

## **The Cold War and Civil Rights: How International Pressure Affected the Pre-Brown Civil Rights Movement**

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### **Abstract**

In 1954, after many years of civil rights activism, the Supreme Court ruled that school segregation was unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*. This ruling was championed by civil rights activists as a major victory for the domestic civil rights movement, and historians have generally focused on this aspect of the *Brown* case. However, behind the scenes, President Truman and the State Department pressured the Supreme Court to rule as it did not because of a desire to advance civil rights, but rather to preserve America's image overseas. The recently uncolonized peoples of the world judged America's racial problems harshly and, Executive Branch officials feared, were more likely to side with the Communists because of these judgments. Conventional thinking suggests that Truman's actions in support of civil rights were driven by organizations such as the NAACP and the National Emergency Against Mob Violence. Yet international pressure in direct response to American foreign policy during the Cold War substantially contributed to the Truman administration's civil rights reform, culminating in the *Amicus Brief* submitted to the Supreme Court in the *Brown v. Board* decision that ultimately informed the decision's final ruling. This paper examines the foreign pressures that prompted the Executive Branch to exert pressure on the Supreme Court and significantly affected the *Brown* decision.

## Background

In 1911, the same year he turned 27, President Harry S. Truman said to his future wife Bess, “I think one man is just as good as another so long as he’s honest and decent and not a n\*\*\*\*\* or a Chinaman. Uncle Will says that the Lord made a white man from dust, a n\*\*\*\*\* from mud, then He threw up what was left and it came down a Chinaman.”<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, this man was the first president to champion civil rights since Abraham Lincoln. He desegregated the military and the federal government and presided over much of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case. While it is unlikely that Truman himself had any personal conversion on the moral necessity of civil rights for African Americans, the criticism from the international community against America’s racial segregation and discrimination during the Cold War influenced the Executive Branch’s response to civil rights reform, culminating in the *Amicus Brief* submitted to the Supreme Court in the *Brown v. Board* decision that ultimately informed the decision’s final ruling.

## The Cold War, the Vets Coming Home, and the Beginning of the Civil Rights Movement

Over 900,000 African Americans returned home from Europe and Asia in 1946 to face intense racism and discrimination unchanged from before the war. They had expected the nation to be grateful for their service. As early as December 1941, they had embraced the promise of “the double VV for a double victory:” victories over fascism and American racism.<sup>2</sup> Originally published by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the Double V Campaign defined the belief that since African Americans had been dying for democracy overseas, they rightfully deserved democratic ideals at home.<sup>3</sup> This expectation was generally not met. Two of the most poignant examples feature George Dorsey and Isaac Woodard. Dorsey was a veteran who fought in World War II for five years and survived battles in the Pacific. After returning to America, he and his

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<sup>1</sup> Harry S. Truman, “Truman to Wallace,” *Archives of the Seattle Times* (The Seattle Times, November 3, 1991),

<https://archive.seattletimes.com/archive/?date=19911103&slug=1314805>.

<sup>2</sup> Euell A. Nielsen, “THE DOUBLE V CAMPAIGN (1942-1945),” Black Past, July 1, 2020, [https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/events-african-american-history/the-double-v-campaign-1942-](https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/events-african-american-history/the-double-v-campaign-1942-1945/#:~:text=The%20Double%20V%20campaign%20was,African%20Americans%20in%20the%20military.)

1945/#:~:text=The%20Double%20V%20campaign%20was,African%20Americans%20in%20the%20military.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

closest friend were killed along the roadside.<sup>4</sup> The killers were never identified, even though many knew their identities; white people were complicit, and Black people were too worried about their safety to speak.<sup>5</sup> While this case drew national attention, it garnered little action on the federal government's part. Similarly, the beating of Isaac Woodard was left unsolved. Woodard, who served in the Pacific theater for three years, was on a bus in the South returning to his home after being honorably discharged several days earlier. The driver of the bus called the police after he and Woodard argued when Woodard asked to stop so he could use the restroom.<sup>6</sup> Still in uniform, Woodward was ordered out of the bus by Lynwood Shull, the sheriff, who beat him. By his admission, the sheriff clubbed Woodard across the eyes, blinding him.<sup>7</sup> Woodard's attackers were tried but declared not guilty by an all-white jury.<sup>8</sup>

Truman had not supported racial equity before the war. For example, as a senator from Missouri in 1940, he gave an address to the National Colored Democratic Association in which he stated that "I wish to make it clear that I am not appealing for social equality of the Negro."<sup>9</sup> Yet as president, he was forced to confront the crisis facing African Americans during a meeting with the National Committee Against Mob Violence, which formed out of religious and legal institutions as a response to the increase in lynchings and other civil rights abuses African American soldiers faced upon their return home. Truman reportedly sat through the meeting with "clenched hands,"<sup>10</sup> exclaiming, "My God! I had no idea it was as terrible as that. We've got to do something."<sup>11</sup> The next day, Truman instructed the attorney

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Bragg, "THE MOORE'S FORD LYNCHING (July 1946)," Black Past, December 2, 2015, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/moore-s-ford-lynching-july-1946/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Olivia B. Waxman, "How a 1946 Case of Police Brutality Against a Black WWII Veteran Shaped the Fight for Civil Rights," *TIME*, March 30, 2021, <https://time.com/5950641/blinding-isaac-woodard/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Jon Bauer, "Truman and Executive Order 9981: Idealistic, Pragmatic, or Shrewd Politician?," Truman and Executive Order 9981: Idealistic, Pragmatic, or Shrewd Politician? | Harry S. Truman, accessed August 22, 2022, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/education/lesson-plans/truman-and-executive-order-9981-idealistic-pragmatic-or-shrewd-politician>.

<sup>10</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, "Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative," *Stanford Law Review* 41, no. 1 (1988): pp. 61-120, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1228836>, 78.

<sup>11</sup> "Truman's Racist Talk Cited by Historian," *The Seattle Times*, November 3, 1991, <https://archive.seattletimes.com/archive/?date=19911103&slug=1314805>.

general to create the President's Committee on Civil Rights<sup>12</sup> to report on the state of civil rights in the US and offer policy solutions.<sup>13</sup> The Committee's final publication, *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights*, proposed various measures: desegregation of the federal government, the increased representation of African Americans in ambassadorial positions, and federal protection against lynching.<sup>14</sup> The Committee came to these conclusions as a result of international pressures, arguing that "Discrimination against, or mistreatment of, any racial, religious or national group in the United States is not only seen as our internal problem... We cannot escape the fact that our civil rights record has been an issue in world politics."<sup>15</sup> This publication helped persuade Truman to issue Executive Orders 9980 and 9981, which desegregated the armed forces and the federal government's workforce.<sup>16</sup> In addition, he sent a message to Congress on February 2, 1948, suggesting several of the Committee's recommendations be implemented.

The idea that discrimination was not simply a domestic issue was not new. During World War II, the Japanese broadcast American racial practices to its conquered territories,<sup>17</sup> accusing America of forming a "negro corps officered by whites" which would "be rapidly drafted into the Service to be used as shields to save the lives of white Americans." lowering the United States to the level of European colonial powers in the eyes of the newly conquered south-east Asian and Oceanian countries.<sup>18</sup> Japan's ultimate goal was to make its conquered territories see the United States as an enemy, allowing Japan to control conquered areas more easily.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Harry S. Truman, "Truman to Clark," *Truman Library* (National Archives), accessed August 11, 2022, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/letter-harry-s-truman-attorney-general-tom-clark-attached-memo-david-niles?documentid=NA&pagenumber=2>.

<sup>13</sup> "Records of the President's Committee on Civil Rights Record Group 220," Truman Library (National Archives), accessed September 6, 2022, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/federal-record/records-presidents-committee-civil-rights-record-group-220>.

<sup>14</sup> President's Committee on Civil Rights, "To Secure These Rights" § (1947).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> "Executive Order 9981: Desegregation of the Armed Forces (1948)," Keystone Documents (National Archives and Records Administration), accessed September 5, 2022, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9981>.

<sup>17</sup> Dudziak, *Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative*, 67.

<sup>18</sup> Jane M.J. Robbins (1997), "Tokyo Calling: Japanese Overseas Radio Broadcasting 1937-1945," <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/77022998.pdf>, 205.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

After the war, America's new Cold War enemy, the Soviet Union, also aimed racial inequality in the United States. Soon after Woodard was blinded, the *Daily Worker*, an organ of the Soviet-controlled American Communist Party, asserted, "Woodard tells a story in affidavits matching tales of horror from Nazi torture chambers...sheer brutality and fascist terror..."<sup>20</sup> In another instance, the Russian newspaper *Trud* published an article titled, "Position of Negroes in the USA," decrying America's "increasing frequency of terroristic acts against negroes,"<sup>21</sup> echoing other Soviet publications on US race relations.<sup>22</sup> Reports of the enormous volume of racial violence in America and the lack of justice for the perpetrators of that violence spread quickly across the globe. This was particularly embarrassing to the United States because it was still prosecuting Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg.<sup>23</sup>

### **No More Difference between International and Internal Policy**

Soon after World War II, the federal government realized segregation harmed American international relations. In 1950, the Department of State published a report commissioned by President Truman asserting that there was "no longer any real distinction between 'domestic' and 'foreign' affairs."<sup>24</sup> Consequently, "[p]ractically everything we do, ... what we say in our newspapers, over the air and on public platforms, our attitudes towards each other and other people—all these things affect... our influence abroad."<sup>25</sup> The competition for global influence between the Soviet Union and the United States meant that the Department of State became an oft-consulted authority for what internal policy changes would be appropriate for the United States. This was most pronounced in the correspondence of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who served in that position from January 1949 until January 1953. Even before Acheson became Secretary of State in 1946, the Chairman of the President's Committee of Fair Employment Practice requested a statement from him regarding how racial discrimination is a "handicap in foreign relations." Acheson responded that "[i]t is true...

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Berkowitz, "Blinding of Isaac Woodard: 1946 Racist Police Violence Case Gets Fresh Attention," *People's World*, March 10, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> "Position of Negroes in the USA," *Trud*, August 1946.

<sup>22</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 20.

<sup>23</sup> "Resonant Ripples in a Global Pond: The Blinding of Isaac Woodard," Isaac Woodard Conference Paper, accessed August 19, 2022, <http://faculty.uscupstate.edu/amyers/conference.html>.

<sup>24</sup> "Our Foreign Policy," *Our Foreign Policy* § (1950).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

that the existence of discrimination against minority groups... has an adverse effect upon our relations with other countries.”<sup>26</sup>

Acheson’s letter came against the backdrop of an increasing American commitment to the Cold War and worries over the effect of racism in the United States on relations with newly independent and developing nations in Africa and Asia. Referring to this issue, Truman stated in a message to Congress in 1947 that “[a]t the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life,” i.e., American capitalism or Soviet communism.<sup>27</sup> The contest was fiercest in the developing world for two main reasons. First, as Truman noted, “[t]he seeds of totalitarian regimes are nurtured by... want. They spread and grow in the evil soil of poverty.”<sup>28</sup> Because centuries of European colonization had left most of the Third World<sup>29</sup> incredibly poor, there was abundant poverty to nurture the “seeds” of communism. Secondly, the post-colonial world harbored a latent distrust of white Europeans. America had initially escaped this anti-imperialist bias because it was not perceived as a major colonial power in most regions outside the Philippines and Cuba. But domestic racial violence made the United States seem hypocritical to these nations at best and imperialist at worst.

Under the Zhdanov Doctrine, the USSR began to exploit this connection, painting the choice facing the world as one, not between capitalism and communism, but between the ideologically right camp of racist imperialism led by the United States and the ideological left camp of racial inclusivity led by the Soviets.<sup>30</sup> Soviet propaganda depicted the United States as simply another colonizer, boosting the USSR’s attempts at gaining a sphere of influence in Asia and Africa. The global attention paid to American racial violence after World War II and segregation under Jim Crow handed the Soviet Union its data. For example, the Muscovite publication *New Times*, describing the “thralldom” of African Americans in the United States, simply reported examples of African Americans being paid less for the same work, barred from public

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<sup>26</sup> Dean Acheson, “Acheson to Malcom,” (Washington D.C., May 8, 1946).

<sup>27</sup> Harry Truman, “Truman Doctrine,” 1947. US Capital Building: Milestone Documents, National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/truman-doctrine>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Unlike its modern and common usage, the Third World referred to the unaligned countries during the Cold War, while the First World was American allies, and the Second World, Soviet allies. Hence why Second World is almost never heard nowadays.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathon Green, *The Encyclopedia of Censorship* (New York u.a.: Facts on File, 1990), 668.

accommodations, prevented from voting in many states, and suffering lynchings and other acts of violence that the United States government was unable to prevent or successfully prosecute.<sup>31</sup> American racial violence was essentially free propaganda for the Soviet Union.

Nowhere was the competition for the loyalty of the Third World more intense than in India, where racism in America garnered much criticism according to John Skrentny, a prominent civil rights scholar.<sup>32</sup> Recently independent from the British, India recognized the United States as the leader of the Western world who would drive the bloc's response to communism. Indians also recognized that the attitude of the United States towards its minorities would affect its ability to be an effective proselytizer of the values of capitalism. One popular Western Indian newspaper stated that if America continued to ignore the effects of segregation, it "would lose the support of the colored races."<sup>33</sup> The *Allahabad Leader* wrote that the "racist spirit in the USA is not consistent with America's claim to be the moral leadership of the world." It was with cruel irony that one paper advised the United States to take a "refresher course in the truths which General Jefferson once held to be self-evident."<sup>34</sup> The Sri Lankan (only two years independent from India) *Observer* noted that "in Washington, the seated figure of Abraham Lincoln broods over the capital of the US where Jim Crow is the rule," adding that "the colour bar is the greatest propaganda gift any country could give to the Kremlin in its persistent bid for the affections of the coloured races of the world...."<sup>35</sup> The American ambassador could always counter by pointing the finger at India's caste system. One American ambassador reportedly stated in response to Indian questions about a recent lynching in the United States, "Yes, it's almost as bad as it is in India," referring to the caste system.<sup>36</sup> But India was not vying to lead the world in freedom and democracy.

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<sup>31</sup> [https://ia903001.us.archive.org/12/items/HistoryOfTheoriesAndIdeologiesThatGotUsInTheTurmoil/%5BKenneth\\_Osgood%5D\\_Total\\_Cold\\_War\\_-\\_Eisenhower%E2%80%99s\\_Se%28z-lib.org%29.pdf](https://ia903001.us.archive.org/12/items/HistoryOfTheoriesAndIdeologiesThatGotUsInTheTurmoil/%5BKenneth_Osgood%5D_Total_Cold_War_-_Eisenhower%E2%80%99s_Se%28z-lib.org%29.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> John D. 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 (April 1998): pp. 237-284, [https://doi.org/10.1163/2468-1733\\_shafr\\_sim270020220](https://doi.org/10.1163/2468-1733_shafr_sim270020220), 248.

<sup>33</sup> Frenise A. Logan, "Racism and Indian-US Relations, 1947-1953: Views in the Indian Press," *Pacific Historical Review* 54, no. 1 (January 1985): pp. 71-79, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3638866>, 73.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 18.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

## Increasing International Outcry and American Response

As the Cold War matured during the late 1940s and early 1950s, attention to American discrimination increased not only in the Third World, but also among America's post-World War II allies, including Great Britain and France, and throughout Europe, particularly in Germany and Italy. Under the Marshall Plan, the United States was providing Europe with food and aiding its economic and political recovery. In addition, Western Europe was dependent on the United States for defense under the newly formed NATO. Because European governments could not risk losing this support, criticism of the United States was dulled. For example, when a Dutch government official complained to the American ambassador about racial violence in the United States, he stated that "the Soviet Union possess[ed] one propaganda theme which is extremely effective throughout Europe... criticism of American racial attitudes."<sup>37</sup> He immediately noted that he meant no insult by this statement, reassuring the ambassador that the "Netherlands is very unreceptive to anti-American propaganda."<sup>38</sup> Yet the dual concerns of defense and recovery only affected the response of the European *governments*. The European *press* regularly criticized violence against African Americans in the United States. This negative press damaged the average European's opinion of the United States, despite the political motivation to remain friendly to the United States provided by the Marshall Plan and other forms of foreign assistance. Secretary of State Dean Acheson commented that the "damage to our foreign relations attributable to [American racism] ... [became] progressively greater,"<sup>39</sup> as the Cold War matured.

The Europeans that America liberated were especially critical of American racism, as they witnessed firsthand the irony of sending a Jim Crow army to war against the Aryan Third Reich. The European press published articles with titles like "America's Untouchables,"<sup>40</sup> "Odor or Burning Flesh,"<sup>41</sup> and "Lincoln or Lynch?"<sup>42</sup> that focused on American hypocrisy: espousing liberal ideals against the Soviet Union, while designating African Americans "untouchables," burning their flesh (referring to one particularly violent lynching), and practicing segregation

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<sup>37</sup> John D. 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 (April 1998): pp. 237-284, [https://doi.org/10.1163/2468-1733\\_shafr\\_sim270020220](https://doi.org/10.1163/2468-1733_shafr_sim270020220), 248.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Dean Acheson, "Acheson to McGranery," (Washington D.C., December 3, 1952).

<sup>40</sup> James W. Ivy, "American Negro Problem in The European Press," *The Crisis*, July 1950, 57 edition, pp. 413-420, 417.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*



in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC. One Swiss newspaper summarized the feeling: “America has a caste chiefly interested in maintaining and spreading racism as an economic arm of her great trusts, and the inferior position of the Negro keeps him a docile and ill-paid worker.”<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, many Europeans considered the United States hypocritical for preaching about the evils of colonialism while maintaining strict segregation in the United States.<sup>44</sup> The London *News Review* wrote that “[n]ow the country which has always shut its eyes to the inequalities of the American way of life for the Negro, while exclaiming in hypocritical horror at persecution in Europe and allegedly the British colonies, has had its housekeep-ing publicly exposed.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, this brand of anti-Americanism also appealed to the portion of Europeans who still believed America to be a culturally backward country.<sup>46</sup> Americans were viewed by some, even after World War II, as “technological barbarians lacking in all notions of human values,” a phrase borrowed from a popular French paper and a prejudice that was inflamed by American racial discrimination.<sup>47</sup> Regarding criticism of the United States, the English philosopher C. E. M. Joad even went so far as to claim that American influence “corrupts, infects, and pollutes whatever it touches.”<sup>48</sup> Not only was American hypocrisy damaging its relations with left-leaning and moderate Europeans, but also with right-wing Europeans who missed the colonial era.

One of the most embarrassing race-related incidents for the United States in the pre-*Brown* Cold War happened during the first meeting of the United Nations Subcommittee on the Prevention of Discrimination. This subcommittee worried the United States, since the UN, which the United States had used to criticize other nations that did not support the rights of all their citizens, was now going to be able to discuss an internal American issue. A high-ranking State Department official wrote on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1947:

United States’ problems concerning relationships with minority groups have been fully treated in the press of other countries. This Subcommittee was established on the initiative of the USSR, and there is every indication

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 417.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 416.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

that the country and others will raise questions concerning our domestic problems in this regard.<sup>49</sup>

As the official's reference to the USSR makes clear, the State Department's concern about the subcommission's findings reflected its larger concerns about the Soviets weaponizing America's racial injustice for propaganda.

Eclipsing the threat of other countries raising issues about domestic problems in the United States, an internal American group, the NAACP, submitted *An Appeal to the World* to the Subcommittee.<sup>50</sup> In this document, W.E.B Du Bois, the primary author, accused segregation of creating a "nation within a nation" and credited American prosperity in large part to slavery.<sup>51</sup> In a stinging jab at American prestige, Du Bois wrote that:

[Racism] has repeatedly led the greatest modern attempt at democratic government to deny its political ideals...[and] falsify its philanthropic assertions. A nation which boldly declared "That all men are created equal," proceeded to build its economy on chattel slavery... [and] finds itself continuously making common cause with race-hate, prejudiced exploitation, and oppression of the common man. Its high and noble words are turned against it because they are contradicted in every syllable by the treatment of the American Negro for three hundred and twenty-eight years.<sup>52</sup>

Du Bois argued that America did not live up to its ideals, and thanks to this document's usefulness to countries that wanted to criticize the United States, it was widely circulated among foreign ambassadors.

The Soviet Ambassador seized the opportunity to publicly criticize America, reportedly wielding a copy of the petition.<sup>53</sup> The State Department worried that the United States was about to be attacked by the Soviets "at its most vulnerable points" and to be outed as a "nation of hypocrites."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the Soviet delegation to the UN launched a very "severe attack on US discrimination practices."<sup>55</sup> To defend against

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<sup>49</sup> Skrentny, "The Effect of the Cold War on African-American Civil Rights," 247.

<sup>50</sup> Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 109.

<sup>51</sup> W E B Du Bois, *An Appeal to the World: A Statement on the Denial of Human Rights to Minorities in the Case of Citizens of Negro Descent in the United States of America and an Appeal to the United Nations for Redress* (New York City, New York, 1947), 1.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>53</sup> Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*, 108-111.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

this embarrassment, the United States claimed that it was already addressing the issue, pointing to the President’s Committee on Civil Rights and other measures that appeared to solve the “negro problem.”<sup>56</sup> It was largely irrelevant if they helped African Americans; to prevent debate over *An Appeal to the World*, the United States simply had to be able to claim that it was already fixing the issue internally, and thus the UN had no jurisdiction.<sup>57</sup> The United States succeeded, proving how useful federal efforts to end racism could be in defending American prestige in the United Nations.

Despite its slight victory at the UN, the government recognized the danger of losing the Cold War if it did not counter anti-Americanism. It directed the efforts of the United States Information Service (USIS), the subagency of the United States Information Agency (USIA) that handled overseas operations, to counter these notions.<sup>58</sup> Essentially the propaganda arm of the United States overseas, the USIS published articles in foreign newspapers, distributed leaflets, and even paid for notable African Americans to travel overseas to speak to Third World audiences about their experiences with American democracy.<sup>59</sup> Initially, especially in parts of the world where race did not pose an issue, such as in the Middle East, the two agencies published what we today think of as traditional Cold War propaganda, painting capitalism as a boon and Communism as a failure based on economic standards. For example, in Tehran, the USIS distributed 10,000 copies of *From Whom Is Help Coming For Me?*, a four-page leaflet that contrasts the exploitation of workers in the Soviet Union with the training and humanitarian aid given to the world by the United Nations (really representing the United States).<sup>60</sup> But to counter the “widespread misunderstanding of the United States”<sup>61</sup> because of American racism and launch a “campaign of

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> “Records of the United States Information Agency (RG 306),” Foreign Policy (National Archives and Records Administration), accessed August 29, 2022, [https://www.archives.gov/research/foreign-policy/related-records/rg-306#:~:text=USIS%20began%20operation%20as%20the,States%20Information%20Agency%20\(USIA\).](https://www.archives.gov/research/foreign-policy/related-records/rg-306#:~:text=USIS%20began%20operation%20as%20the,States%20Information%20Agency%20(USIA).)

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Embassy, Tehran, “Attaching Memorandum Entitled “Report on the Use of Anti-Soviet Material Within Iran During Period Covered by Last Two Years,”” *NSA Archive 2* (National Security Agency), accessed January 2022, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB78/propaganda%20096.pdf>, 5.

<sup>61</sup> Harry Truman, “Address on Foreign Policy at a Luncheon of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.” April 20, 1950, Washington DC: Truman Library, National Archives, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/92/address-foreign-policy-luncheon-american-society-newspaper-editors>.

truth,”<sup>62</sup> the USIS needed to develop *defensive* propaganda—propaganda that defended the racial reality of the United States. To that end, the Department of State began to reframe the narrative around racial discrimination and push internally for civil rights reform.

This reframing argued that African Americans had made immense progress since their emancipation, showing the superiority of American democracy.<sup>63</sup> In this way, the USIS did not deny the past: it simply portrayed African Americans’ success in advancing their civil rights as a triumph of democracy, even though there was much more to fix. In addition, the service consciously identified newsworthy achievements by Black Americans, such as records set in athletics, as evidence of racial progress.<sup>64</sup> One example is an article for a Burmese newspaper by Fredrick C. Jochem, who worked with the American embassy in Burma, entitled *Negro Problem* in which he suggested that the Burmese did not have all the facts about the racial problems in the United States.<sup>65</sup> He revealed that more than 50 African Americans held teaching positions at American colleges and conceded that while there still was a racial issue in the United States, it was largely contained to the South and was becoming less prevalent, both hallmarks of USIS propaganda.<sup>66</sup>

Despite the USIS narrative overseas, the fact remained that the average African American earned \$14,216 while the average white earned \$27,807, and African Americans in most of the South were only half as likely as their white counterparts to register to vote and even less likely to vote.<sup>67</sup> Lynch mobs still killed African Americans with impunity.<sup>68</sup> To silence accurate criticism of American racial issues, the United States needed to get serious about civil rights. President Truman tried to implement various reforms, such as an anti-lynching bill or a bill to abolish the poll tax, but most civil rights bills were “bottled up” in committees chaired by powerful Southern democrats.<sup>69</sup> New tactics were needed.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Osgood, *Total Cold War*, 71.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>65</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 47.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 89.

<sup>68</sup> “History of Lynching in America,” NAACP, February 11, 2022, <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america>.

<sup>69</sup> “STILL BOTTLED UP,” *New York Times*, January 23, 1950.

Since they could not influence Congress to pass civil rights reform, the Justice Department, State Department, and President Truman turned to the courts, and began, without precedent, to submit *amicus* briefs announcing the Federal Government's support for African American civil rights. The first brief was submitted by the Department of Justice to the Supreme Court regarding *Shelley v. Kraemer*. In 1948 this case, Shelly challenged the constitutionality of racially restrictive land covenants. The brief argued that racial covenants were an international embarrassment and caused problems in international affairs.<sup>70</sup> It maintained that the State Department found it "next to impossible to formulate a satisfactory answer to our critics in other countries; the gap between the things we stand for in principle and the facts of a particular situation may be too wide to be bridged."<sup>71</sup> The brief also posed the question: how could America lead other nations by example towards freedom, while it was not free itself? Essentially, to win the Cold War, America needed to 'practice what it preached.' Continuing this tactic, the State Department submitted similar briefs for *Henderson v. United States* and *Sweatt v. Painter*.

### ***Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka***

African Americans in the United States were not treated equally. Even if the United States had made progress, the Soviet Union could still claim that the United States did not live up to its ideals. By 1953, despite the efforts of the USIS, USIA, and the federal government, America's international record of racial injustice had significantly diminished its global reputation, especially in the Third World. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell stated that the United States was "the most hated nation in the world today," warning that "communism must win the global cold war by default" if the United States did not issue serious civil rights reform.<sup>72</sup> Truman was looking for a way to push civil rights forward when a group of thirteen parents complained about segregated schooling and *Brown v. Board of Education* was born.

The State Department and Justice Department submitted a joint *amicus* brief to the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board* advocating for the end of segregation primarily because of its negative impact on

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<sup>70</sup> Osgood, Total Cold War, 112.

<sup>71</sup> Dean Acheson, "Foreign Policy and Domestic Discrimination," *Foreign Policy and Domestic Discrimination* (National Archives, March 5, 2015), <https://text-message.blogs.archives.gov/2015/03/05/foreign-policy-and-domestic-discrimination/>.

<sup>72</sup> Postwar Foreign Policy and African-American Civil Rights §, accessed August 1, 2022, <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Essays/Keeping-the-Faith/Postwar-Foreign-Policy-Civil-Rights/>.

international relations, claiming, “Racial discrimination furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills, and it raises doubts even among friendly nations as to the intensity of our devotion to the democratic faith.”<sup>73</sup> The brief spent six of its eight pages opposing segregation because of its negative effect on America’s ability to promote democracy over communism.<sup>74</sup> It included the letter by Dean Acheson mentioned above, which stated his concerns over how the United States was constantly attacked in foreign media and by international bodies, such as the United Nations, because of racial discrimination.<sup>75</sup>

Although the court’s decision did not directly mention the international context of the case, there is no doubt that *Brown* was powerfully affected by the international opinion of American racial practices. The justices of 1953 were not like the earlier justices in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case who believed separate but equal was possible; they understood that the world was watching American racial practices, and to fix America in the eyes of the world, they would need to take serious action. Chief Justice Earl Warren was particularly conscious of the issues that racial discrimination caused for the United States. He stated that “[o]ur American system like all others is on trial both at home and abroad. The way it works;...The extent to which we maintain the spirit of our constitution with its Bill of Rights, will in the long run do more to make it both secure and the object of adulation than the number of hydrogen bonds we stockpile.”<sup>76</sup>

In a time when US racism was ever-present in foreign headlines, America’s Supreme Court Justices were aware that the international community was concerned about civil rights abuses in America according to Dudziak, a Cold War Civil Rights historian.<sup>77</sup> For example, when Justice William O. Douglas traveled to India in 1950, the first question he was asked upon his arrival was “[w]hy does America tolerate the lynching of the Negroes?”<sup>78</sup> The *Brown* Supreme Court justices were well-schooled in the international connotations of their decision. The *amicus* brief would have resonated clearly.

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<sup>73</sup> “Oliver Brown, et al., Appellants v. Board of Education of Topeka, Shawnee County, Kansas, et al.” Accessed August 29, 2022. [http://archive.oah.org/special-issues/teaching/2008\\_12/sources/ex1src2.pdf](http://archive.oah.org/special-issues/teaching/2008_12/sources/ex1src2.pdf).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 106.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, “Brown as a Cold War Case,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (January 2004): pp. 32-52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3659611>, 4.

On May 17, 1954, *Brown v. Board* declared school segregation unconstitutional. Within the hour, the USIS began to broadcast the decision around the world on *The Voice of America*.<sup>79</sup> Almost 40,000 copies of “The Negro in American Life” and other pamphlets were distributed in India reporting on the *Brown* decision, while in Eastern Europe, the *Voice of America* broadcast the decision for weeks.<sup>80</sup> USIS propaganda films were reviewed and edited, and many were broadcast around the world depicting white and black school children together. Showing the critical importance *Brown* held for the information agencies of the United States, the decision was exploited “to the fullest” on all broadcasts and included in almost every USIS publication for almost a month after the decision.<sup>81</sup>

There was an outpouring of support for the decision from across the world, especially in Asia and Africa. The *Hindustan Times of India* praised the ruling, saying that, “The practice of racial segregation in schools ... has been a long-standing blot on American life and civilization.”<sup>82</sup> In Nigeria, the *West African Pilot* reported that:

It is no secret that America is today hailed as the leader of the democratic world. This carries with it a great deal of moral responsibility. Firstly, it entails that the American concept and practice of democracy within its territories should acknowledge the necessity of equal opportunity for all citizens, no matter their racial origin. Secondly, it implies that the United States should set an example for all other nations by taking the lead in removing from its national life all signs and traces of racial intolerance, arrogance, or discrimination for which it criticizes some other nations.<sup>83</sup>

Like in Nigeria, the ruling was also significant in Westernized nations. The *Sydney Morning Herald* hailed *Brown* as a “blow to communism.”<sup>84</sup> America also recognized the international significance of *Brown*. The *San Francisco Chronicle* printed that “[g]reat as the impact of the antisegregation ruling will be upon the states of the South..., still greater, we believe, will be its impact on South America, Africa, and Asia, to this country’s lasting honor and benefit.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 107.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Osgood, *Total Cold War*, 280.

<sup>82</sup> Dudziak, “Brown as a Cold War Case,” 3.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>85</sup> “Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights of the Committee on the Judiciary,” Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights of the Committee on the Judiciary § (1959), 2782.

## Conclusion

International pressure throughout the early years of the Cold War focused on the supposed hypocrisy of the United States. Internationally, the United States promoted the benefits of democracy and capitalism while at home, African Americans were denied the same basic constitutional and human rights supposedly guaranteed by democracy. Truman recognized that this hypocrisy diminished the United States' moral leadership of the world and attempted to promote civil rights through Congress. Facing resistance, he chose to influence the courts instead, and he ultimately found success in the *Brown v. Board* ruling.

International criticism of American racial discrimination began to decline after the ruling. The Little Rock Nine and the assassination of Martin Luther King notwithstanding, international pressure never reached pre-1954 levels. Although the Soviet Union ran propaganda campaigns such as “And You Are Lynching Negroes?” until its dissolution in 1991, most Soviet propaganda dropped discussions about American racial discrimination. This was a considerable accomplishment in US international relations.

While international pressure during the Cold War is not often studied for the effect it had on US civil rights, it was a significant factor that contributed to establishing *Brown v. Board* as the tipping point in the civil rights movement.



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