Franklin McCain says: “As time went on, it ceased to matter because you could come in around lunch time and you could see alternating almost black white black white patrons - nobody paid much attention to it...and you ask yourself...what was all the fuss about in the first place?” What does McCain mean by this?
NY Times: “1960: Sitting Down to Take a Stand”  
By Suzanne Bilyeu

It was shortly after four in the afternoon when 4 college freshmen entered the Woolworth’s store in downtown Greensboro, North Carolina. They purchased a few small items—school supplies, toothpaste—and were careful to keep their receipts. Then they sat down at the store’s lunch counter and ordered coffee.

"I'm sorry," said the waitress. "We don't serve Negroes here." "I beg to differ," said one of the students. He pointed out that the store had just served them—and accepted their money—at a counter just a few feet away. They had the receipts to prove it. A black woman working at the lunch counter scolded the students for trying to stir up trouble, and the store manager asked them to leave. But the 4 young men sat quietly at the lunch counter until the store closed at 5:30.

Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond, now known as the "Greensboro Four," were all students at North Carolina A&T College, a black college in Greensboro. They were teenagers, barely out of high school. But on that Monday afternoon, Feb. 1, 1960, they started a movement that changed America.

The Greensboro sit-in 50 years ago, and those that followed, started a decade of civil rights protests in the U.S. It was a departure from the approach of the N.A.A.C.P. (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), the leading civil rights group at the time, which focused on challenging segregation in the courts.... The sit-ins showed that Americans, and young people in particular, could protest against segregation directly and have a real impact.

Six years after the landmark Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of Education, the civil rights movement seemed to have stalled... some states ignored the ruling... "Jim Crow" laws and customs often continued, and public facilities like hospitals and parks remained segregated, with water fountains and restrooms often designated "White" or "Colored."

Before heading to Woolworth’s, the students rehearsed how they would act and what they would say. When they sat down at the lunch counter, they fully expected to be arrested—or worse. "I felt that this could be the last day of my life" recalls Franklin McCain, now 67 and living in Charlotte, North Carolina. "But I thought that it was well worth it. Because to continue to live the way we had been living—I questioned that... I'd made up my mind that we absolutely had no choice."

At the time, Woolworth's was one of the world's largest retailers, and the store in downtown Greensboro was one of its most profitable. It was a typical "five and dime" that sold all kinds of merchandise for less than a dollar, and its lunch counter served about 2,000 meals a day. Curly Harris, the manager, didn't want any disruptions that would scare away customers. When the four black men sitting at the lunch counter refused to leave, Harris told his staff, "Ignore them. Just let them sit."

The four returned the next morning, along with two more A&T students, and took seats at the lunch counter. Some opened textbooks and studied, and occasionally they tried to order something. Otherwise, they were silent. By the end of the week, students from A&T and Bennett, a black women's college in Greensboro, occupied all 66 seats at the Woolworth's counter. A few white students joined in. On the Saturday after the sit-ins began, nearly 1,000 people crowded around the lunch counter before a bomb threat by the KKK prompted the manager to close the store.

On February 3, The New York Times ran the first of many articles about the sit-ins. Media coverage was one reason that the movement spread so quickly. Within days after the four students first sat down at Woolworth's, sit-ins were taking place in towns across North Carolina. Students in Nashville, Tennessee, held sit-ins at a number of stores. In New York, demonstrators picketed Woolworth's stores in support of the students in North Carolina. Over the next few months, 50,000 demonstrators would sit in at lunch counters in a hundred Southern cities. King encouraged the students in their nonviolent campaign, telling them to prepare to be arrested.

Six months after the sit-ins began, Harris, the manager of the Greensboro Woolworth's, finally relented: The sit-ins had already cost him $150,000 in lost business. On July 25, 1960, the lunch counter served its first black customers...

Sit-ins and marches...helped bring about support for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed racial segregation.

Analysis Questions:
1. Was the Greensboro sit-in a nonviolent protest? Why?
2. How was the Greensboro sit-in protest different from the approach of the NAACP?
3. Who did it engage in the Civil Rights movement that hadn't been involved before this? Do you think this impacted its success? Why or why not?
4. Why was this particular sit-in so effective?
5. What were two effects or impacts the Greensboro sit-in had on the Civil Rights movement and African Americans?