



**Cary Fraser, “Crossing the Color Line in Little Rock: The Eisenhower Administration and the Dilemma of Race for U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Diplomatic History*, Volume 24, Issue 2 (Spring 2000): 233-264.**

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On September 4, 1957, nine African American high school students tried to enter Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Their admission to Central High had been ordered by a federal district court. The students’ attendance would be stymied by an unruly crowd of segregationists surrounding the high school. They would not attend Central High for some time, but would instead find themselves at the center of international attention. Ultimately President Eisenhower, not a supporter of enforced school desegregation, would send in federal troops to escort the students to school.

Cary Fraser takes up the foreign affairs implications of the crisis in Little Rock. He argues that Little Rock was a defining moment -- “a moment of crisis that forced a fundamental and radical reassessment of existing approaches to dealing with the world of color.” The Eisenhower administration had to come to terms with the impact of domestic racism on U.S. foreign relations, he argues, and had to rethink its approach to questions of colonialism.

This well-researched article effectively demonstrates the international impact of the crisis, and the way Eisenhower and his aides tried to manage Little Rock’s impact on foreign affairs. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Attorney General Herbert Brownell discussed Dulles’ concern that the crisis was “ruining our foreign policy,” and Eisenhower made reference to Little Rock’s harm to the nation’s image overseas in his address to the nation announcing his decision to send in federal troops. Fraser details the extensive international reaction, as reported by U.S. embassies around the world.

Another contribution of this article is that Fraser pays more attention than other writers in this area to the connections between Eisenhower’s approach to race domestically and internationally. Little Rock was a “catalyst for the reassessment by the administration of its terms of engagement with the Third World,” he suggests, as the administration considered economic aid to African and Asian nations as a means of countering the negative impact of the crisis on the U.S. image in those parts of the world. Nevertheless, Fraser argues, Eisenhower’s engagement with race, domestically and internationally, continued to be characterized by ambivalence.

Fraser works with the assumption that the Little Rock crisis is familiar to his readers, and as a result he does not recount the episode, or even mention Central High. This reader would have preferred at least a paragraph summarizing the basic story line. It is helpful to be reminded, for example, that the impasse in Little Rock lasted for three difficult weeks before President Eisenhower, under mounting domestic and international criticism, reluctantly made the decision to send in troops to enforce the desegregation order, and that during this time Little Rock was a

major news story on a daily basis in the press around the world. It was in part because Little Rock was a prolonged crisis that it had such an impact. As the international press continued to cover the story, many foreign critics used it as an occasion for an in-depth analysis of race in America, and many questioned whether massive resistance by segregationists in Little Rock was the true face of American democracy.

Little Rock was clearly a significant moment in the history of the relationship between domestic race politics and international affairs. Fraser's article acknowledges that domestic racism had affected U.S. foreign relations in earlier years, but sees Little Rock as the moment when the issue finally received sustained attention. In his emphasis on Little Rock, Fraser may minimize too much the implications of earlier developments. It was in 1947 that Truman's President's Committee on Civil Rights issued its report *To Secure These Rights*, arguing that there were three principal reasons the Truman Administration should take steps to eliminate discrimination: a moral reason -- discrimination was morally wrong; an economic reason -- discrimination harmed economic growth; and an international reason -- discrimination harmed U.S. foreign relations. It was in 1949 that the U.S. Embassy in Moscow reported that racism in the U.S. had become a principal Soviet propaganda theme. And it was during the late 1940s and early 50s, in the cases leading up to *Brown v. Board of Education*, that the Justice Department repeatedly inserted into its Supreme Court briefs in desegregation cases State Department material designed to demonstrate that segregation harmed the U.S. position in the cold war. It was in *Brown* itself that the Truman administration argued in its 1952 brief that "It is in the context of the present world struggle between freedom and tyranny that the problem of racial discrimination must be viewed."

Viewing Little Rock in this context, I would agree with Fraser that it was a crucial moment in the history of the impact of American race relations on U.S. foreign affairs, but I would describe that impact in a different way. I would argue that it was during the Truman years that the federal government came to terms with the impact of American racism on U.S. foreign relations, and began to develop a sustained strategy for countering it. The apex of pre-Little Rock efforts to manage the impact of American racism on U.S. foreign relations came in 1954 with the *Brown* decision. *Brown* helped support an image of race in America that the State Department and the USIA had already been projecting overseas. They used speakers and propaganda brochures to develop an argument that American democracy was a system of government that facilitated social change for people of color, and that change best occurred in a free society through a gradual, democratic process. *Brown* was a symbol of success, and news of the decision was widely disseminated overseas. There was widespread international acclaim for the decision. Foreign critics of U.S. racism now saw new hope for American democracy. *Brown* was so helpful in reconstructing the image of race in America that, for example, U.S. travelers to India found that they were no longer peppered with questions and criticism about the state of American race relations. Little Rock threatened to demonstrate to the world that the rights protected in *Brown* would not be implemented. Little Rock's importance was magnified because it threatened to undo all the good that had been accomplished by *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Eisenhower's decision to send in the troops in Little Rock was motivated in part, as Fraser argues, by concern about the impact of the crisis on U.S. foreign relations. But what Fraser

seems to suggest was an innovation in U.S. policy, may instead have been a effort on the part of Eisenhower to maintain an effort begun by his predecessor to manage domestic race crises in a manner than would soften their impact on U.S. foreign affairs.

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