

## **The Global Context of the Civil Rights Movement**

*By Lynn Burnett*

In the 1920s, African Americans looked towards India, and towards the nonviolent resistance movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. If Gandhi could use nonviolent resistance to challenge British colonialism in India, perhaps it could be used to challenge white supremacy in the United States. Although African Americans debated the possibility, most did not feel the time was right. The renowned black sociologist, Franklin Frazier, summarized the doubts black Americans held about nonviolence when he said: "I fear we would witness an unprecedented massacre of defenseless black men and women." At the time of his statement in 1924, the Ku Klux Klan had between two and three million members. Racial violence was extremely widespread. Nonviolent resistance did not seem like an option.

And yet, by the time that Martin Luther King moved to Montgomery thirty years later, African Americans were ready to embrace nonviolent resistance on a massive scale. Something had changed in those thirty years. This is the story about that change... and specifically, about how major global events during those thirty years impacted race relations and created new possibilities for racial justice.

### ***Part I: The Rise of Fascism & World War II*** **The Uncomfortable Comparison to Nazism**

African Americans were one of the first groups in the United States to express serious concern about the persecution of the Jews in Germany. In the early years of Hitler's rule – long before he took racism to its ultimate extreme by attempting to exterminate the Jewish people – his persecution of the Jews reminded black Americans of their own persecution in the United States. When Hitler ascended to power in 1933, the headline of one prominent black newspaper read: "Adolph Hitler, KKK: Germany is doing to the Jewish people what the South does to the Negro."

During Hitler's first years, many African Americans believed that racial oppression in the United States was actually worse than anti-Semitism in Germany. Shortly after Hitler came to power in Germany, a lynching took place in Florida that was attended by an estimated three thousand people. As was the

common practice at the time, the lynching was advertised in advance so that people from the surrounding countryside could attend. The crowd tortured a black man named Claude Neal for hours before finally killing him and hanging his body from a tree. As was also common practice, photographs were taken and sold as postcards, and parts of Neal's body were cut off and displayed as souvenirs. The black sociologist Kelly Miller expressed the popular African American opinion about the first years of Nazi Germany when he wrote that in America, blacks are "often lynched and burned at the stake... the German people have not yet reached such depths of depravity."

Jewish Americans, of course, also watched Hitler's rise very closely. Unlike other white Americans, they were seriously concerned that fascism might spread to the United States. In fact, unlike other peoples of European ancestry in America, Jewish Americans were not yet defined as "white," but were widely considered to be a separate, inferior race... the so-called "Hebrew race." This would only change after World War II, when Americans were horrified by the images coming out of the Nazi death camps... and felt guilty about not doing more to stop the Jewish genocide.

Although Jews were treated as an inferior race in America, their fear that fascism might take root in the U.S. was based less on their own experience of oppression, and more on their understanding of the racial oppression of African Americans in the South. When Jewish Americans looked at the ways that African Americans were violently controlled, segregated, and deprived of basic democratic and human rights in the South, they saw a system of race-based totalitarian control that to them, appeared far too similar to the system that Nazi's were developing overseas. Jewish Americans and African Americans already had a long history of working together on civil rights issues, and their connection deepened as fascism rose. Later on, during the civil rights movement, many of the white allies who participated in the Freedom Rides, marched in the streets, and went to jail were Jewish. Martin Luther King's closest white friend – and one of his most trusted advisors – was a Jewish man named Stanley Levison.

To the great embarrassment of the American government and the American people, the Nazi's themselves justified their practice of racial terrorism by comparing it to the treatment of African Americans in the United States. When the U.S. government criticized the Nazis for their persecution of the

Jews, the Nazis replied that their treatment of the Jews was no different than the U.S. treatment of African Americans. In the words of one Nazi propagandist, "In America, Negroes are killed by mobs without fear of punishment and for the most trivial reason... The treatment of Negroes in America [is] far worse than that accorded Jews by the Nazis and America's criticism should be turned in that direction rather than toward Germany... As we do not bother [you] about executions of Negroes, you should not bother [us.]" Images of Claude Neal's mutilated body hanging from a tree were printed in German newspapers after the lynching, as was the fact that the U.S. Congress refused to pass anti-lynching legislation... a fact that proved that lynchings in America were not just the acts of murderous villains, but were supported by the state itself.

Hitler himself praised American practices of violent racial control, and at least during his first years in power, viewed them as a sign that the United States might one day join the global fascist revolution he was planning. During his first year in power, one of Hitler's most important advisors, Joseph Goebbels, told him: "Nothing will be easier than to produce a bloody revolution in North America... no other country has so many social and racial tensions. We shall be able to play on many strings there." Within three years of Goebbels' statement, Congress was investigating more than 100 possible Fascist organizations in the United States. And a year later, in 1937 – two years before the start of World War II – the FBI discovered an undercover Nazi agent who had been sent to unify the different fascist organizations in the United States under the leadership of the Ku Klux Klan... and to offer generous funding to the Klan in exchange for taking orders from the Nazis.

Fascism, however, did not take hold in the United States. In many ways, the opposite happened. As the race-based totalitarianism of the Nazis became ever-more extreme, and as many people in the United States came to view Nazism as a powerful force of evil in the world, the most violent forms of racial oppression in the United States became unacceptable. Photos of lynchings such as Claude Neal's caused many Americans to feel that some of their own racial practices were far too similar to the growing Nazi menace overseas.

In the years before the outbreak of World War II, racial violence steadily declined in the United States. In 1939 – when the war finally erupted – there were only two lynchings in the United States, compared to over a hundred per year a few

decades earlier. Racial violence, of course, continued, but it changed: once highly public, it now became secret. Lynchings were no longer advertised and photographed; large crowds no longer gathered to participate in them. The lynching of Claude Neal – what historians refer to as a “spectacle lynching” – would be one of the last of its kind. The racial violence of the future – such as the infamous murders of civil rights workers and the many bombings of homes and churches during the civil rights movement – would be done in secret by small groups of men.

As racial terrorism decreased in the United States, it rapidly escalated in Germany. Still, when Hitler enacted the infamous Nuremberg Laws in 1935 – which made it illegal for Jews and non-Jews to marry or have sexual relations, and which stripped Jews of their basic citizenship rights – African Americans felt that Hitler had passed laws for Jews that were quite similar to the laws that governed African Americans in the South. As one black journalist wrote, “What else are Jim-Crow laws but fascist laws?... It is difficult to believe that Hitler to save time did not copy them directly from the Southern statutes.” Historian Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore writes, “Although Hitler did not actually use Southern laws as an explicit model for Jewish persecution, he was reported to admire Dixie’s dictates for enforcing day-to-day white supremacy.” When the world condemned the Nuremberg Laws, Nazi’s once again defended their actions by comparing them to the United States.

Hitler waited until after the Olympic games – hosted in Germany in 1936 – to violently enforce those laws. Only then did the Nazi’s drop their excuse that they were simply engaging in racial practices no different from the U.S. During that year, W.E.B. Du Bois – a leading civil rights figure and perhaps the most renowned black intellectual of his generation – spent six months in Germany. When he returned, he wrote that the persecution of the Jewish people was reaching a point where it could be compared only to the slave trade itself... and things were getting worse. By the time that war broke out in 1939, the vast majority of African Americans had come to believe that Jewish persecution in Germany had become far worse than their own. During World War II, African American soldiers viewed themselves as going to war with an especially brutal form of white supremacy. They vowed to fight for a “double victory:” against fascism overseas... and against racial oppression at home.

## **Fighting the Nazis with a Segregated Army**

As the United States prepared to enter the war, it developed a powerful story about what its citizens would be fighting for. In fighting the Nazis, they were going to save the world from totalitarian control, and ensure that the people of the world could live freely and democratically. The story of freedom and equality, however, clashed with America's practice of racial oppression. The story of democracy clashed with the fact that African Americans were often denied their basic political rights, such as the right to vote.

The segregated military that was sent to fight overseas placed this contradiction right before the eyes of the world. The U.S. forces included over one million African Americans, who were organized into segregated military units. At home and abroad, black servicemen were housed separately, worked separately, ate their meals separately, and were often denied access to recreational activities such as swimming pools and movie screenings. The people of the world had often heard about American segregation, but during the Second World War, it arrived in their own countries.

For example, when U.S. forces gathered in England to prepare for the massive military operation known as D-Day, those forces included 130,000 African Americans. England was an almost entirely white country, and although the English had colonized much of the world, there was no segregation. The English treated soldiers of all races with respect. Under serious threat from the Nazis, they were delighted to have soldiers of any race arrive to support them, and were disturbed by the segregation they witnessed and by the racial attitudes of white American soldiers.

Those attitudes sometimes exploded into violence overseas, as they did at home. Racial violence sometimes occurred when white soldiers tried to enforce segregation overseas, and when black soldiers resisted. The most explosive situations, however, involved the ways that white soldiers sought to control African American interactions with European women. In the South, interactions between black men and white women were heavily controlled, and black men often faced violence if their actions were interpreted as sexual. A kind word or a smile given by a black man to a white woman was viewed as potentially being the first step on the road to interracial sex, and was violently policed. When white men

engaged in that violent policing, they thought of themselves not only as protecting white women, but as protecting the purity of the “white race:” a white woman giving birth to a black child was a thought that horrified white supremacists, and was something they sought to prevent at all costs. African Americans pointed out that this obsession with white “racial purity” was shared by the Nazis... a point they also highlighted by criticizing the fact that the American military segregated the blood supply so that white soldiers, if wounded, would not be given “black blood.” The obsession with “pure blood” was clearly one that Hitler shared as well.

White soldiers often feared that if black soldiers interacted with white women in Europe, that they would feel they could do so at home. Black soldiers were warned not to interact with European women while stationed in Europe, but that was impossible. When black soldiers were off base in an all-white country, they were unavoidably going to interact with white women. When they did, white soldiers sometimes attacked them. There were numerous cases of white soldiers intimidating black men who were talking to white women in European restaurants or bars, and in some cases brawls broke out between groups of white and black soldiers... with European men siding with the African Americans, who from their perspective had done nothing wrong. In France, a white soldier shot a black soldier in the back simply for speaking to a French woman who was serving him coffee. It was also true that some white soldiers overcame a lifetime of deeply ingrained prejudice after fighting alongside their African American brothers. But as historian Jason Sokol emphasizes, “While African American veterans remembered that some white soldiers lost their prejudices during the war, those memories were far outweighed by accounts of whites who violently defended Jim Crow” in the military.

Racial segregation and racial violence in the U.S. military harmed America’s reputation with its European allies, but it had a far more devastating impact in non-European nations. When the people of Africa and Asia witnessed the racist treatment of African American servicemen – such as the 22,000 stationed in India – they realized that they were witnessing how they would be treated if they went to the United States. For many of them, the treatment of African Americans reminded them of their own status as colonized people, viewed as racially inferior by their European rulers. This led people around the world to feel a sense of solidarity with black

Americans, and it led an increasing amount of black Americans to feel a sense of solidarity with colonized people. Some came to feel that they were essentially a colonized people themselves. Furthermore, just as African Americans did not feel that the United States' claims of fighting for freedom and democracy applied to them, many colonized people did not feel that the French or British claims to be fighting for democracy applied to them either.

As the historian Thomas Borstelmann writes, "Africans listened carefully as the major colonial powers on their continent – Britain, France, and Belgium – condemned Germany for its efforts to rule over other peoples." Colonized peoples "were dismayed at the apparent surprise of Europeans at the success of fascism, which seemed not so different from colonialism." Aime Cesaire – a famous poet and politician from the French territory of Martinique – wrote that before Europeans were the victims of fascism, "they were its accomplices," before it was inflicted on them, they had "absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples."

Many of the most influential anticolonial freedom fighters shared this perspective. Early in the war, Mahatma Gandhi published an article titled "British and American Nazism." In a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt shortly after the United States entered the war, Gandhi wrote: "Dear friend, I venture to think that the allied declaration that the Allies are fighting to make the world safe for freedom of the individual and for democracy sounds hollow so long as India and, for that matter Africa are exploited by Great Britain and America has the Negro problem in her own home." He told a reporter that "The Allies have no moral cause for which they are fighting, so long as they are carrying this double sin on their shoulders, the sin of India's subjection and the subjection of the Negroes and African races." Gandhi's words echoed the feelings of hundreds of millions of colonized peoples... and of a rising number of African Americans.

During the war, U.S. officials, ordinary citizens, civil rights workers, and business leaders all grew increasingly concerned that racism in the United States was undermining America's relations with its allies in Africa and Asia. As Walter White – the president of the NAACP – stated, when describing the effects of the segregated military overseas: "I have seen bewilderment in the eyes of brown, yellow and black peoples

in the Pacific at the manifestations of race prejudice by some American whites, not only against American Negro servicemen but against the natives whose aid we need *now* in winning the war, and whose friendship we will need *after* the war if we are to have peace.”

Even *Fortune* magazine – dedicated not to racial justice, but to business interests – wrote that “The Negro’s fate in the US affects the fate of white American soldiers in the Philippines, in the Caribbean, in Africa; bears on the solidity of our alliance with 800 million colored peoples in China and India; influences the feelings of countless neighbors in South America.” In other words, during World War II, there was widespread concern that racism in the United States threatened the ability of the United States to build and sustain positive relations with important military allies. In the words of historian Nico Slate, when “domestic racism threatened the war effort by alienating ‘colored’ nations,” that racism became unacceptable.

By the end of the war, President Truman believed that the United States needed to end its most notorious racial practices in order to emerge as a major world leader. Believing that lynchings did more than anything else to destroy the image of the United States as a land of freedom, and concerned that denying African Americans the right to vote undermined America’s ability to portray itself as a land of democracy, Truman urged Congress to outlaw lynching and to protect the right to vote. With many powerful segregationists in the Senate, he was unsuccessful. However, Truman did issue an executive order in 1948 calling for full equality in the military, stating that it was “essential that there be maintained in the armed services of the United States the highest standards of democracy.” Although the military resisted the change, it would be totally desegregated within six years. The world would continue to hear about racial segregation in the United States for many years to come, but they would no longer witness it in their own countries.

## ***Part II: The Cold War and Decolonization*** **White Supremacy Becomes a National Security Problem**

World War II devastated Europe, and destroyed the ability of European nations to control their colonies. In the years following the war, these colonies gradually gained their independence, and dozens of new African and Asian nations formed.



As European power faded and the era of colonization came to a close, two so-called “superpowers” emerged: the Soviet Union, and the United States. These superpowers both sought to influence the emerging African and Asian nations. U.S. officials quickly became obsessed with the fear that the new nations would turn to Communism, which they believed would ruin the world economy and perhaps plunge it into another Great Depression... which might then lead to another major war. U.S. officials believed that their nation’s new role as a superpower was to help re-establish a healthy global economy in a world that had been torn apart.

They also wanted to ensure that the United States would gain control over strategic resources – such as the massive amount of oil required for future wars, and the uranium needed for nuclear weapons – which were available in Europe’s old colonies. As both the United States and the Soviet Union tried to gain control of such resources, the emerging nations of Africa and Asia often came to view both sides as trying to replace their old colonial rulers. Rather than form strong alliances with either superpower, the emerging nations sought neutrality. They resented U.S. and Soviet attempts to influence their political direction, and fiercely guarded their right to develop whatever kind of political and economic system they believed would best serve their new nation.

In their efforts to control their own resources, many emerging nations pushed out the foreign businesses that had previously controlled those resources. They often broke up the large farms and plantations established during colonial times, and redistributed land to the people. Many U.S. officials saw these actions as attacks on private property, which they associated with Communism. In reality, they were usually just attempts by a recently liberated people to do away with the leftover structures of colonialism. U.S. officials often saw Communism where there was none... and wherever they imagined Communism, they also imagined the hidden influence of the Soviet Union.

The assumption that the Soviet Union was behind each and every Communist act – real or imagined – was due in part to the fact that the vast majority of U.S. officials had a very weak understanding of these new nations, which the United States had never seriously interacted with before. The assumption was also partly due to fear: unlike other nations, the people of

the United States had never had to worry about foreign invasions... but Pearl Harbor had changed that. Despite their immense wealth and power, the people of the United States felt extremely insecure in the decade following the Second World War, and imagined danger everywhere. Finally, U.S. officials assumed that the Soviet Union wielded far greater influence than it really did because of their racial beliefs: they viewed Africans and Asians as childlike, doubted their ability to make sophisticated political decisions by themselves, and therefore assumed that some outside force was influencing them. Many white Americans would later assume that so-called “outside agitators” – meaning Communists – were the true forces behind the civil rights movement for the same reason: they doubted that African Americans could have built such a powerful movement on their own.

The competition between the United States and the Soviet Union became known as the “Cold War.” During the Cold War, the old tradition of white supremacy in the United States grew from an international embarrassment into a serious national security concern. In the past, U.S. relations with Africa and Asia were usually not worked out with actual African and Asian people, but with their European colonial rulers who sympathized with the racial beliefs of white Americans. In the era of decolonization, the United States had to deal directly with African and Asian leaders, and American traditions of white supremacy reminded those leaders of their old colonial rulers. Because white supremacy caused African and Asian leaders to distrust the United States, it pushed them to build stronger economic and political ties with the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union, meanwhile, waged a relentless, global propaganda campaign against the United States by publishing endless stories about American racial oppression. It was an extremely effective way to undermine the United States’ claim that it was dedicated to spreading freedom and democracy. U.S. officials desperately tried to claim that racism was a part of America’s past that was quickly dying out, and that it only existed in isolated areas of the South that did not represent the nation as a whole. However, that story was impossible to sell: for in this new era, prominent Africans and Asians travelled to America much more frequently... and they were disturbed by what they saw.

## **The United Nations and the Humiliation of Foreign Dignitaries**

During the Second World War, a friend of Mahatma Gandhi's travelled by train through the American South, speaking with African Americans about the similarities between British imperialism in India and white supremacy in the United States. Her name was Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. One of the major leaders of the Indian struggle against British colonization and a major leader in the fight for women's rights, Kamaladevi was a friend of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and had recently attended President Roosevelt's inauguration. Now, the ticket collector on the train approached the distinguished guest of the United States and ordered her to move to the "colored" section.

Like Rosa Parks fourteen years later – and like Mahatma Gandhi half a century earlier, in South Africa – Kamaladevi refused to move. The ticket collector asked her where she was from. Kamaladevi could have explained that she was a distinguished guest from India and a friend of the President's wife. Instead, she replied: "It makes no difference. I am a colored woman obviously and it is unnecessary for you to disturb me for I have no intention of moving from here." With those words, Kamaladevi chose to identify with the struggles of people of color in the United States... and across the world. When the ticket collector stalked away to notify his superiors, he may have learned something about Kamaladevi, for he did not bother her again. One year later, Mahatma Gandhi would state in a speech before the Indian Congress that "I do not regard England, or for that matter America, as free countries. They are free after their own fashion, free to hold in bondage the colored races of the earth."

The humiliation of foreign dignitaries soon became a serious problem for the U.S. government. In 1945, after the war, the United Nations was founded in order to develop international cooperation, protect against human rights abuses, and prevent future wars. The headquarters for the United Nations was in New York City, meaning that representatives of countries around the world who worked with the UN suddenly poured into the United States. These representatives often lived in New York, where they became all-too familiar with the racially segregated neighborhoods that existed outside of the South. In New York, representatives from Asia, Latin America, and Africa had humiliating – and sometimes dangerous – racial experiences. In fact, in 1964 – nearly two decades after its

founding – fifty-five representatives from Africa and Asia submitted a petition asking that the United Nations be relocated to another country where they would be treated as equal human beings.

From New York City, these representatives would often drive down Highway 40 to meet with officials in Washington D.C. The hotels and restaurants along Highway 40 were segregated... meaning that African diplomats often walked into meetings in the nation's capital shortly after suffering humiliating experiences. As one African ambassador described his experience of trying to get a simple cup of coffee while driving along Highway 40: "When I asked for coffee, the good woman said she could not serve me. She said, 'That's the way it is here.' I cannot say how I felt. I was astonished. I was so angry." When journalists asked for the waitresses' side of the story, she replied: "He looked like just an ordinary run of the mill nigger to me. I couldn't tell he was an ambassador."

Worse yet was the fact that Washington D.C. itself – supposedly the very symbol of U.S. freedom and democracy – was segregated.

### **"To Secure These Rights"**

President Truman responded to these serious problems by establishing the Committee on Civil Rights in 1946, just one year after the end of World War II and the founding of the United Nations. The President instructed this committee to report on the current status of civil rights in the United States, and to recommend how to move forward. A year later, the Committee delivered a 178-page report titled *To Secure These Rights*. The report, in the words of historian Mary Dudziak, "highlighted the foreign affairs consequences of race discrimination."

*To Secure These Rights* stated that "Our foreign policy is designed to make the United States an enormous, positive influence for peace and progress throughout the world. We have tried to let nothing, not even extreme political differences between ourselves and foreign nations, stand in the way of this goal. But our domestic civil rights shortcomings are a serious obstacle... We cannot escape the fact that our civil rights record has been an issue in world politics. The world's press and radio are full of it." Communist nations "have tried to prove our

democracy an empty fraud, and our nation a consistent oppressor of underprivileged people.”

According to the Presidential Committee on Civil Rights, developing “better international relations” required reforming racial segregation in the nation’s capital. The Committee’s report stated that “The shameful and absurdity of Washington’s treatment of Negro Americans is highlighted by the presence of many dark-skinned foreign visitors. Capital custom not only humiliates colored citizens, but is a source of considerable embarrassment to these visitors... Foreign officials are often mistaken for American Negroes and refused food, lodging, and entertainment.” To these foreign visitors, Washington D.C. appeared to be “a graphic illustration of a failure of democracy.”

Following the release of the report, President Truman delivered a special message to Congress, stressing that the nation’s capital needed to be turned into “a true symbol of American freedom and democracy,” meaning that it needed to be desegregated. “If we wish to inspire the peoples of the world whose freedom is in jeopardy, if we wish to restore hope to those who have already lost their civil liberties [to totalitarian regimes,] if we wish to fulfill the promise that is ours, we must correct the remaining imperfections in our practice of democracy.” Truman was unable to desegregate Washington D.C., but the next president – Dwight Eisenhower – did. Eisenhower believed in white superiority, and supported segregation. But he also knew that a segregated capital humiliated foreign dignitaries and pushed potential allies towards the Soviet Union... and that was unacceptable. The desegregation of the nation’s capital began in 1953, and was complete by 1955.

### **American Propaganda: Telling Stories About Race and Democracy**

As racial progress slowly moved forward, the world’s newspapers remained full of stories of racial oppression in the United States. A paper in Fiji reported that “the United States has within its own borders one of the most oppressed and persecuted minorities in the world today.” In Ceylon, a reporter wrote that “in Washington, the seated figure of Abraham Lincoln broods over the capital of the U.S. where Jim Crow is the rule.” U.S. officials responded to such stories by waging a global propaganda campaign that, in the words of

historian Mary Dudziak, painted “American race relations in the best possible light for dissemination overseas.”

In the late 1940s, the United States Information Service was formed in an effort to influence global opinion. In 1950, it published a pamphlet titled *The Negro in American Life*, which was quickly spread around the world. *The Negro in American Life* began with the story of slavery, and of how theories of racial inferiority had developed in order to justify it. It claimed that although the United States still suffered from some of these old beliefs, it had made remarkable progress. After admitting the sins of America’s past – which the whole world clearly knew about, and which would therefore be impossible to hide – the pamphlet proceeded to paint a rosy picture: “Some Negroes,” it stated, “are large landowners; some are wealthy businessmen... They are physicists, chemists, psychologists, doctors.” The pamphlet described – and greatly exaggerated – recent Supreme Court cases, making it sound as if a ruling that had struck down segregation in a single university had abolished segregation in all universities. The message was that the United States, although flawed, was a land of constant progress, where good triumphed over evil, and where racism would soon be gone.

In order to enforce this narrative, the State Department – the branch of government in charge of foreign relations – also sent successful African Americans on overseas speaking tours. In looking for these candidates, the State Department examined their previous public statements to ensure that they were anti-Communists who truly believed that racial progress was being made in the United States. U.S. officials knew that the peoples of Africa and Asia would trust a story about racial progress much more if they heard it from African Americans, and they hoped that foreign publications would report the positive statements they made overseas.

However, even as some African Americans travelled abroad to paint a more positive picture of race relations, others fought to keep the world focused on racial oppression. Many believed that the United States would not embrace serious racial reform without intense international pressure. Some African Americans travelled the world, speaking not of progress, but of continuing atrocities. Some filed petitions with the United Nations, urging it to investigate human rights abuses against African Americans in the South. Some of these petitions – including one written by the renowned African American

scholar W.E.B. Du Bois – were deeply researched and filled with profoundly troubling statistics about the poverty and violence faced by black Americans. These petitions gained massive news coverage around the world, undermined the government’s story of racial progress, and caused many U.S. officials to feel that civil rights activists were pushing the emerging nations of Africa and Asia away from the United States, and towards the Soviet Union. For this reason, many civil rights activists were put under intense government surveillance during the Cold War.

Although the U.S. government put great efforts into promoting the story of racial progress – and repressing those who undermined it – a report on these efforts published in 1952 revealed that they were largely unsuccessful. Stories, quite simply, would not be enough to change the negative opinions that the majority of the world’s population held about racism in the United States. Nor was the desegregation of the single city of Washington D.C., or of the U.S. military. If the people of the world were ever going to believe the story of racial progress, that story would have to be based on something more substantial... on something that applied to all of American society.

### **The International Dimension of *Brown v. Board of Education***

In 1954, the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled that racially segregated public schools were illegal. The case had reached the Supreme Court at the end of 1952, during the last weeks of Truman’s presidency... and shortly after the report that American propaganda about racial progress was failing. The Truman administration quickly informed the Supreme Court that if they decided that the segregation of schools was constitutional, it would send a signal to the world that racial oppression was enshrined in the Constitution... and that equality, justice, and democracy were not. A positive ruling, on the other hand, would show the world that the American story of racial progress was real.

In the briefing that Truman’s administration sent to the Supreme Court, the leading foreign policy official in the United States – Secretary of State Dean Acheson – was quoted at length:

During the past six years, the damage to our foreign relations attributable to [race discrimination] has become progressively greater. The United States is under constant attack in the foreign press, over the foreign radio, and in such international bodies as the United Nations because of various practices of discrimination against minority groups in this country. As might be expected, Soviet spokesmen regularly exploit this situation in propaganda against the United States, both within the United Nations and through radio broadcasts and the press, which reaches all corners of the world. Some of these attacks against us are based on falsehood or distortion; but the undeniable existence of racial discrimination gives unfriendly governments the most effective kind of ammunition for their propaganda warfare.

The message was clear: a ruling in favor of segregation would do great damage to foreign relations and to national security. The Supreme Court Justices had likely already come to this conclusion. During World War II, they had often considered national security when making their rulings. For example, in 1940 they had ruled that schools could expel students who refused to salute the flag, writing that “national unity is the basis for national security.” Most notoriously, when the Court ruled in *Korematsu v. United States* that the internment of Japanese Americans was constitutional, they did so largely for national security reasons. In *Korematsu*, the Supreme Court decided that racial discrimination would protect the United States; in *Brown*, they decided that discrimination would hurt it.

The Justices were well-travelled men who had personally witnessed how American racism caused the people of the world to distrust the United States. For example, when Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas went to India in 1950, the first question Indians asked him was “Why does America tolerate the lynching of Negroes?” While in Pakistan, a man Douglas describes as a “Mongol prince” warned him that the Soviet Union would defeat the United States in the battle for Asia, because Asians did not view the wealthy and powerful United States as a land of justice. Shortly before the *Brown v. Board of Education* case arrived at the Supreme Court, Douglas wrote: “Neither wealth nor might will determine the outcome of the struggles in Asia. They will turn on emotional factors too subtle to measure. Political alliances of an enduring nature will



be built not on the power of guns or dollars, but on affection.” That affection depended on doing away with government support of racial oppression. Other Justices agreed.

However, the *Brown* ruling did not mention national security as one of the reasons for the decision. To have done so would have undermined the notion that the ruling was based purely on the principles of equality enshrined in the Constitution. The ruling gave the U.S. government the story of racial progress it needed to gain the favor of the emerging nations of the world. It had the exact effect on international opinion the government had hoped for. Three months after the decision, the National Security Council reported that in Africa, “the decision is regarded as the greatest event since the Emancipation Proclamation, and it removes from Communist hands the most effective anti-American weapon they had.” Two years after the ruling, the State Department reported that “Criticism of the United States because of color discrimination practices... has markedly declined.”

### **Epilogue: The Civil Rights Movement**

The civil rights movement began a year after the *Brown* decision, when long-time activist Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery. The people of the world watched the events of the civil rights movement closely. While marveling at the rise of Martin Luther King, they expressed outrage at all the injustices that occurred during the movement. The world was outraged when Emmitt Till was brutally murdered in 1955; outraged when violent mobs gathered to prevent the integration of schools in Little Rock in 1957; outraged when nonviolent college students were beaten during the sit-ins of 1960; outraged when the buses of the Freedom Riders were bombed in 1961 and when peaceful protestors were attacked in Birmingham and Selma in 1963 and 1965.

Meanwhile, U.S. officials continued to worry that these episodes of racial violence would contribute to pushing the new nations of the world towards the Soviet Union. When Eisenhower sent troops to protect black students in Little Rock; when Kennedy decided to take a stand and protect the Freedom Riders; and when Johnson pushed for the most important civil rights legislation of the century, they did so in response to pressures at home created by the civil rights

movement... and to serious pressures from abroad created by the Cold War.

However, something had changed after the *Brown* decision. Although the world continued to express outrage, it increasingly viewed the U.S. government as being on the side of racial progress. The Supreme Court decision that segregated schools were unconstitutional led much of the world to feel that the U.S. government had taken a strong stand against segregation. The world's outrage began to shift away from being directed at the U.S. government itself, and to being directed at the most explicitly racist parts of the United States, which the world increasingly viewed as being in conflict with the U.S. government rather than being supported by it. This new global opinion that the U.S. government was actively working for racial progress was sealed with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination based on race, religion, gender, and national origin.

Although the United States had indeed made remarkable progress, racial conflict showed no signs of ceasing after the Civil Rights Act. In fact, the civil rights movement spread dramatically outside of the South in the second half of the 1960s. As race-based poverty continued to increase during the civil rights movement, the movement became more militant. Riots flared across America's cities, and it became increasingly clear that white American racism was not just a southern problem. Despite these facts, the world had become less critical... not of American racism, but of the American government that *they* built relations with. Meanwhile, by the time the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, U.S. officials had begun to feel that Communism was much less of a threat. The continuing racial oppression at home no longer seemed to pose much of a national security concern. And so, just as the civil rights movement was turning its attention towards the kinds of race-based poverty that plagues America to this day, one of the major pressures in pushing forward racial justice in the United States – the international pressures – began to fade.

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