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39 Years Later

Lyndon Johnson and the Civil Rights Act of 1968

By [Melissa Ware](#)

This year marks the 39th anniversary of the Federal Fair Housing Act, also known as the Civil Rights Act of 1968. To commemorate the anniversary this month, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which administers the act, issued their yearly report on fair housing. According to HUD, government agencies received 10,328 complaints of housing discrimination for FY 2006, the highest ever filed in a single year. To view the entire report, go to: <http://www.hud.gov/utilities/intercept.cfm?offices/fheo/fy2006rpt.pdf>.

A Brief History

The riots of 1965 and 1966 in urban areas across the nation signaled the unrest and dissatisfaction of many who still felt the sting of discrimination. Los Angeles, Detroit, Indianapolis, Omaha, Chicago, Brooklyn, and Jacksonville were some of the cities whose communities rioted. Many civil rights organizations had been lobbying the Senate to speed up the passage of the (then) 1966 Civil Rights Bill that President Lyndon Johnson had sent to Congress on April 28th. The National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the GI Forum, as well as Senators Edward Kennedy and Edward Brooke, demanded that Congress vote to address the problem.



President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1968

At the same time, many of the casualties in the Vietnam War were from the African American and Hispanic communities -- many of whom had families that because of their ethnicity were unable to purchase or rent homes. Senator Edward Brooke testified to Congress on his family's experience with housing discrimination; after his return from fighting in WWII he was unable to purchase the home he desired because he was an African American.

When Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated on April 4th, 1968, it set off a firestorm of riots and civil unrest that killed six and left at least 350 injured in Washington, D.C. Violence erupted in cities across the nation: Kansas City, Chicago, and Baltimore, among others. According to the Lyndon B. Johnson Library and Museum, these riots caused between 45 and 60 deaths, injured 2,600 more, and 21,000 individuals were arrested. Property damage estimates totaled \$65 million. Dr. King's assassination and its aftermath prompted President Johnson to urge Congress to pass the bill in memoriam to all Dr. King did in the struggle for equal rights. President Johnson signed the Act into law after it was passed on April 11th.

The Act

In addition to the fair housing component, Johnson's bill called for "legislation to end discrimination in the selection of federal and state juries, and to empower the attorney general to initiate suits to force desegregation in public facilities." For the first time in history, the federal government prohibited housing discrimination. Title VIII reads:

Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 (Fair Housing Act), as amended, prohibits discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of dwellings, and in other housing-related transactions, based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status (including children under the age of 18 living with parents of legal custodians, pregnant women, and people securing custody of children under the age of 18), and handicap (disability)... [1]

For the entire text of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 visit: <http://www.hud.gov/offices/fheo/FHLaws/index.cfm>

The first official to administer the new act was George Romney, former Michigan Governor who was appointed Secretary of HUD by President Nixon. Romney was tapped because of his successes in fighting for fair housing laws in Michigan; during his time as Governor, he had campaigned for ratification of a state constitutional provision that prohibited discrimination in housing.

Every year, celebrations of Fair Housing Month range from gala events to coloring and poster contests in schools across the country. This year, a collaboration of organizations and former HUD officials are sponsoring ads in theatres across the country. The ads will feature HUD's discrimination hotline and web address, as well as housing services under the Fair Housing Act.

The department has been especially busy since disaster struck the Gulf States of Mississippi and Louisiana. HUD has since been in charge of an initiative to transition housing management from FEMA to the Housing Authority of New Orleans, who hopes to provide more permanent housing placements.

Information for this article was taken from the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development website.

[1] Taken from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, <http://www.hud.gov/offices/fheo/FHLaws/index.cfm>