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978-0-521-82431-6 - Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955

Carol Anderson

Excerpt

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Introduction

The Struggle for Black Equality

There is not even a common language when the term “equality” is used. Negro and white have a fundamentally different definition. Negroes have proceeded from a premise that equality means what it says But most whites in America . . . proceed from a premise that equality is a loose expression for improvement. White America is not even psychologically organized to close the gap—essentially it seeks only to retain it.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.¹

How could all of the blood, all of the courage, and all of the martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement still leave in its wake a nation where schools are more segregated than ever, where more than half of all black children live in poverty, and where the life expectancy of African Americans has actually *declined*? And how could a movement with so much promise still leave more than six million African Americans trapped and dying in the “underclass”?² The answer lies, I believe, not so much in the well-documented struggle for civil rights, but in the little known, but infinitely more important, struggle for human rights. For too long, civil rights has been heralded as the “prize” for black equality.³ Yet, those rights, no

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 8.
2. Gary Orfield, Susan E. Eaton, et al., *Dismantling Desegregation: The Quiet Reversal of Brown v. Board of Education* (New York: New Press, 1996); Deborah L. Cohen, “Half of Black, Hispanic Children May Be Poor by 2010,” *Education Week*, 3 November 1993; Jessie Carney Smith and Robert L. Johns, eds., *Statistical Record of Black America* (New York: Gale Research, Inc., 1995); William J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
3. Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965*, with an introduction by Julian Bond (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987); Clayborne Carson, Vincent Harding et al. eds., *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991); *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965*, Vol. 4, No

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matter how bitterly fought for, could only speak to the overt political and legal discrimination that African Americans faced. Human rights, on the other hand, especially as articulated by the United Nations (UN) and influenced by the moral shock of the Holocaust, had the language and philosophical power to address not only the political and legal inequality that African Americans endured, but also the education, health care, housing, and employment needs that haunted the black community.

In fact, toward the end of the Second World War, the African American leadership, led by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), had already decided that only human rights could repair the damage that more than three centuries of slavery, Jim Crow, and racism had done to the African American community. Civil rights, no matter how noble, could only maintain the gap. The NAACP, therefore, marshaled its resources – including a war chest of more than one million dollars, nearly 500,000 members, and access to power brokers throughout the world – to make human rights *the* standard for equality. Although there were other African American organizations contributing to this effort, including the black Left, none of them had the credibility, the money, and the influence to make human rights the agenda in the struggle for black equality.⁴ Only the NAACP could do that. Yet, even with all its clout and prestige, the Association recognized that it could not singlehandedly alter the trajectory of America's sordid racial history.

The NAACP, therefore, forged important, but ultimately flawed, alliances with Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry S Truman to aid in the struggle for African Americans' human rights. Yet, whereas Roosevelt and Truman were clearly committed to some measure of civil rights, they were both unable and unprepared to fight for a world that embraced full equality for African Americans. Truman was emphatic. "I wish to make clear," he told a group of black Democrats, "that I am not appealing for social equality for the Negro. The Negro himself knows better than that, and the highest type of Negro leaders say quite frankly that they prefer the society of their own people. Negroes want justice, not social equality."⁵

Easy Walk (1961–1963), produced and directed by James DeVinney and Callie Crossely, Blackside, Inc., 1987, videocassette.

4. For works that suggest a much more important role for the black Left see, Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, New York, and London: Cornell University Press, 1997); Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946–1956* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1988).
5. Quoted in, Harry S. Ashmore, *Civil Rights and Wrongs: A Memoir of Race and Politics, 1944–1994* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 57.

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With this narrow philosophical framework, Truman set out to implement his vision of equality for the black community. He issued executive orders to desegregate the federal bureaucracy and the military. He commissioned a study on the status of civil rights in the United States. He also had the Justice Department support a range of desegregation cases winding through the court system. And although this was an impressive start, especially compared with the sluggish civil rights efforts of Franklin Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower, Truman's efforts did not even come close to what needed to be done. Instead, it becomes evident that he often engaged in the politics of symbolic equality – executive orders issued with little or no funding to finance the endeavor; powerless commissions created to once again study “the Negro problem” and give the aura of action; and directives issued from on high with no enforcement mechanism and no serious repercussions for noncompliance.

Similarly, although scholars and admirers speak glowingly about Eleanor Roosevelt's unstinting support for African American equality, she, too, was one of the masters of symbolic equality.⁶ The stories of her battles to allow Marian Anderson to sing at the Lincoln Memorial, coupled with her act of racial defiance in a Southern Jim Crow theater, cemented Roosevelt's reputation as “a friend of the Negro.” A closer examination of her actions in the UN and the repercussions of those actions for the black community, however, reveal a very different story. Thus, in her role as chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights, although she sympathized with the plight of African Americans, she was even more responsive to the public relations exigencies of the Cold War, which called for sanitizing and camouflaging the reality of America's Jim Crow democracy. She, therefore, joined with Texas Senator Tom Connally and others in an attempt to thwart a complaint to the UN charging South Africa with racial discrimination and systematic human rights violations. Roosevelt, Connally, and the other members of the U.S. delegation voiced strong concerns that, if the complaint succeeded, it would set a dangerous precedent that could ultimately lead to the United Nations investigating the condition of “negroes in Alabama.”⁷

6. See, for example, Allida M. Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); A. Glenn Mower, Jr., *The United States, the United Nations, and Human Rights: The Eleanor Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter Eras*, Studies in Human Rights, ed. George W. Shepherd, Jr., no. 4 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979); Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.: National History, <http://www.uca.edu/org/aka/nationalhistory.htm>. Accessed May 18, 2002.

7. Minutes of the Tenth Meeting of the General Assembly Delegation, October 28, 1946, US/A/M/(CHR)/10, Box 60, File “US/A/M/(CHR)/1-32,” *Records of the U.S. Mission*

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Roosevelt also used her chairmanship and influence to manipulate the human rights treaties in ways that would shield the United States from UN scrutiny and assuage the powerful Southern Democrats, who “were afraid” that the UN’s treaties just “might affect the Colored question.” After all, the senators from Georgia and Texas railed, those treaties were nothing more than a “back-door method of enacting federal anti-lynching legislation.”⁸ Mrs. Roosevelt, therefore, fought for the insertion of a clause in the Covenant on Human Rights that would allow states that were in a federal system, such as Georgia, to disregard the treaty completely. Mrs. Roosevelt explained the benefits of this federal–state clause to a skeptical Southern audience as she promised that, even with a Covenant on Human Rights, the federal government would never interfere in “murder cases,” investigate concerns over “fair trials,” or insist on “the right to education.” In essence, Eleanor Roosevelt had just assured the Dixiecrats that the sacred troika of lynching, Southern Justice, and Jim Crow schools would remain untouched, even with an international treaty to safeguard human rights.⁹ Obviously, then, although the United States was willing to use the rhetoric of human rights to bludgeon the Soviet Union and play the politics of moral outrage that the Holocaust engendered, the federal government, even the liberals, steadfastly refused to make human rights a viable force in the United States or in international practice.¹⁰

to the United Nations, Record Group 84 (hereafter *RG 84*); Minutes of the Eleventh Meeting of the United States General Assembly Delegation, October 28, 1946, US/A/M/(CHR)/11, *ibid.*; Minutes of the Fifteenth Meeting of the General Assembly Delegation, November 12, 1946, US/A/M/(CHR)/15, *ibid.*; Minutes of the Tenth Meeting of the United States Delegation to the Third Regular Session of the General Assembly, October 5, 1948, US(P) A/M/(CHR)/10, Box 60, File “US(P)/A/M/ (CHR)/1-34,” *ibid.*

8. Memorandum from Ralph E. Becker [to Senator Thomas C. Hennings, Jr.], January 22, 1954, Folder 4772, *Papers of Thomas C. Hennings, Jr.*, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri–Columbia, Columbia, Missouri (hereafter *Hennings Papers*); Fisher to Rusk, memo, January 19, 1950, Box 8, File “Genocide (folder 1 of 2),” Lot File 55D429, *General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59* (hereafter *RG 59*).
9. “Statement to the Press by Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt on the ‘Federal State’ Clause of the Covenant on Human Rights,” press release, June 6, 1952, Box 4588, File “Human Rights Commission, undated,” *Papers of Eleanor Roosevelt*, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, New York (hereafter *Roosevelt Papers*); Lowell Limpus, “UN Pact Won’t Clash with States’ Rights, Says Mrs. Roosevelt,” June 9, 1952, found in Box 626, File “UN Secur. Council ‘Commission on Human Rt. of the Econ. & Soc. Coun.,” *Republican National Committee Newspaper Clippings*, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas (hereafter *RNC*); Walter White to Jacob Javits, March 6, 1952, Box 117, File “Bills: McCarran Bill—General—1950–52,” *Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter *Papers of the NAACP*).
10. David P. Forsythe, “Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect,” *Political Science Quarterly* 105:3 (Autumn 1990), 435–54; Louis Henkin, “U.S.

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The international struggle for African Americans' human rights thus became entangled in the entrenched power of the Southern Democrats and the shallowness of white liberal commitment to black equality. The struggle was ultimately destroyed, however, by the Cold War and the anti-Communist witch hunts, which compromised the integrity of the black leadership, twisted the definition of human rights into the hammer and sickle, and forced the NAACP to take its eyes off the prize of human rights.

Mary Dudziak, Michael Krenn, and Thomas Borstleumann have ably demonstrated how the Cold War muddied U.S. foreign policy and compelled the federal government to make several grudging but key concessions on the civil rights front to quell mounting international criticism.¹¹ The Cold War, however, affected much more than the federal government's half-hearted, but necessary, response to black inequality.

The Cold War also systematically eliminated human rights as a viable option for the mainstream African American leadership. During the McCarthy era, human rights and the United Nations became synonymous with the Kremlin and the Soviet-led subversion of American democracy. The Southern Democrats and isolationist Republicans joined together and denounced rights, such as housing and health care, as foreign to all liberty-loving Americans and inspired by the scourge of Marxist dogma. Although the right wing's anti-Communist fulminations were to be expected, elements of those basic sentiments were shared across the ideological spectrum. Eleanor Roosevelt, for example, also made the political distinction between the revered political and legal rights emanating from Western thought, such as the right to free speech, and the untried, untested, and unwashed economic and social rights that seemed so dear to the Soviets and other communists. Truman and his advisors agreed and tried desperately to rein in or at least neutralize the UN's human

Ratification of Human Rights Conventions: The Ghost of Senator Bricker," *American Journal of International Law* 89:2 (April 1995), 341–50; Dorothy Q. Thomas, "We Are Not the World: U.S. Activism and Human Rights in the Twenty-First Century," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25:4 (2000), 1121–24; Sandy Vogelgesang, "Diplomacy of Human Rights," *International Studies Quarterly* 23:2 (June 1979), 230–35.

11. Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America, eds. William Chafe, Gary Gerstle, and Linda Gordon (Princeton, New Jersey and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000); idem, "Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative" *Stanford Law Review* 41:1 (November 1988), 61–120; Michael L. Krenn, *Black Diplomacy: African Americans and the State Department, 1945–1969* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1999); Thomas Borstleumann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2001).

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rights initiatives and to supplant the international community's expansive definition of human rights with one that included only a small number of political and legal rights.

As bad as this situation was, it got decisively worse when the Eisenhower administration came to power in 1953. With no firm commitment to either the UN, human rights, or African Americans and pressured by the right wing to jettison all of the covenants on human rights or risk the Damocles' sword of the Bricker Amendment, which would have turned the president into a mere figurehead, Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, eagerly announced that the United States had decided to abandon the human rights declarations and treaties altogether, because, in addition to being impractical, those treaties harbored communistic ideas and were a direct threat to the basic liberties protected by the Constitution.

With the presidents, the Senate, and even some liberals identifying the economic and social rights provisions of the UN's treaties as a "Soviet Trojan Horse," the foundation for true black equality was now roundly repudiated as subversive, communistic, and even treasonous.¹² The NAACP was caught. To push further for human rights was to risk all of the dangers that being labeled a "communist front" entailed. Moreover, because a fight for human rights exposed the depths of America's flawed democracy to the world, it also served as a ready-made propaganda weapon for the Kremlin, which, when wielded, would then only reaffirm the insidious allegations about the NAACP's communist bent. On the other hand, to jettison human rights was to leave the black community with only the hope of civil rights, which the NAACP's own analysis made clear was not enough to rectify the destruction that centuries of human rights violations had caused. As wholly inadequate as civil rights may have been, however, they carried the protection of being firmly rooted in American tradition and the Bill of Rights.

The NAACP clearly stood at the proverbial crossroads. Pressured by the image-conscious demands of the Cold War; hounded by white liberal allies to turn toward more traditional, pragmatic goals; thrown off course by internal dissension and power plays; distracted by battles with the Communist Party, USA; chastened by the telling example that the U.S. government was making of the black Left; and hopeful that its legal strategy would be more than enough to bring about equality, the NAACP opted to reincarnate itself as an "American organization" and retreat from the struggle for human rights.

12. Quoted in, Rowland Brucken, "A Most Uncertain Crusade: The United States, Human Rights and the United Nations, 1941–1954," (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1999), 233.

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The results were devastating. The fight for black equality was now limited to the narrowly confined, traditional arena of political rights and the “Soviet-tainted” goal of economic and social rights – even though essential for true black equality – was overtly removed from the NAACP’s agenda. And because the African American Left was destroyed by its own strategic blunders and the McCarthy witch hunts, there was no countervailing force, no matter how small, to balance the NAACP’s forced retreat. The remaining black leadership could therefore only envision a civil rights, not a human rights, movement and would soon discover that blacks in the northern slums could not be freed by hymns, protest marches, or Supreme Court decisions. This would be one of the most tragic, but not yet explored, legacies of the Cold War. Until now.

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*Beyond Civil Rights***The NAACP, the United Nations, and Redefining the Struggle for Black Equality***Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.*Frederick Douglass¹

War loomed. This time, however, African Americans were determined that there would be no repeat performance of the First World War's broken promises. As they well knew, and as Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, reminded them, their only "reward" for postponing the fight for equality in 1917 was to be "lynched and even burned at the stake" in 1919. Hardened by the "bitter green" memories of that betrayal, White vowed that during the Second World War, African Americans would not back down "one iota" from their demands for full equality.² That trenchant spirit led labor leader A. Philip Randolph to announce that "American democracy is a failure. It is a miserable failure."³ Instead of constitutional rights and guarantees, Randolph asserted that African Americans were flogged by Jim Crow and lynching; disfranchised by poll taxes and white primaries; suffocated by "goodwill and a white God"; and

1. Frederick Douglass, *Two Speeches by Frederick Douglass: One on West India Emancipation Delivered at Canandaigua, Aug. 4th, and the Other on the Dred Scott Decision, Delivered in New York, on the Occasion of the Anniversary of the American Abolition Society, May 1857* (Rochester, New York: C. P. Dewey, [1857?]), 22.

2. "Fight for Liberties Here While Fighting Dictators Abroad, Says N.A.A.C.P.," December 12, 1941, Part 1, Reel 14, *Papers of the NAACP: 1909–1950* (Washington, DC: University Publications of America, 1982), microfilm (hereafter NAACP); "Address by Walter White, Secretary, at the Closing Session of the Thirty-First Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People," June 23, 1940, *The Papers of Eleanor Roosevelt, 1933–1945*, Reel 19 (Frederick, Maryland: University Publications of America), microfilm (hereafter *Roosevelt*); Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors, December 8, 1941, Part 1, Reel 3, NAACP.

3. Quoted in, Roi Ottley, *New World-A-Coming, The American Negro: His History and Life Series*, ed. William Loren Katz (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Riverside Press, 1943; reprint New York: Arno Press and the *New York Times*, 1968), 252 (page numbers refer to reprint edition).

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impoverished by “charity,” when all they wanted was equality – social, political, religious, and economic equality.⁴

For the black leadership, America’s “limited and racial and divisible democracy” became all the more intolerable as the United States prepared to wage war against the Nazis and the doctrine of white supremacy.⁵ It was simply incomprehensible to Walter White how the United States could “fight a war for freedom” with a Jim Crow army.⁶ Nor could he find any rational, sane reason why U.S. military officers would tell “the British . . . that all Negroes have tails, that they are savage, diseased, illiterate and will rape their women” and not expect black soldiers to become “embittered” and question who the real “enemy” was. “It is tragic,” White noted, “that the Civil War should be fought again while we are fighting a World War to save civilization.”⁷

The arsenal of democracy’s “whites only” hiring policy inspired similar disgust. An NAACP report noted that, “as late as the summer of 1942, only three percent of the people working in war industries were colored. Only when there was virtually no one else to hire” and “almost every other labor source was exhausted” were African Americans even considered.⁸ As a result, of 29,215 defense contract employees in the New York area, “only 142 were Negroes.” In St. Louis, with a population of more than 100,000 African Americans, 56 defense factories “employed an average of three Negroes” each.⁹

During the First World War, for the sake of unity, African Americans would tacitly agree to “close ranks,” set aside their “special grievances,” and quietly endure this type of blatant discrimination.¹⁰ The Second World War, however, evoked a very different response. Harlem’s

4. Call to “We Are Americans, Too” Congress, enclosure, A. Philip Randolph to Rayford Logan, March 17, 1943, Box 181-7, Folder 1, *Rayford Logan Papers*, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC (hereafter *Logan Papers-MSRC*).

5. A. Philip Randolph quoted in, Ottley, *New World-A-Coming*, 252.

6. Walter White to Arthur Spingarn, March 23, 1945, Box 94-8, Folder 181, *Arthur B. Spingarn Papers*, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC (hereafter *Spingarn Papers*).

7. “Observations and Recommendation of Walter White on Racial Relations in the ETO [European Theater of Operations].” February 11, 1944, Reel 19, *Roosevelt*.

8. “Factual Supplement: A Program for Progress in Race Relations: NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.,” enclosure of copy of proposal to the Ford Foundation, Walter White to Eleanor Roosevelt, June 25, 1951, Box 3338, File “NAACP, 1951,” *Roosevelt Papers*.

9. Ottley, *New World-A-Coming*, 289–90.

10. David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1993), 556; Charles Young to Arthur B. Spingarn, November 5, 1917, Box 94-8, Folder 189 *Spingarn Papers*.

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Photo 1.1. The leadership of the NAACP (l to r): Roy Wilkins, Walter White, and Thurgood Marshall.

Visual Materials from the NAACP Records, Library of Congress.

Amsterdam-Star News reported that, unlike the First World War, “now the Negro is showing a ‘democratic upsurge rebellion,’ bordering on open hostility.”¹¹ “Discontent and bitterness,” Walter White asserted, “were growing like wildfire among Negroes all over the country.”¹²

One White House official warned his colleagues about this firestorm of black resentment. Philleo Nash, an aide in the Office of War Information, remarked that during the last war, African Americans “did not attempt . . . to bargain for economic improvement” and for that display of loyalty they “were hit harder” than anyone else by the Depression. To make matters worse, the economic devastation in the black community had been “accompanied by the rise of white supremacy movements in both North and South.” As a result, the docile, patriotic Negro had vanished. For this war, Nash warned, “Negroes are in a militant and demanding mood.”¹³

11. Quoted in Ottley, *New World-A-Coming*, 289.

12. *Ibid.*, 292.

13. Philleo Nash to Jonathan Daniels, memo, December 16, 1943, Box 29, File “OWI-Files Alphabetical File-Race Tension-Jonathan Daniels File-Memoranda Nash to Daniels: 1942–45,” *Papers of Philleo Nash*, Harry S Truman Presidential Library, Independence,