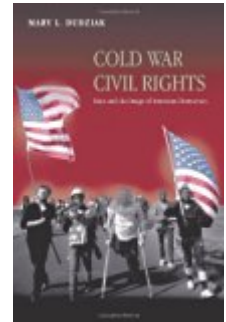


Mary L. Dudziak. *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy (Politics and Society in Twentieth Century America)*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000. xii + 330 pp. \$42.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-01661-0.



Reviewed by Terry Goddard

Published on H-South (November, 2001)

Communism v. Democracy and Race in America

Mary L. Dudziak (Professor of Law at the University of Southern California, teaching civil rights history and constitutional law) provides students of the Civil Rights era a new and innovative view of the subject. Although Dudziak moves chronologically and thematically, she sets civil rights activities in a broader frame than usually employed. She draws on State Department records as well as foreign newspaper accounts to provide a different perspective of America's racial struggles than does the standard study of civil rights.

Dudziak's provocative work focuses on the impact the Cold War had on American civil rights reform. She argues effectively that once the battle lines had been drawn between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War, the United States found itself under attack because of its treatment of black Americans. Her story contrasts the worldwide struggle against communism for freedom and independence with black Americans' struggle for freedom at home in America. Dudziak

demonstrates that U.S. diplomatic concern with foreign opinion as well as international pressures both "constrained and enhanced" civil rights reform in the United States. Moreover, Dudziak contends that the U.S. government in an attempt to stop the spread of communism propagated a story of progress in race relations and the triumph of democracy. "The lesson of this story was always that American democracy was a form of government that made the achievement of social justice possible, and that democratic change, however slow and gradual, was superior to dictatorial imposition. The story of race in America, used to compare democracy and communism, became an important Cold War narrative" (p. 13).

On the heels of World War II as the Cold War took center stage in foreign affairs, American policy-makers in the Truman administration were caught off guard by the international response to racial discrimination in the United States. Chapter 1 examines the impact that racial segregation and the violence it was clothed in had on black Americans in the years following WWII. An example is the story of the brutal murders of George Dorsey

(a WWII veteran), his wife and his friends Roger and Dorothy Malcolm, by a white mob in rural Georgia. Dudziak's account is at once matter of fact and chilling in its detail.

Dudziak turns from the rural southern United States to examine the foreign press' response, particularly that of the Soviet Union, which asks the questions many African Americans were asking themselves, "What is the Position of Negroes in the USA?" and "Where is Democracy?" As other foreign papers took up the issue, the Truman Administration began to focus on public relations. How, the administration asked, could they respond to these attacks on the American way of life? As Dudziak notes, Truman's advisors argued that the story of America and race must be woven together to underscore that even with its social problems America was a great nation.

Chapter 2 details the ways in which Washington policy-makers shaped the story of U.S. race relations in the foreign press. By doing so democracy could be portrayed as a superior system to communism. The policy of managing the news for foreign consumption however was anything but democratic. Dudziak reveals the government's efforts to prevent the voicing of views other than the "party line." Here Dudziak focuses on the civil rights activities not of the mainstream but rather on those that openly challenged America's racial policies as well as her democracy. Paul Robeson and Josephine Baker are singled out for particularly close examination. According to Dudziak, the image America was attempting to project of democracy was in danger if alternative voices like those of Robeson and Baker were not silenced. Managing the foreign press, the way the story was told internationally became important to administrative policy makers in Washington, D.C. While America waged cold war against the Communists it had to in some way turn its history of race relations into an account of the "superiority of democracy over communism as a system of government" (p. 15).

As obvious as it sounds today, the government finally came to the realization that the best way to make America's case on the world stage was to actually make changes in race relations. In Chapter 3, Dudziak turns to a discussion of the Truman administration's use of the courts to effect social change. Focusing on *Brown v. Board of Education*, Dudziak demonstrates the importance of national security to the arguments put forth by the U.S. government. America's image and democracy itself, the government argued, was on trial in the court of world opinion.

Chapter 4 is a rehash of the Little Rock school crisis of 1957. In her retelling of this important civil rights episode, however, foreign response to the actions of Arkansas Governor Faubus is the focus. Moreover, the way in which this event was used to promote the U.S. propaganda of democracy and race relations is central.

Today it is common knowledge that civil rights were not at the top of JFK's national agenda upon taking office. As Dudziak demonstrates in Chapter 5 however, domestic events forced a change in the Kennedy administration's approach both at home and abroad. "[R]acism and discrimination...had a major impact on my life as secretary of state," noted Dean Rusk" (p. 153). The world was accustomed to racism directed toward black Americans but was shocked by similar treatment of African diplomats. Episodes of racial discrimination directed toward visiting Africans coupled with the rise of civil rights organizations such as SNCC and the Freedom Rides of 1961 propelled the issue of race to the forefront of JFK's domestic and foreign concerns.

With Kennedy's assassination and LBJ's rise to the presidency civil rights legislation took a front row seat. Chapter 6 is an account of Johnson's attempts to build on the image of "Kennedy as a visionary with dreams of progress extending to the heavens" (p. 203). Johnson's efforts met with disaster however, brought on by the Vietnam War. Civil rights activities coupled with anti-war

demonstrations resulted in an anti-civil rights backlash. The nation sought hope in Richard Nixon and his call for law and order.

Dudziak concludes by insisting that while the Cold War affected race relations in America, "it limited the field of vision to formal equality...and away from a broader critique of the American economic and political system" (p. 252). Arguing throughout that attention to the world's opinion of our domestic affairs casts new light on "what happened at home," Dudziak makes a solid case for a place for this fine work in both foreign affairs and civil rights history.

Cold War Civil Rights has an abundance of illustrations, 54 pages of notes and an index. Unfortunately, the publisher chose not to include a bibliography. Dudziak blazes a new path to a familiar destination. By analyzing the affect of the Cold War on U.S. policy both at home and abroad, Dudziak has added a new and penetrating critique of the U.S. government's racial policies. Dudziak's global perspective provides students of the civil rights movement with new insights to this widely studied period in our history. In many ways it is a sad tale, one in which U.S. presidents and their administrations seemed only to respond to race discrimination as a means to promote America's image overseas. Some may argue that Dudziak's claim, that Cold War politics shaped United States civil rights agenda, diminishes the part played by African American activism at home. I am not one who does so. Rather her work illustrates that using other lenses to study historical events (in this case Cold War politics) adds to the story (civil rights) and enriches the history. Dudziak's well-written and researched study adds significant information to the body of work assembled and expands our knowledge of this formative period in U.S. history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

Citation: Terry Goddard. Review of Dudziak, Mary L. *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy (Politics and Society in Twentieth Century America)*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. November, 2001.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5632>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.