

THE EFFECT OF THE COLD WAR ON THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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In the aftermath of the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of African-Americans kicked off their combat boots only to find that the freedoms they fought for in Europe were now denied them at home, and thus the foundation was laid for the civil rights related upheavals that shook America in the 1950s and 60s. Internationally, the United States found itself competing against the Soviet Union for the hearts and minds of newly decolonized people across Africa and Asia. These nations watched as the United States denied basic civil liberties to its own minority citizens. This paper explores how the United States' need to gain the favour of these nations played a role in shaping civil rights reform during the early years of the Cold War.

The superpower standoff at the heart of the Cold War affected nearly every nation in the world. Each side sought to bolster its position at the expense of the other by gaining the favour of Third World countries, many of which had just escaped the grip of colonialism.¹ The anti-imperialist rhetoric of the Soviet Union inclined some newly decolonized nations to drift towards the Soviet camp. To combat Soviet influence in the Third World, the United States positioned itself as a champion of freedom, democracy, and human rights. This stance, and the international reputation of the US as a whole, was damaged by America's domestic oppression of its own minority citizens. As civil rights were increasingly understood as a Cold War issue, America's need to protect its image abroad opened up avenues for civil rights activists to gain institutional support for reform.

The United States' long history of racism began to occupy more space in the

¹Although today the term "Third World" is viewed as derogatory, within the context of the Cold War it was used to categorize nations that were not firmly aligned with either the Western or Eastern blocs.

American collective conscience after the Second World War. After all, approximately 405 000 Americans had just given their lives in a titanic struggle to liberate the people of Europe and Asia from oppressive regimes.² Though combat roles were mostly denied to them, approximately 350 000 African-Americans served overseas in the U.S. military in all-black segregated units.³ Many fought under the impression that victory against fascism in Europe would coincide with a victory at home against racism.⁴

Upon demobilization, African-American veterans discovered that their hopes for equality were unfounded, and in some regions they faced even greater oppression than they had before the war. In many instances, skilled labour positions given to black workers during the war were now denied them in order to open up positions for white veterans.⁵ The GI Bill, designed to help educate, house, and employ veterans, had exploitable loopholes used to deny black veterans access to its full benefits.⁶ Black veterans who were able to improve their situation with their due benefits were sometimes met with resistance from racist whites; in one instance, two black veterans were lynched in Georgia for starting successful farms with their GI money.⁷ The growing discontent towards societal and institutional racism, coupled with a new found sense of black unity formed during the war, inspired increased demands for civil reform just as Cold War battle lines were being drawn.

The problem of racism in America was not unknown on the international stage, and the Soviet Union attempted to use it for propaganda purposes at every opportunity. In line with Marxist values, there was, at least according to its constitution, no racism in the Soviet Union.⁸ With their legally enshrined equality in place to bolster their argument, the Soviets were able to use American domestic racism to undercut American rhetoric concerning liberty and democracy.⁹ Domestically, the Soviets pushed the narrative of the working-class black man being exploited and kept down by America's white capitalist elite, fueling Soviet perceptions of America as a

²U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs. *America's Wars*. Washington, DC: Office of Public Affairs, 2016.

<https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/>

³Clayborne Carson. "African Americans At War." In *The Oxford Companion to the Second World War*, ed. I.C.B. Dear and M.R.D. Foot (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6.

⁴Mary L. Dudziak. "Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative." *Stanford Law Review* 41, no. 1, (1988): 72. www.jstor.org/stable/1228836.

⁵Hilary Herbold. "Never a Level Playing Field: Blacks and the GI Bill." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 6 (1994): 105. doi:10.2307/2962479.

⁶*Ibid*, 105.

⁷*Ibid*.

⁸Maxim Matusevich. "Black in the U.S.S.R." *Transition*, no. 100 (2008): 56.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20542541>.

⁹Renee Romano. "Moving Beyond 'The Movement That Changed the World': Bringing the History of the Cold War into Civil Rights Museums." *The Public Historian* 31, no. 2 (2009): 35. doi:10.1525/tpb.2009.31.2.32.

prosperous nation where the wealth was only accessible to a privileged few.¹⁰ Abroad, they used this to undermine the United States' standing in newly decolonized nations in Africa and Asia whose people were forming and rediscovering their own national and racial identities.¹¹ Within America itself, the Soviets gained influence by declaring support for left-leaning civil rights organizations.¹²

Soviet propaganda concerning American racism was often exaggerated but rarely fabricated. American newspapers often printed openly racist articles, giving the Soviets all the proof they needed to declare America an immensely unequal society.¹³ In the early 1950s, the focus on American racism was so prevalent in Soviet propaganda that the U.S. State Department estimated that nearly half of Soviet propaganda focused on race.¹⁴

From the onset of tensions, American politicians understood the damage that America's race issue had on its international reputation. As early as 1946, Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote:

An atmosphere of suspicion and resentment in a country over the way a minority is being treated in the United States is a formidable obstacle to the development of mutual understanding and trust between the two countries. We will have better international relations when these reasons for suspicion and resentment have been removed.¹⁵

Despite Acheson's attitude, the government attempted to keep America's racial policies from becoming an embarrassment by downplaying the problem at international conferences.

In the early days of the United Nations, the NAACP, with full support of the Soviet Union, petitioned for the poor treatment of African Americans to be investigated as a human rights issue.¹⁶ Both Republicans and Democrats framed race as a domestic affair as they sought to keep the UN from influencing domestic policy. Even

¹⁰Konstantin Valentinovich Avromov. "Soviet America: Popular Responses to the United States in Post-World War II Soviet Union." PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2012. 58.
<https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/10286>

¹¹Mark Newman. "Civil Rights and Human Rights." *Reviews in American History* 32, no. 2 (2004): 248. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30031843>.

¹²Newman, "Civil Rights and Human Rights," 249.

¹³Avromov, "Soviet America," 59.

¹⁴John David Skrentny. "The Effect of the Cold War on African-American Civil Rights: America and the World Audience, 1945-1968." *Theory and Society* 27, no. 2 (1998): 245.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/657868>.

¹⁵Skrentny, "The Effect of the Cold War on African-American Civil Rights," 247.

¹⁶Mary L. Dudziak. *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000). 45.

President Harry Truman and former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, both considered allies of the NAACP, endeavored to keep the UN at a distance.¹⁷

This did not mean, however, that Truman ignored the link between foreign affairs and civil rights. A 1947 report released by a presidential committee on civil rights, *To Secure These Rights*, stated that U.S. foreign policy was designed to “make the United States an enormous, positive influence for peace and progress throughout the world . . . But our domestic civil rights shortcomings are a serious obstacle.”¹⁸ As a result of the report, Truman superseded Congress and issued two executive orders: one desegregated the U.S. military and the other desegregated the federal workforce. Though domestic pressures and the work of civil rights organizations were the primary drivers for reform, it was now apparent that civil-rights was a Cold War issue.

Opportunities opened up for minority Americans as more politicians began viewing civil rights through the lens of the Cold War. In an effort spearheaded by the State Department, a growing number of African Americans began to be hired into government positions. There was a desire to appoint African Americans to foreign embassies, especially in countries with a majority black population.¹⁹ By 1953, there were sixty African Americans and seven Asian Americans working for the State Department internationally.²⁰ By appointing non-whites to government offices around the world, the State Department hoped to make America appear more equal on the world stage. Well intentioned as these measures were, they were not enough to slow the race-based Soviet propaganda being trumpeted to the world.

International opinion on American racism took on an increased importance as a wave of decolonization began sweeping the world. In the zero-sum politics of the Cold War era, both blocs deemed it necessary to gain influence with newly independent nations at the expense of the other. Public opinion in the Third World was highly critical of American racial policy. Supreme Court Justice William Douglas recognized that India considered the treatment of non-whites by other nations as an important factor in India’s foreign relations.”²¹ In Pakistan, he was informed that the Soviet Union was viewed more favourably because the United States was not seen as an advocate for social justice.²² The connection between civil rights and foreign public opinion was apparent in Douglas’ mind when he

¹⁷Newman, "Civil Rights and Human Rights," 248.

¹⁸President’s Committee on Civil Rights. “A Program of Action: The Committee’s Recommendations,” in *To Secure These Rights* (1947), 146.
<https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/to-secure-these-rights#139>

¹⁹Skrentny, “The Effect of the Cold War on African-American Civil Rights,” 248.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 105.

²²Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 105.

participated in the *Brown v. the Board of Education* case in 1954. It was the *Brown* case that began to repair America's prestige in the Third World.

Desegregation, the success of which depended heavily on the legal workers and activists leading the charge, became a Cold War objective as the world turned its attention to the issue. In the lead up to the *Brown* case, segregation in particular stood out as the race issue that damaged U.S. foreign relations the most.²³ A Justice Department brief at the start of the case noted that "the existence of discrimination against minority groups in the United States has an adverse effect upon our relations with other countries."²⁴ Further briefs concluded that the "only reason for government participation in the case was that segregation harmed U.S. foreign relations."²⁵ During the case, Acheson noted that discrimination "remains a source of constant embarrassment to this Government in the day-to-day conduct of its foreign relations; and it jeopardizes the effective maintenance of our moral leadership of the free and democratic nations of the world."²⁶ Foreign newspapers around the globe indicated that the world was watching the case, and foreign public opinion was being shaped by the outcome.

The outcome of the *Brown* case, which declared segregation in public schools as unconstitutional, was not just a huge step forward for civil rights; it was also a major propaganda victory for the United States abroad. The West African newspaper *Afrique Nouvelle* printed the headline "At last! Whites and Blacks in the United States on the Same School Benches."²⁷ The Indian *Hindustan Times* declared that American democracy and prestige was strengthened by the ruling.²⁸ The U.S. State Department was eager to publicize the ruling as widely as it could, and reported immense positive feedback from around the world. In 1956, the department declared that the ruling was responsible for a sharp decline in international criticism.²⁹ The positive feedback from foreign nations had two easily perceptible effects on American civil rights advancement: civil rights activists now understood the power of using foreign relations to gain concessions, and the opinion of the international press mattered. This was made clear in 1957 at Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas when, in the presence of the international media, the military was deployed to enforce desegregation, superseding the authority of

²³Mary L. Dudziak. "Brown as a Cold War Case." *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (2004): 34. doi:10.2307/3659611.

²⁴Brian K. Landsberg. "The Federal Government and the Promise of Brown." *Teachers College Record* 96, no. 4 (1995): 628. <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/facultyarticles/278/>

²⁵Dudziak, "Brown as a Cold War Case," 35.

²⁶Ibid, 34.

²⁷Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 108.

²⁸Dudziak, "Brown as a Cold War Case," 35.

²⁹Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 109.

Arkansas governor Orval Faubus, who attempted to keep black students out of the school.³⁰

After Little Rock, the importance of international opinion could not be ignored. The 1960 election saw competing presidential candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, in an attempt to court black voters, allude to worldwide public opinion as a necessary reason to support civil rights.³¹ Kennedy won that election, but at the start of his presidency was described by some of his aides as uninterested in civil rights.³² His primary concern was winning the Cold War. Civil Rights activists were able to use this concern to put pressure on Kennedy. An NAACP memorandum to the president declared that civil rights reform should not be postponed in pursuit of other domestic or foreign goals, as civil rights were an inseparable aspect of both.³³

1960 also witnessed seventeen African nations declare independence, exacerbating the need for America to resolve its race issues for the sake of Cold War supremacy. Kennedy was very aware that racism in the United States could lead newly decolonized nations to side with the Soviet Union.³⁴ Despite the public relations victory of desegregation, the Soviets continued to focus on American racism, and several events during Kennedy's presidency gave them fuel for their propaganda machine.³⁵

Kennedy paid close attention to how the foreign press portrayed the ever growing number of protests taking place across the country.³⁶ When a series of high profile embarrassments involving discrimination against African ambassadors at American restaurants made international headlines, Kennedy was moved to take a harder stance on civil rights reform.³⁷ Though he faced opposition from powerful Southern Democrats, he was able to use the Cold War to leverage support for what he hoped would be his administration's major contribution to civil rights, the Civil Rights Act.³⁸ Kennedy never saw the bill become law. He was assassinated while trying to drum up support for it in 1963. His successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, passed

³⁰Romano, "Moving Beyond "The Movement That Changed the World," 36; Kevin Gaines. "The Civil Rights Movement in World Perspective." *OAH Magazine of History* 21, no. 1 (2007): 60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25162103>.

³¹Skrentny, "The Effect of the Cold War on African American Civil Rights," 261.

³²Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 155.

³³Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 156

³⁴Romano, "Moving Beyond "The Movement That Changed the World," 36.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 36.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷Jed Handelsman Shugerman. "Rights Revolutions and Counter-Revolutions." *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 13, no. 2 (2001): 540.

<https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlh/vol13/iss2/6/>

³⁸Shugerman, "Rights Revolutions and Counter-Revolutions," 541.

a refined version of the bill in 1964, and racial tensions exploded as the Civil Rights Movement reached brand new heights through the 1960s.

The progress made up to the Kennedy assassination laid the foundation for the major civil rights advancements of the 1960s. The bulk of the successes should, first and foremost, be accredited to the activists and politicians who worked tirelessly in the face of aggressive and often violent opposition to make reform happen. It is important, however, to understand that Cold War politics did have an influence. The need to combat Soviet propaganda, the influence of foreign public opinion on American politics, and the need to protect American prestige abroad as competition with the Soviet Union for the hearts and minds of Third World nations took on increased importance, all factored into government decisions concerning civil rights reform. As stated in *To Secure These Rights*, “the United States is not so strong, the final triumph of the democratic ideal is not so inevitable that we can ignore what the world thinks of us or our [civil rights] record.”³⁹

³⁹President’s Committee on Civil Rights, “A Program of Action: The Committee’s Recommendations,” in *To Secure These Rights* (1947),148.

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