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Azza Salama Layton

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER ONE

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### *Introduction*

If the United States merely wants to “dominate” the world, the atomic bomb and the U.S. dollar will be sufficient to achieve that purpose. However, the world cannot be “dominated” for a long time. If the United States wants to “lead” the world, it must have a kind of moral superiority in addition to military superiority.<sup>1</sup>

The racial strife in America is a disgrace to the civilized world, and if the United States wishes to preach the principle of justice and humanity to others [it] must first solve the race problem within [its] own borders.<sup>2</sup>

The inhumanity of racial arrogance seems to have become the privilege of certain people with blonde skins and the odd thing is that it finds apologists among American leaders who want to convert pigmented Asians to the American cult of democracy.<sup>3</sup>

In the two decades following World War II, the advances in U.S. civil rights were unmatched in American history. During Franklin D. Roosevelt’s second administration, there were hints of a new receptivity to civil rights changes on the part of some within the federal government establishment. Simultaneously, civil rights advocates continued to pressure and mobilize supporters to end institutionalized segregation and racial discrimination. Nevertheless, these

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 International Politics and Civil Rights Policy in the United States

pressures from below were insufficient to explain the qualitative shift in the extent and nature of federal attention to civil rights reform in the immediate postwar period.

To explain this qualitative shift, we need to examine the new Cold War pressures impinging on the United States – and especially the Executive branch – in the postwar years. The emerging Cold War pressures attendant to the superpower competition for influence in the postwar world order represented a sea of change in the federal approach to the “Negro problem.” Domestic pressures had to be accompanied by international pressures. International factors and their impact on America’s foreign policy interests swung the pendulum in favor of civil rights advocacy.

Why did the Executive branch of the federal government, in 1946, place civil rights reforms at the top of its domestic policy agenda? Why in the midst of an era marked by civil rights violations and colored by rivalry with the Soviet Union and a national phobia concerning domestic Communism that were used to justify repression at home against unions, universities, business, and even government sectors do we see improvements and a push by the Executive and Judicial branches for civil rights reforms for African Americans? Why did the efforts of civil rights groups produce few advancements under President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s liberal progressive administration, yet we see groundbreaking initiatives in civil rights sponsored by President Harry S. Truman’s administration? What was the critical motivating factor behind the speedy and comprehensive intervention by the Executive branch in an area historically and traditionally reserved for state and local politics?

The key to explaining why President Truman pushed civil rights reforms to the top of his public agenda following World War II lies, I argue, in the dynamic relation between domestic race policy and U.S. foreign policy interests. America’s entry into global politics and the “complex interdependence” of international politics altered the bargaining position of African Americans and civil rights advocates and also that of Southern Democrats. Geopolitical realities provided new opportunities for civil rights activists at home and critics abroad to call for race reforms. The increasing international pressures on the U.S. government to “put its own house in

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Excerpt

[More information](#)**Introduction 3**

order” pushed forward reforms that started with executive and judicial measures. International pressures injected confidence into African American aspirations. These pressures provided new opportunities for civil rights advocates and helped in the peaking and culmination of the civil rights movement and the passage of the long overdue Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.<sup>4</sup>

Neither the reality nor the prospect of African American electoral power would have sufficed to produce the attention the Truman Administration devoted to civil rights reform. I argue that the unprecedented presidential racial policy activism following World War II was the result of changes in U.S. foreign policy in the context of a new geopolitical order. In addition, Truman’s tenure as president coincided with an era, unmatched in history, of the centrality of race in international politics.

While President Roosevelt was politically secure with historically unprecedented margins of victory at the polls, in 1946 Truman was a nonelected president who enjoyed neither the popularity nor the electoral support of his predecessor. Roosevelt was a social and political liberal who cemented the New Deal coalition of the South and the North, labor and business, the “less fortunate” and the rich, and African Americans and whites. His New Deal reforms successfully lured the black vote away from the Republican Party – the party of Lincoln, the emancipator. But with the exception of Executive Order 8802, which established a Federal Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), Roosevelt’s accomplishments in the arena of civil rights may be described as political rhetoric lacking in substance.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, Truman, a Missourian who showed signs of racism in earlier years,<sup>6</sup> began his presidency by appointing the first civil rights committee in U.S. history. His action was the first official assault by the Executive branch on black oppression. By proposing an end to racial segregation in schools, housing, and public facilities, equal access to jobs, and equal voting rights, the 1946 Civil Rights Committee established a national agenda that the black civil rights movement would seek for the next twenty years. Truman also issued two landmark executive orders in 1948 prohibiting discrimi-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

#### 4 International Politics and Civil Rights Policy in the United States

nation in federal employment and desegregating the armed forces. In 1951, he established the Committee on Government Contract Compliance to prevent employment discrimination by private employers with government contracts.<sup>7</sup>

What explains Truman's crusade in the mid-1940s when "the 1946 Congressional elections seemed to indicate the country was moving to the right and the conservative wing of the Southern Democrat[s] took heart, along with the Republicans[?]"<sup>8</sup> Why did he take the political risk of alienating the Southern Dixiecrats by sponsoring civil rights when his predecessor, a politically and electorally more popular figure, refused to take such a risk? Both Roosevelt and Truman needed the Southern bloc not only for electoral votes but also in order to pass their legislative agendas. By virtue of the one-party South and the seniority system, Southern Democrats enjoyed tremendous congressional power.<sup>9</sup> They had a large claim on federal patronage and the allocation of federal spending. Southern senators could filibuster legislative proposals and could retaliate against the president by using the strategy of obstruction, a strategy illustrative of their cohesive power.<sup>10</sup> Fear of retaliation, President Roosevelt claimed, is what prevented him from supporting antilynching legislation proposed in the 1930s. He could not risk congressional obstruction of other bills that had higher priority, such as those to remedy the recession at home and also the worsening situation in Europe.<sup>11</sup>

Truman's aggressive pursuit of race reform carried the potential of serious political damage to the maintenance of the majority coalition created in 1936. What was behind his willingness to pursue such a costly agenda? The domestic social and political pressures for racial reform were not strong enough incentives for the administration to risk the loss of congressional support for other programs that it valued more highly. Domestic pressures for racial reforms were not strong enough to jeopardize foreign aid programs, such as the Marshall Plan, and other defense and social legislation.

Truman's civil rights program occurred in the absence of substantive influence from African Americans. Some have argued that Truman's crusade was a political maneuver to capture black sup-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)**Introduction 5**

port in 1948.<sup>12</sup> But how significant was African American political power before 1948, when Truman ordered his Civil Rights Committee to investigate the status of the African American? How effective was African American political power in the face of traditional solid opposition of the Southern Democratic–Northern Republican coalition?

Because of the leadership position of Southern politicians in Congress, African Americans did not benefit much from their growing voting power in the North during the 1940s, and civil rights legislation continued to be suppressed in Congress. Putatively, for the African American voter in the South, the Supreme Court ruling in *Smith v. Allwright* in 1944 outlawed the white primary. In practice, though, Southern states adopted various measures to preserve the white primary and to circumvent the Court decision. Southern politicians passed amendments that added literacy and poll tax requirements, and “tests of good character and good citizenship.”<sup>13</sup>

In sum, Southern congressmen and their state and local counterparts were able to stifle the voting power of African Americans throughout the 1940s. By the mid-1940s, 70 percent of the black population lived in the South. By 1950, non-whites made up only 20.1 percent of the potential voters in the South, 4.8 percent in the West, and 5.1 percent in the North.<sup>14</sup>

African American leaders liked to point out that the black vote was the balance of power in the 1944 and 1948 elections. But in both years, voter registration of blacks did not proceed according to the expectations of their leaders.<sup>15</sup> In 1947, the NAACP claimed that there were enough black voters to determine the outcome of a close presidential election in 1948. That claim was based on two assumptions: a close election and a highly unlikely scenario that the overwhelming majority of all potential voters would be registered, well organized, and unified behind one candidate.<sup>16</sup> African American political clout in the 1940s was not perceptible enough to pressure the Truman Administration to pursue civil rights reforms. Public opinion and political opposition in many Southern states, and complacency and indifference elsewhere, overshadowed the incipient progress that African Americans were making.<sup>17</sup>

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Azza Salama Layton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 International Politics and Civil Rights Policy in the United States

In addition and as important, the syndrome of dejection, isolation, self-contempt, and other marks of oppression both in the North and South left many African Americans politically apathetic.<sup>18</sup> The political influence of the black population evolved slowly. "If blacks moved to the cities to solve their problems, they soon discovered that their problems persisted, even increased."<sup>19</sup> The African American migration to the North, the dilution of the agricultural economy, the rise of industry and trade sectors, and the growth of cities and urbanization in general were fundamental trends that created favorable conditions for bringing about political change.<sup>20</sup> However, these conditions did not automatically convert the black voter into a power that would force the federal government to address civil rights reform in the mid-1940s.

Questions surrounding Truman's civil rights platform amidst strong political opposition and without substantive black political power will persist if scholars continue to adopt a purely domestic view of the impetuses for civil rights reforms. Only an analysis of the international context within which these reforms occurred can explain the timing and content of U.S. civil rights reform and the incentives behind the government's actions. The traditional explanation of the rise of social movements has generally focused on changes in the domestic political and social environment. Such approaches do not fully explain why Presidents Roosevelt and Truman acted differently over race issues or why certain figures in the federal government pushed for civil rights reform when they did. The "international setting, and particularly the way in which it intrudes upon domestic politics, is a crucial . . ." <sup>21</sup> yet neglected component of social movement theory. Current analyses of domestic political, social, and economic factors surrounding civil rights politics provide insufficient theoretical or analytical leverage for understanding the timing of the actions of the federal government in the mid-1940s. The rich social movement scholarship and the literature on the civil rights struggle tell only the domestic story.<sup>22</sup> But even though, as I suggest throughout this work, the international context of the U.S. civil rights movement is extremely significant, it awaits comprehensive treatment. As Paul Gordon Lauren

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Azza Salama Layton

Excerpt

[More information](#)**Introduction 7**

notes, “Unfortunately, the impact of [the Cold War] pressure has often been completely ignored in the study of the history of the U.S. civil rights movement.”<sup>23</sup> This work, a part of a growing intellectual project concerned with internationalizing the study of race, civil rights, and international politics, attempts to fill the gap.<sup>24</sup>

The United States’ efforts in the area of civil rights were the result of not only domestic pressures but also represented a calculated measure aimed at containing Communism. Anti-Communism and the uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the Cold War were the most salient issues of political concern. Cold War politics shaped U.S. foreign policy for several decades. It also had a significant influence over domestic politics.<sup>25</sup> The belief that “the civilization to which [the U.S.] belongs . . . confronts a critical danger indicated by the phrase ‘Cold War’” became the principal element shaping American politics.<sup>26</sup>

The salience of Cold War thinking, especially the “Domino Theory” of Soviet containment, meant that U.S. policy makers perceived *any* loss of territory to the Soviets as a threat to national interests, whether that loss was in Mozambique, Laos, or anywhere else. The Cold War and its ensuing geopolitical and ideological competition between the two superpowers challenged U.S. efforts to shape the postwar era in its own image of democracy and the free enterprise system. The contradiction between this image and the government’s racial practices at home, State Department officials realized, was an obstacle in the conduct of foreign relations with African, Asian, and Latin American countries. Consequently, the U.S. government’s ability to preach democracy to Third World countries was seriously hampered by its domestic racism.<sup>27</sup> The Soviet Union’s use of American racism to compete for influence in non-white nations was an effective weapon against the United States.<sup>28</sup> People all over the world were saying “if the U.S. wanted to appear as the champions of democracy throughout the world, [it] would do well to see first all [its] own colored population enjoys the benefits of democracy.”<sup>29</sup> If ending institutionalized segregation and discrimination “could be achieved [this] would show the Africans and Asians whom the United States hoped to secure as allies in

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Azza Salama Layton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 International Politics and Civil Rights Policy in the United States

the conflict with the Soviet Union that steps were being taken to curb the American habit of humiliating people because of the color of their skins.”<sup>30</sup>

I believe that the international context did far more to command specific components of the federal government’s attention to civil rights than would have come from the government’s own inclinations. While there were signs of a new open-mindedness among some government officials and Northern urban liberals toward the African American struggle, domestic pressures alone are not enough to explain the Executive branch’s push for civil rights reforms in the mid-1940s. It was the international dimension of U.S. race policies that swung the pendulum. The decision by the Executive branch in general, and the Justice and State Departments and the U.S. diplomatic core in particular, to intervene on behalf of African American civil rights in the mid-1940s lies partly in the realization that world events had made the race problem “a global instead of a national or sectional issue to a greater extent than ever before in the history of the world.”<sup>31</sup> While race relations were always considered a domestic issue, they ceased to be so as the United States ended its policy of relative isolation and assumed a leadership position in global political and economic affairs. It is within the Cold War context that the federal government decided to take drastic measures (by 1940s standards) to eliminate institutional racism, the number one domestic failure and the number one international handicap.<sup>32</sup>

The focus of this study is twofold. The first concern is how the international community pressured the American government to deal with the gap between its creed of democracy, equality, justice, and freedom and its practice of discrimination and segregation at home. The second concern is how African American leaders, to mobilize the international community<sup>33</sup> as well as new supporters at home, framed their struggle within the context of Cold War politics. The work’s empirical mission is to incorporate the rich and untapped government documentation of international pressures and the American administration’s response to these pressures with the prominent literature on U.S. civil rights. Records of the State Department, the U.S. mission to the United Nations, and the



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Azza Salama Layton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction 9

United States Information Agency illustrate the important role international opinion and international pressures played in the shift in the federal government's position on race policy.

Of equal importance are the theoretical implications of the study. The work of social movement scholars – especially those who have studied movements in the U.S. and Western Europe – has been marked by an almost total lack of emphasis on the international roots of social movement emergence, development, and impacts. The nearly universal stress in social movement literature, in Europe and the United States, on the role of favorable conditions in shaping the emergence and development of collective action has betrayed a consistent domestic bias. That is, “movement scholars have, to date, grossly undervalued the impact of global political and economic processes in structuring the domestic possibilities for successful collective action.”<sup>34</sup> In this book I argue that the pressure for shifts in the federal government race policy arose internationally; that international events provided leverage and new political opportunities that were successfully mobilized by civil rights advocates at home as well as utilized by foreign government and non-government entities to criticize the U.S. government.<sup>35</sup> While in the following chapters I substantiate, through empirical data, my arguments that international pressures played a prominent role in the federal government's decision to advocate civil rights reforms, I show in this introductory chapter how important it would be for social movement theory to take account of the international context of collective action.<sup>36</sup>

### Social Movement Theory

The past two decades have witnessed a proliferation of studies of social movements. Movement scholars representing different theoretical approaches emphasize the importance of three broad sets of determinants in the emergence and development of collective action. First is the structure of political opportunities and constraints that confront the movement.<sup>37</sup> Second are the resources available for mobilization by members of the movement.<sup>38</sup> Lastly is

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Azza Salama Layton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 International Politics and Civil Rights Policy in the United States

the political and social framing process by which the movement hopes to enhance its support both within its own population but more importantly within the public at large for the purpose of attracting new allies.<sup>39</sup> While the first of the three approaches, that of political opportunity structure, is the most germane to my study, the other two approaches, those of resource mobilization and framing process, do pertain to the case of the American civil rights movement. Civil rights advocates, as I demonstrate in the next chapter, mobilized the support of the international community as well as framed their struggle in the context of America's national security and foreign policy interests and a necessary measure in the fight against Communism.

### Political Opportunity Structure and Civil Rights

The attractiveness and utility of the concept of political opportunity structure lie in the concept's capacity to link institutionalized politics and social movements.<sup>40</sup> Scholars attempt to use changes in the internal structure or informal power relations of a given national political system to explain the emergence, development, and impacts of a particular social movement. The argument is straightforward. Social movements emerge and develop in response to changes "not only among previously quiescent or conventionally oriented groups but also in the political system itself."<sup>41</sup> Some scholars point out the utility of political opportunity structure in explicating the variable of timing. The "when" of social and political change can be understood only by analyzing the political environment in which change occurs.<sup>42</sup>

Political opportunity structure has become a staple of social movement inquiry. Yet use of the concept has consistently betrayed a domestic bias. The vulnerabilities that allow movements to emerge and achieve gains are thought to develop internal to a given polity. But as William Gamson and David Meyer state, and as my empirical data indicates, "international politics intrudes upon domestic political opportunity structure . . . that national political opportunity structures are nested in a larger international environ-