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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

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EYES OFF THE PRIZE

As World War II drew to a close and the world awakened to the horror wrought by white supremacists in Nazi Germany, African American leaders, led by the NAACP, sensed the opportunity to launch an offensive against the conditions of segregation and inequality in the United States. The “prize” they sought was not civil rights, it was human rights. Only the human rights lexicon, shaped by the Holocaust and articulated by the United Nations, contained the language and the moral power to address not only the political and legal inequality, but also the education, health care, housing, and employment needs that haunted the black community. The NAACP understood this and wielded its influence and resources to take its human rights agenda before the United Nations. But the onset of the Cold War and rising anti-communism allowed powerful Southerners to cast those rights as Soviet-inspired and a threat to the American “way of life.” Enemies and friends excoriated the movement, and the NAACP retreated to a narrow civil rights agenda that was easier to maintain politically. Thus, the Civil Rights Movement was launched with neither the language nor the mission it needed to truly achieve black equality.

Carol Anderson is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Missouri–Columbia. Her research on African Americans, the United Nations, and human rights has received generous financial support from the American Council of Learned Societies, the Ford Foundation, and the Eisenhower World Affairs Institute. She has received multiple awards for teaching and is a recipient of the William T. Kemper Fellowship for Teaching Excellence.

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*The United Nations and the African American
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CAROL ANDERSON

University of Missouri–Columbia



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*Dedicated to
Mommy, Daddy, and Little Dave
I miss you.*

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page ix
Introduction: The Struggle for Black Equality	I
1 Beyond Civil Rights: The NAACP, the United Nations, and Redefining the Struggle for Black Equality	8
2 The Struggle for Human Rights: African Americans Petition the United Nations	58
3 Things Fall Apart	113
4 Bleached Souls and Red Negroes	166
5 The Mirage of Victory	210
<i>Epilogue: The Prize</i>	271
<i>Bibliography</i>	277
<i>Acronyms</i>	291
<i>Index</i>	293

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Acknowledgments

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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I know that what I am asking is impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand – and one is, after all, emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general, and American Negro history in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible.

James Baldwin
The Fire Next Time