



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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Mary Dudziak’s thoughtful review of the article reminds us of the fact that the civil rights struggle was a process that antedated the Eisenhower administration and that the Truman administration was an early architect of the strategy of couching justification for and managing domestic racial reform as an asset in foreign policy during the Cold War.

My concern in the article was to point to the Eisenhower administration’s limited endorsement (to be generous) of its predecessor’s strategy. As the Autherine Lucy incident in 1956 demonstrated -as did the State Department’s efforts to insulate the apartheid regime in South Africa from condemnation in the United Nations - the Eisenhower administration displayed a deference for white supremacist sentiment that was the antithesis of the thrust of the Brown vs. the Board of Education decision of 1954. In effect, the Eisenhower administration displayed a kind of institutional amnesia that appears to bedevil changes in administration in American political life. After the Truman administration’s efforts to establish a linkage between domestic racial reform and the goal of American leadership of the anti-communist coalition of states, the successor administration appeared to believe that it could pursue a foreign policy strategy that detached domestic racial reform from the American quest for leadership in the international system. The point of my article was to illustrate how the Eisenhower administration came to an appreciation that its predecessor’s strategy was the only game in town.

In fact, in his 1944 study “An American Dilemma” Gunnar Myrdal had anticipated the predicament that would confront postwar American governments. Myrdal argued:

“ The main international implication is, ... that America, for its international prestige, power, and future security, needs to demonstrate to the world that American Negroes can be satisfactorily integrated into its democracy. ...Statesmen will have to take cognizance of the changed geopolitical situation of the nation and carry out important adaptations of the American way of life to new necessities. A main adaptation is bound to be a redefinition of the Negro’s status in American democracy.” Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962 - 20th Anniversary edition) 1016.

Similarly, the Double-V Campaign mounted African Americans during World War II - Victory against Nazism abroad and Racism at home - was a precursor of, and undoubtedly, an inspiration for the Cold War-era racial reform campaign that would energize American politics into the 1960s.

The Little Rock episode served as a powerful reminder to the Eisenhower administration that it would be unable to avoid the task of implementing racial reform and it served as a defining moment in American politics and foreign policy. But the larger purpose of the essay was to highlight the coincidence of racial reform in the US with the broader challenges to European colonial rule in the non-European world and apartheid in South Africa. The worldwide challenge to white supremacy both influenced, and was influenced by, the American civil rights struggle. As Martin Luther King, Jr. observed in December 1956: “Now I am aware of the fact that there are those who would contend that we live in the most ghastly period of human history. They would argue that the rhythmic beat of the deep rumblings of discontent from Asia, the uprisings in Africa, the nationalistic longings of Egypt, the roaring cannons from Hungary, and the racial tensions of America are all indicative of the deep and tragic midnight which encompasses our civilization. They would argue that we are retrogressing instead of progressing. But far from representing retrogression and tragic meaninglessness, the present tensions represent the necessary pains that accompany the birth of anything new.” (“Facing the Challenge of a New Age” in James M. Washington (ed.) *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991) 135.

If King, without the resources of the American state could appreciate that linkage, the critical question that has to be posed is why Eisenhower, with the panoply of powers and resources of the American presidency at his disposal, proved to be hesitant to accept the power an idea whose time had arrived?

As the article suggests, Eisenhower’s sympathies for white supremacy as the official orthodoxy in American life prior to 1954 should not be discounted. Nor should his deference to European sensibilities on white minority rule in Africa (and colonialism generally) be underestimated. But I think that considerations of domestic politics, including Eisenhower’s willingness to pander to white segregationist sentiment in an effort to win Southern votes in his two election campaigns were an important consideration in his attitudes towards domestic racial reform.

According to Burk, as the Republican Party was drafting its platform for the 1956 elections, “Upset over suggestions that the platform committee would link his administration with the Brown decision, Eisenhower insisted that he had never taken a stand on the constitutionality of segregation, and he reminded Attorney General Brownell in a private conversation that he had appeared before the Supreme Court in the Brown case ‘as a lawyer, not as a member of the Eisenhower Administration.’ ...After relaying his threat not to come to San Francisco if platform committee members ‘did not come around,’ Eisenhower received a platform plank that met with his approval; it indicated only that the Republican party ‘accepted’ the decision of the high court.” Robert Fredrick Burk, *The Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984) 166.

This stance in 1956 followed upon Eisenhower’s success in his 1952 campaign in winning the endorsement of notable Southern Democratic leaders such as Governor Allen Shivers (Texas), Governor James F. Byrnes (South Carolina), and Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia. The demands of building a conservative electoral coalition that would sustain his presidential campaigns in 1952 and 1956 would seem to have weighed heavily upon Eisenhower’s attitudes towards racial reform.

Little Rock in 1957 forced Eisenhower into reversing himself on sending federal troops into the South and confronted him with the consequences of his pandering to segregationist sentiment. It also occurred in the wake of the Suez crisis; the Soviet-led suppression of the Hungarian uprising; the accession to independence by Ghana; the growing Sino-Soviet challenge to American attempts to assert a position of leadership in the non-European world; and the successful Sputnik launch. Faced with a multi-faceted challenge to American leadership in the international system, the administration sought to use Little Rock to redefine America's role in the emerging "New World Order" where white supremacy was perceived as bankrupt - it sought to demonstrate that race was not a constraint upon participation in a 'democratic' polity. Eisenhower's infatuation with white supremacy, however, continued to be a major stumbling block to America's search to redefine its image on the issue of race in domestic and international terms.

Since 1980, American politics has been energized by a conservative/Republican ascendancy which sought to 'rollback' some of the gains of the civil rights struggle from the 1940s to the 1960s and, particularly in the early years of the Reagan administration, to reaffirm the legitimacy of apartheid as a weapon of anti-communist struggle. That conservative ascendancy is a reminder that the idea of white supremacy has not been vanquished in American life and I hope that the article provides an historical context for understanding some contemporary developments in American politics.

This article also seeks to encourage scholars of American politics and foreign policy to scrutinize in greater depth the relationship between the domestic politics of race and American foreign policy - as scholars such as Mary Dudziak, Gerald Horne, Michael Krenn, Brenda Gayle Plummer, and Elliott Skinner among others have been doing with considerable skill in recent years.

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