**The Cold War and Civil Rights – A Re-examination of the Kennedy-Era (1961-1963) Civil Rights Policies**

**By Simon H. Tang—California State University, Fullerton.**

**Introduction:**

Between 1950 and 1970, the progress in U.S. civil rights was unparalleled in American history. Studies on Civil Rights for that period are almost always written from the perspective of domestic politics. The black migration to the North between 1910 and 1950, which formed a significant black electorate in some battleground northern states, the dilution of the agricultural economy, the rise of industry, and the growth of cities were all necessary conditions for a "Second Reconstruction". However, more was needed to convince Federal policymakers to address civil rights reform for the period beginning in the mid-1940. This essay will argue that the United States’ efforts in civil rights were not only the result of domestic pressures but also a calculated part of the containment of Communism during the Cold War era.

Reading Morone’s *Hellfire Nation,* we recognize that racism in the United States serves powerful economic and psychological interests that only a combination of strong countervailing forces would hold in check.[[1]](#endnote-1) To explain the rise and decline of the civil rights movement, one must attend to a wide range of domestic factors and the international context of the Cold War. During that era, especially in the mid-1940, anti-Communism and the uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the Cold War were the most prominent issues of political concern. The salience of Cold War Thinking, especially the “Domino Theory” of Communism containment, meant that U.S. policy makers perceived any loss of territorial or ideological ground to the Soviets as a threat to national interests. The United States was also involved in competition for the allegiance of the uncommitted Third World peoples, most of whom were non-white. In the years following WW II, racial discrimination in the United States received increasing attention from other countries. At a time when the U.S. hoped to reshape the postwar world in its own image of democracy and free enterprise, this international attention was troublesome and embarrassing.[[2]](#endnote-2) While historians are nearly unanimous in considering the civil rights movement to be central to the story of postwar America, they have paid little attention to the international context. Conversely, even eminent scholars of American foreign policy mostly display a lack of concern for domestic issues. This essay will attempt a balanced approach, focusing on the international perception of American racial policies and practices, and the impact that feedback from abroad had on those policies and practices. In summary, this essay will favor the position that domestic factors alone are not enough to explain the success of the Second Reconstruction; it was the international dimension of the American race policies that swung the pendulum. [[3]](#endnote-3)

This essay systematically examines the international context of American civil rights policy and seeks to explain why the Kennedy administration promoted civil rights reforms. Why focus on President Kennedy’s civil rights policy? The presidency of John Kennedy spanned a period of intense change and conflict in race relations around the globe. This essay examines those international and domestic changes during that period, which enhanced and/or constrained Kennedy's civil rights policy options. More so than Truman or Eisenhower – his two Cold War predecessors – Kennedy was forced by external factors to address the American racial issues. The timing of his administration’s intervention in Civil Rights issues was a reflection of international as well as domestic factors, and the shift in his position on race policy can be better understood when studied from a global perspective.

In later sections, I will apply selected theoretic approaches from the fields of American Political Development (APD) and international relations in analyzing this topic. I will apply a Historical-Institutional perspective and also Rational Choice Theory**.** The prologue section of this essay will revisit the post-WW II anticommunism in foreign and domestic policy during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, before Kennedy’s Presidency. It will set the stage upon which foreign policy, civil rights, and anticommunism interacted with each other before Kennedy took office. I will dissect political actors’ motivations during that era through the prism of Rational Choice Theory. The recognition that the U.S. was embarrassed during the Cold War offered civil rights groups leverage. By leverage, I mean that the intense ideological struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War era strengthened the political position of American blacks in the U.S. The Kennedy Administration, as a political institution, perceived the conflict between Americans' democratic convictions and their domestic racism as a problem because it damaged American moral legitimacy in the world.

Next, I will demonstrate that there was a “fit” – to use Theda Skocpol’s term – between the goals and capacities of those civil rights groups, and the changing points of access and leverage allowed by the political institutions during Kennedy’s Presidency. [[4]](#endnote-4)

From the international relations field, a Constructivist approach will be chosen. From a Constructivist standpoint, foreign policy is a reflection of social norms, national identities and shared cultures. In short, “Foreign policy is what states make of it.”[[5]](#endnote-5) In regard to the Civil Rights Movement and related policies during Kennedy’s Presidency, Constructivists would emphasize that the American government’s increasing participation in various international institutions led to shifts in its strategic cultures, social norms, and conceptions of national identity.

**Prologue – The historical background before Kennedy’s Presidency:**

When Harry Truman assumed the Presidency after Roosevelt’s death in 1945, Southerners saw Truman, grandson of a slaveholder, as white supremacy’s insurance policy.[[6]](#endnote-6) However, President Truman became the first openly civil rights-oriented Democratic president.[[7]](#endnote-7) What were the domestic and international factors that led to his commitment to the civil rights movement?

 During the time of Truman’s presidency, the United States was in the early stages of the Cold War. The focus of American foreign policy was to promote democracy and to contain communism. However, the international focus on U.S. racial problems meant that the image of American democracy was tarnished. In the years following WWII, race was an issue that the federal government was unable to ignore. A wave of violence swept the South as black veterans returned home and those incidents were covered in this country and abroad.[[8]](#endnote-8) Lynching and other forms of racial violence, as well as segregation, provoked international outrage.[[9]](#endnote-9) Newspapers around the world covered stories of mistreatment against visiting non-white diplomats.[[10]](#endnote-10) The Soviets also made effective use of these events in anti-American propaganda. [[11]](#endnote-11) [[12]](#endnote-12) The Truman Administration had two options to respond to this international criticism: either to silence and repress movements and/or voices that could have challenged the official narrative of race or to make an effort to achieve some level of social change at home. In summary, the choice it made was based on the domestic and international setup at the time.

During Truman’s presidency, because of the Communist phobia that swept the country, the federal government silenced many of its critics. Black activists who sought a wider audience among the international community were tainted with Communist labels and sometimes had their passports confiscated. Later on, this policy was relaxed due to domestic and international expression of outrage over such treatment. This demonstrates that American government had always been selective in granting access to social groups based on the government’s perceived national interests during the Cold War era. To take advantage of the new political milieu, the civil rights groups not only exploited the traditional access to American politics through various protests and non-violent movements (e.g. court litigation, sit-ins, and "free rides"), they also explored new venues by appealing to foreign audiences and international institutions, such as the United Nations.[[13]](#endnote-13) This change demonstrates that a success of a social movement depends on finding the “fit” between the rules and interests of government institutions and the social group’s political identities and capacities.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Consequently, the elite whites in the State Department, in the Supreme Court, and other circles of power realized that the contradiction between the international image they desired for America and the government’s racial practices at home was an obstacle in the conduct of relations with Third World countries. They also perceived that America’s self-interest lay in publicly supporting blacks so as to gain an edge in the Cold War with Soviet Union. There is no doubt that Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights was initiated partly in response to and in anticipation of further embarrassment caused by the international attention to racial issues in the United States.[[15]](#endnote-15) President Truman responded to this shift of interests by setting up the President’s Committee on Civil Rights which issued its report “To Secure These Rights” in 1947. It argued that there were three reasons why civil rights issues should be redressed: a moral reason; an economic reason; and an international reason – discrimination damaged U.S. foreign relations. The committee stressed that:

“We cannot escape the fact that our civil rights record has been an issue in world politics. *The world’s press and radios are full of it*…. our civil rights record has growing international implications. These cannot safely be disregarded by the government at the national level which is responsible for our relations with the world…A lynching in a rural American community is not a challenge to that community's conscience alone. The repercussions of such a crime are heard not only in the locality, or indeed only in our own nation. They echo from one end of the globe to the other, and *the world looks to the American national government for an explanation* problem.” [[16]](#endnote-16)

I would argue that “To Secure These Rights” was a blueprint for the Truman administration’s civil rights reforms.[[17]](#endnote-17) The report preceded Truman’s executive orders to integrate the army and Supreme Court rulings in favor of desegregation in housing, transportation, and education institutions.

It is hard to overstate the importance of the landmark ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* in May 1954. I will make two arguments here: First, the Truman administration’s position on this ruling was significantly influenced by both its foreign policy goals and the pervasive racial discrimination and segregation at home. Second, the connection between Cold War and Civil Rights had a significant impact on the Supreme Court’s decision. In its brief, the government argued that:

 “The existence of discrimination against minority groups in the United States has an adverse effect upon our relations with other countries….Racial discrimination *furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills*…. This issue can potentially damage *the credibility and integrity of the United States in the pursuit of true democracy with foreign governments and in the world community*. It is in the context of the present world struggle between freedom and tyranny that the problem of racial discrimination must be viewed.” [[18]](#endnote-18)

The brief also quoted Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s letter to the attorney general, “The United States is under constant attack in the foreign press, over foreign radio, and in such international bodies as the United Nations because of various practice of discrimination against minority group in this country….*Soviet spokesman regularly exploit this situation in propaganda against the United States*, both within the United Nations and through radio broadcasts and the press, *which reaches all corners of the world*….The undeniable existence of racial discrimination gives unfriendly governments *the most effective kind of ammunition for their propaganda* *warfare*.” [[19]](#endnote-19)

Later, during Eisenhower’s presidency, the State Department used the Brown decision to convince its critics abroad. Within an hour of the Supreme Court decision, the Voice of America broadcasted the news all over in thirty-five languages. [[20]](#endnote-20) The reactions of the nation and the world were mostly positive.[[21]](#endnote-21) The amicus briefs were also helpful for domestic political purposes because President Truman referred to them in his 1948 campaign speeches before black audiences. In my view, the amicus briefs in the Supreme Court case were a manifestation of Truman administration policy. Even if Truman did not personally approve all of the briefs, high-level members of his administration in charged with furthering his interests participated in this case. The Truman administration’s active participation in such well-published civil rights cases is evidently a deliberate policy decision made at the highest levels. The repeated emphasis in the briefs on the linkage between the civil rights issues and the credibility and integrity of the United States in the world is further proof that the Truman administration’s position on this ruling was significantly influenced by its foreign policy goals. Furthermore, almost all of the statements in the brief have little legal bearing. It argues mainly from a national foreign affairs perspective. I am not claiming that the only reason behind the Truman Administration‘s stand on this case was the Cold War imperative. However, the wealth of materials in the State Department archives and amicus briefs demonstrates that it took this problem very seriously. [[22]](#endnote-22) The Truman Administration’s choice of position on this case seemed more a rational than a moral one.

 The Supreme Court’s opinion on *Brown vs. Board of Education* itself does not contain explicit Cold War rhetoric. I would argue that in any given historical record, the Supreme Court is likely to be influenced by the intellectual history of its times. The ideas available to Supreme Court about the world were the same ideas available to others especially in their social class. During the late 1940s, Cold War ideology shaped the broader discourse on Civil Rights in important ways. At least two of the Supreme Court justices who decided ruled in favor of Brown had expressed concern, either in speeches or their private correspondence, which the civil rights problem in the United States would play into the hands of its enemies. [[23]](#endnote-23) The Brown decision, in essence, is a demonstration of what Bruce Ackerman called the very process of higher law-making. [[24]](#endnote-24) **[[25]](#endnote-25)**

 International reaction to the Brown decision was uniformly favorable, with the predictable exception of the South Africa government.[[26]](#endnote-26) White Southerners generally saw the Brown decision as a terrible mistake. Powerful U.S. senators like Strom Thurmond and Richard Russell believed that racial integration would subvert the fundamental social order of the United States. [[27]](#endnote-27) It is interesting that Governor Herman Tallmadge of Georgia wrote a book titled “You and Segregation” for this case. Tallmadge asked, “How many times have you read or heard this: ‘What will the Reds say if we don’t do this?’ or ‘What will the Communist newspaper Pravda print about the United States because we do this or that?’ Who cares what the Communists say? Who cares what Pravda prints?”[[28]](#endnote-28) It appeared that even Southerners had caught up the importance of Cold War propaganda; otherwise, this book would not have sold 10,000 copies in one week. [[29]](#endnote-29)

 Eisenhower himself refused to endorse the Court’s decision or to offer any leadership to the country beyond a quiet agreement to desegregate Washington schools. He also declined to speak of the case as one involving a moral issue. A few months before the Court’s announcement, he said to Chief Justice Earl Warren on behalf of segregation, “These are not bad people. All they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit in school alongside some big overgrown Negros.” [[30]](#endnote-30) During the first three years of his presidency (1954-1957), he tried to avoid confronting subsequent Southern resistance until his hand was forced in Little Rock in the fall of 1957.[[31]](#endnote-31) However, Little Rock displayed America’s racial dilemmas to a fascinated international audience. Governor Faubus’s actions were seen to be a strong aid to the Soviet propaganda machine. [[32]](#endnote-32) Television cameras from around the world whirred as vicious white mobs taunted and assaulted nine orderly, well-dressed black schoolchildren. The name “Little Rock” quickly became the foremost international symbol of American racism at home and abroad.[[33]](#endnote-33) On September 24, 1957, Eisenhower decided to send in the troops, and he explained his action in Little Rock as a matter of preserving domestic order, not promoting racial justice.[[34]](#endnote-34) Only two months before, Eisenhower had told reporters, “I can’t imagine any set of circumstance that would have ever induced me to send Federal troops … into any area to enforce the orders of a federal court. “[[35]](#endnote-35) What had caused the president to change his mind? I would argue that there were two main reasons: his concern for the rule of law and order, and for America’s reputation in the world. It was a mix of factors, domestic and international that led to his extraordinary action in Little Rock. Eisenhower wrote, “The Supreme Court has spoken, and I am sworn to uphold the constitutional process in this country … around the world it could continue to feed the mill of Soviet propagandists who by word and picture were telling the world of the ‘racial terror’ in the United States …Overseas, the mouthpiece of Soviet propaganda in Russia and Europe were blaring out that ‘anti-Ngoro’ in Little Rock was being ‘committed with the clear connivance of the United States government.’ ” [[36]](#endnote-36) In a radio and television address to the American people in September 24, 1957, he stressed that “at a time when we face grave situations abroad because of the hatred that communism bears toward a system of government based on human rights, it would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence, and indeed to the safety, of our nation and the world. “ [[37]](#endnote-37) The president’s address to the nation was also an address to the world, and it was widely covered in the international press. Eisenhower’s actions were widely and favorably viewed in the nation and the world. [[38]](#endnote-38) In summary, from the perspective of President Eisenhower, the core interest at stake in Little Rock had more to do with federal authority and foreign affairs than with racial equality.

 A lesson we can draw from Little Rock is that strong federal government actions provided the greatest benefit to the American international image. Decisive government actions in addressing racial incidents gave the United States Information Agency (USIA) and other government officials something worth reporting.[[39]](#endnote-39) Although the crisis in Little Rock would be resolved, in later years, Little Rock remained the paradigmatic symbol of race in America and served as the reference point for Presidents Kennedy, as he faced a civil rights crisis of his own.

**President Kennedy, Civil Rights and the Cold War:**

John Kennedy entered the White House without strong personal feelings about civil rights and racial discrimination. Harris Wofford, Kennedy’s advisor on civil rights, at that time, considered him rather uninterested in civil rights. According to Wofford, “His chief concern then and very possibly … to the end of his life, was foreign affairs and peace and relations with the Soviet Union.” [[40]](#endnote-40) [[41]](#endnote-41) However, by 1960, the black migration northward created a larger pool of black voters, and both presidential candidates, Richard Nixon and Kennedy sought the black vote. [[42]](#endnote-42) Both have often invoked the national-security meaning of black equality as a reason to support civil rights at home. [[43]](#endnote-43) Kennedy, as a Democratic president with a narrow margin of victory, recognized that he had to work both sides of the street – the white South and the power of its representatives in Congress, and the political struggle over racial equality in the nation. During his presidential campaign and his first year in office, Kennedy did little that regular Sothern Democrats could not tolerate. He answered his “problem” with African voters by first drawing upon his records of support for African independence. Second, he focused his civil rights efforts on voting rights. As his aide Arthur Schlesinger put it, voting was perceived as “the keystone in the struggle against segregation.” Also, it “did not incite social and sexual anxieties” in the way that integration did … concentrating on the right to vote … seemed the best available means of carrying the mind of the white south.” It is evident that he then considered that moving forward on civil rights reform would jeopardize his other initiatives in Congress. [[44]](#endnote-44) [[45]](#endnote-45)

However, the domestic and international events during this time reordered Kennedy's priorities. The period between 1961 and 1965 proved to be one of heightened activity and significant accomplishment for the Civil Rights Movement, from the 1960’s “sit-in”, the founding of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In May 1961, aimed to test the compliance of the Court’s ruling against the segregation in Southern interstate transit, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) initiated a Freedom Ride movement. [[46]](#endnote-46) All mass civil rights actions during that era triggered violent backlash. The later predictable cycle of events was straight forward: movement actions 🡪 whites’ backlash 🡪 government events 🡪 movement actions -> and so on [[47]](#endnote-47) Outside Anniston, Alabama, one of the Freedom Ride buses was firebombed. In Birmingham, riders were brutally attacked by mobs. SNCC then sent in reinforcements and they were attacked again; President Kennedy then sent six hundred federal marshals to the scene; and the riders kept coming. Kennedy was angered by the Freedom Riders’ persistence. He was upset because the violence against the riders was “exactly the kind of thing the Communists used to make the United States look bad around the world.” He told Harris Wofford, “Stop them! Get your friends off those buses!” Kennedy thought the movement was “embarrassing him and the country on the eve of his meeting in Vienna with Khrushchev.” [[48]](#endnote-48)

The international reaction to these events was harsh. [[49]](#endnote-49) I can only select a few among them here. The USA reported that “assessed in terms of its impact on the American image abroad, the Alabama racial incident was highly detrimental … The incidents had dealt a severe blow to U.S. prestige which might adversely affect its position of leadership in the free world as well as weaken the overall effectiveness of the Western alliance.” [[50]](#endnote-50) The Pakistani Observer suggested that “the race riots in Alabama seem to out-Little Rocked Little Rock.” Reports from Moscow characterized the event as an indictment of the American “way of life” and emphasized its impact on U.S. standing around the world. Chinese media stated the events “bore down hard on the theme that rampant racism has ‘exposed’ the savage nature of American freedom and democracy.” The London Daily Telegraph stated that “It is a pity that the Russians and Chinese in their endless efforts to foster hatred of American, who have made great play with the disturbances at Little Rock, should have another opportunity on the eve of the President’s meeting with Khrushchev.” [[51]](#endnote-51) What the Kennedy Administration learned from the Freedom Rides incident was that Civil Rights Movement activities, coupled with violent southern white reactions, created a crisis that demanded federal government attention. At this point, Kennedy could not control the nature and timing of the issues. There were to be no breaks in the international side of the U.S. civil rights crisis. After the Freedom Ride issue in Birmingham came the incident in Oxford, Mississippi in 1962, which handed the Kennedy administration another civil rights crisis that would incite more reactions overseas. The violence in Oxford and the federal role in managing this crisis were again closely followed overseas. However, some positive reactions were formed around his decisive response, and this lesson was not missed by Kennedy Administration. [[52]](#endnote-52) They learned that a more passive civil rights stance might serve president’s interest in not alienating the South, but an active posture would better serve U.S. foreign affairs. Kennedy, therefore, found himself increasingly involved in civil rights because federal authority was at stake, because of the demand for law and order, because it had an impact on his image as a national leader, and because it incited negative international opinions and “vicious” Communist propaganda that damaged American legitimacy abroad.

The impact of race in America on international politics came to a head in the spring of 1963 in Birmingham. Pictures of the strife in Birmingham flew around the world. Intelligence agencies tallied up the Soviet propaganda and announced that Birmingham had broken the historical record with 1,420 Communist commentaries in two weeks.[[53]](#endnote-53) The Kennedy Administration realized that as Birmingham had once more focused the world’s attention on racial brutality in America, resolving problems on the local level would not fully resolve the crisis. As with so many civil rights crises in the 1960s, Birmingham demanded a global, in addition to a local response. President Kennedy attacked the problem from three fronts. First, the President ordered to the federalization of the Alabama National Guard to stabilize the situation. Second, he made an impassioned plea for civil rights before a nationwide television audience. [[54]](#endnote-54) It was the president’s most dramatic and heartfelt statement on civil rights. He noted, “Today we are committed to a worldwide struggle to promote and project the right of all who wish to be free … We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it.” President called upon an ambitious civil rights agenda that would depend upon more than congressional action, executive branch enforcement efforts, and court orders. Third, the following week, President Kennedy appeared before a joint session of Congress and argued that legislative inaction would result in continued, if not increased, racial strife.” It would also weaken “the respect with which the rest of the world regards us.” [[55]](#endnote-55)

 Before President Kennedy finally broke with southern Democrats and sponsored tough civil rights legislation after 1963, he needed to address another civil rights related issue, a particularly awkward and persistent embarrassment for the administration: discrimination against nonwhite foreign diplomats, especially in Washington D.C. This problem made the Kennedy administration acutely aware that racial discrimination remained a national rather than a Southern phenomenon. Diplomats of newly independent non-white nations since the early 1960s continued to experience the U.S. primarily through New York and Washington, D.C. Dean Rusk, the then Secretary of the United State, recalled many incidents where non-white delegates to the United Nations were refused services by restaurants and hotels before their arrival in New York. [[56]](#endnote-56) A source of particular concern was Maryland’s Highway 40, the route taken by many diplomats on the drive from the U.N. in New York to Washington, D.C. When non-white diplomats stopped for a meal, they were refused service at Maryland restaurants. Such incidents upset the diplomats and often generated a hostile press reaction in their home country. This had been an old problem since the Truman era, had never been satisfactorily resolved and became an even greater concern for the Kennedy’s administration. President Kennedy’s initial reaction to these stories was that those diplomats should fly. His staff in the State Department had to remind him of the seriousness of this problem and its impact on his commitment in improving America’s image in the world. [[57]](#endnote-57) The administration later introduced a bill prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations of the state of Maryland. However, State Department involvement in state legislation seemed to be a great breach of federalism. The State Department drew an analogy between this request for assistance and the U.S. government’s appeal to private industry to help by building better weapons during WWII, except this time the war was the Cold War, and the weapons required were different: “Give us the weapons to conduct this war of human dignity.” [[58]](#endnote-58) The Maryland public accommodation bill was passed by the state legislature in January 1963. However, to have this problem, along with other civil rights issues, resolved nation-wide, federal legislation was necessary. The Supreme Court had already handed down many important pro-civil rights rulings; the battleground over civil rights reform had shifted to Congress. This is because the movement demanded rights beyond what the Court was likely to provide. Discrimination by private parties – restaurant, hotel, and gas station owners, for example – was discrimination that the Supreme Court considered a matter of state, not federal, concern. Federal rights to equal protection of the laws only came into play when the state itself practiced discrimination. [[59]](#endnote-59)

President Kennedy was cautious and only acted when forced to by political crisis. On the march of August 28, 1963, more than two hundred thousand people demonstrated in Washington in support of civil rights reform. The march was an international event, spawning sympathy marches around the world. [[60]](#endnote-60) It powerfully underscored the fact that a new era had begun. This meant that the President’s capability to control the pace of civil rights change was limited. These new circumstances required strong leadership if Kennedy wished to be seen as an effective leader at home and abroad. President Kennedy finally sponsored civil rights legislation in June 1963. In what became the Civil Rights Act of 1964, his new bill outlawed segregation in public places; it even leveraged the interstate commerce clause to instate a ban on racial discrimination by private business. By the time of his death, the nation and the world had taken notice of President Kennedy’s commitment to civil rights. Even those close to the president had noticed the changes. [[61]](#endnote-61) Kennedy campaign for office before 1960 used foreign affairs – Africa policy – to court black voters, but he finally understood that questions of justice at home reflected overseas, and vice versa. Unfortunately, the assassination on November 22, 1963 prevented him from fulfilling those commitments.

**Conclusion:**

This essay consistently emphasizes that President Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and their State Departments all saw civil rights as a matter of national security and promoted civil rights reforms to combat enemy propaganda.[[62]](#endnote-62) I have provided elaborate evidence to support the argument that domestic factors alone are not enough to explain the success of the Second Reconstruction; it was the international dimension of the American race policies that swung the pendulum. I would present a few more arguments to support this position.

Immigration reform to end discrimination based on national origin suggests the power of national-security meanings in promoting reform. Immigration reform mostly helped Asians, though Asians were a small and politically inactive part of the population. The reason is that it served as a tool against Communist propaganda while only technically changing policy. Presidents and State Department perceived it as an inexpensive policy with great payback from the Third World nations. All these arguments demonstrate the undeniable impact of the Cold War on the social movements between the period of 1945 and 1970. They also illustrate that the success of a social movement depends on finding the “fit” between the rules and interests of government institutions and the social group’s political identities and capacities. Theda Skocpol states that “A policy is ‘successful’ if it enhances the kinds of state capacities that can promote its future development, and especially if it stimulates groups and political alliances to defend the policy’s continuation and expansion.” [[63]](#endnote-63) I have concluded that the history of the Civil Rights Movement and its relation to the United States government’s Cold War concerns fit the model nicely.

**Figure 1: Applying Theda Skocpol’s model on Civil Rights Movement.**



From a Constructivist perspective, the identity of the nation determines its interests, and its actions. Gunnar Myrdal and Samuel Huntington both thought that all Americans shared an “American creed.” This creed is widely considered as a part of our national identity. The United States cared about its national identity, prestige, and image more than other nations during that period because those things affected the nation’s ability to maintain its leadership role. According to Huntington, American identity is defined not in existential but normative terms, in political rather than organic terms.[[64]](#endnote-64) What makes it malleable is its ability to “hold contrary ideas simultaneously without bothering to resolve the potential conflict between them.” [[65]](#endnote-65) I would argue further that this amorphous characteristic also makes it susceptible to the influence of internal and external changes. The interaction with international institutions like (United Nations, etc.) prompts Americans to revalue and refine our cultural identity. [[66]](#endnote-66) The United States was the most important founder of that the United Nations and almost all of the principles listed in the United Nations Charters match seamlessly with the American creed. Today, the concept of racial equality has become a concrete and unseparated part of the American creed. One needs not deny the continuing reality of discrimination and de facto segregation still exists in this nation to acknowledge how much progress the country had made at the end of the Cold War. The victory over white supremacy represented a more monumental achievement even than the victory over Soviet Communism. This victory cannot be understood apart from the international context of the Cold War. By the end of the Cold War, the United States had emerged as the multiracial leader of a multiracial world.

**Figure 2: Applying Constructivist Theory on Civil Rights Movement.**

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1. Derrick A. Bell raised the attention of the possible countervailing forces like the changes of labor market, the need to placate working class whites, wartime needs for solidarity and bodies to serve in industry or on front, and the exigencies of Cold War completion. *Race, Racism and American Law,* Boston: Little, Brown, 1973 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John David Skrentny, *The effect of the Cold War on African-American civil right: America and the world audience, 1945-1968.* pp 237, 238. Theory and Society 27:, 1998 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Azza Salama Layton, International Politics and Civil Rights Politics in the United States 1941-1960, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 5-29 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Solders and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, the Harvard University Press. 1992, pp. 54-62. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Alexander Wendt, *Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics.* International Organization, Vol. 46, No. 2. (Spring, 1992) p. 398 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Richard M. Valelly, *The Two Reconstructions*. 2004. Page 163 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Id, p. 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The murder of Macio Snipes and the blinding of Issac Woodard splashed across the pages of the world news, reflected poorly on America. Juan Williams, *Eyes On The Prize: American’s Civil Rights Years,* 1954-1965. 1987, Page 41-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Mary L. Dudziak, “Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative*.”* Stanford Law Review, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Nov., 1988), pp. 80-83. This article extensively documented the relationship between federal civil rights policy and international criticism of U.S. race relations. Many of this book’s sources are original documents – Foreign press releases and editorials and memos by U.S. officials kept in the National Archives. She seems to have overlooked nothing. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Id, pp. 90-91. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Id, pp. 88-90. As early as June of 1945, Truman wrote in his diary, “Propaganda seems to be our greatest foreign relations enemy. Russians distributes lies about us. Alonzo L. Hamby, Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism. New York: Columbia University Press, 1973, page 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Mary L. Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy. Princeton University Press, 200, pp. 32-37. Soviet propaganda often called American professions of liberty and equality under democracy a sham. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black American and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 180-181, also **Table 5.2 and 5.3** illustrate the support from African American organizations to this kind of petitions. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Supra Note 5, pp. 54-58. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Alexander DeConde, *Ethnicity, Race, and American Foreign Policy*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992, p. 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. To read the original text of the report: <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/civilrights/srights3.htm#133>. Due to the importance of this report, I have to quote a large portion of it. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Layton, supra note 4, at page 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Brief for the United States as amicus curiae, Browan v. Board of Education, 374 U.S. 483. We can find the briefs for this case with these two links: <http://www.lexisnexis.com.lib-proxy.fullerton.edu/hottopics/lnacademic/> and http://www-tc.pbs.org/beyondbrown/brownpdfs/amicuscurisummary.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Id, 483, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. New York Times, May 18, 1954. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/nytarchive.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Please see this link for reference: <http://www.streetlaw.org/en/Page/507/Immediate_Reaction_to_the_Decision_Comparing_Regional_Media_Coverage> [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See Supra note 12, pp. 117-119. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. William O. Douglas, Strange Lands and Friendly People, New York: Harper, 1951, p.296. Also see Supra note 15, pp. 104-106. The two judges were Justice Earl Warren and Justice William O. Douglass. “Other members of the court traveled extensively abroad in the years before Brown v. Board of Education. Spending time overseas during a period when American race discrimination was a prominent source of news headline, these Justices could not have helped but recognize the international concern over American civil right abuses.” [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Bruce Ackerman, *We the People, Volume 1: Foundations,* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Chapters 1 – 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. The Brown Decision was but one of the many major Pro-Civil Rights rulings between 1951 and 1955 (1 out of 16). Please see Figure 1 in appendix, excerpted from page 85 of Doug Mcadam’s book, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970.* [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See Supra note 15, pp. 107-109. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line* (Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 88. Kindle version: Location 1411. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Herman E. Talmadge*, You and Segregation.* Beimingham, Vulcan Press, 1955. Birmingham, Vulcan Press, 1955, p. 31 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. New York Times, Nov. 14, 1955 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Earl Warren, The memoirs of Earl Warren, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977, p. 291 [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line* (Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 88. Kindle version: Location 1411. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. See Supra note 15, pp. 124-125 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Id, pp. 90-92. Rejecting American warnings about Communist influence in South Africa, Nelson Mandela declared that Africans “do not require any schooling from the U.S., which should … learn to put its own house in order before trying to teach everyone else. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Kenneth O'Reilly, *Nixon's Piano: Presidents and Racial Politics from Washington to Clinton.* New York: Free Press, 1995, pp. 183-184. It quoted the text of Eisenhower address, 24 September 1997, AWF, Administrative Series, box 23, DDEL; Halberstam, *Fifties*, 687; Ambrose Eisenhower; 2:414. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Waging Peace, 1956-1961: The White House Years, Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1965, p. 170 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Id, pp. 162-168, 170-171 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. The full context of this speech can be viewed by this link: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=10909> [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. See Supra note 15, pp. 133-135. Southerners were not so happy, pp. 135-136. Senator Richard Russell of Georgia considered the action an attempt to “destroy the social order of the South” and thought that “… nothing like this was ever attempted in Russia.” [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Refer to Supra notes 15, p. 145. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. See Supra note 15, p. 155. It quoted this primary source: Harris Wofford, recorded interview by Berl Bernhard, Nov. 29, 1965, pp. 7, 31, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program, Kennedy Library. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Some IR scholars believed that his young age, his inexperience in foreign affairs, and the disaster at the Bay of Pigs might have encouraged Khrushchev’s adventure in Cuba in 1962. Kennedy might have felt that he needed to focus on Cold War in order to prove himself as a strong leader in the international arena. See Graham T. Allison, “Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis”, American Political Science Review, Vol. I.XIII, No. 3 (September, 1969), pp. 698-718 [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. See figure 2 in the appendix. It shows the trend of increase in Blacks’ voter registration. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Richard M. Nixon, *The Challenges We Face*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1960, pp. 186-188. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Carl M. Brauer, John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction, New York: Columbia University Press, 1977, pp. 43, 127, 250-210, 212-213. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White Hous*e, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965, pp. 847-849, 853. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Figure 3 in appendix illustrates the gradual intensity of civil right actions between 1960 and 1965. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Figure 4 in appendix illustrates the interactions among civil rights actions, supremacist actions, and government events between 1960 and 1965. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Richard Reeves, President Kennedy: Profile of Power, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993, p. 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. All the relative articles can be retrieved from National Archives web site. On the site, look for Special “S” Reports, 1953-1963. The document number for this subject is **304002**. All those documents are image copies, not digitized. Reading them can be a challenge. URL: <http://research.archives.gov/description/304002>. Page 1-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Id, p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Id, p. 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. USIA, “Media Comment on the Mississippi Crisis,” Oct 5, 1962, URL: http://research.archives.gov/description/5679683 [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. James Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History,* Yale University Press, 2003, p. 225. Kindle version Loc 3613. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. John F. Kennedy, “Radio and Television Report to the American people on Civil Rights” June 11, 1963. The whole text is available in this link: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9271> [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. John F. Kennedy, “Special Message to the Congress on Civil Rights and Job Opportunities,“ June 19, 1963. The whole text is available in this link: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9283> [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1990, p. 582. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. See Supra note 47, page 77. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. See Supra note 15, p. 168 [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. See Supra note 15, pp. 182-185. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. See Supra note 15, p. 195. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. See Supra note 15, p. 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. John D. Skrentny, John *The Minority Rights Revolution,* The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. See Supra Note 5, p. 59 [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Samuel P. Huntington, American Politics: *The Promise of Disharmony.* The Harvard University Press, pp. 23, 30 [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Id, page 16 [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Huntington was most respected for his contributions to the field of International Relations. In his book “Cultural Maters”, he states that a country’s cultural factors have strong explanation power in “modernization, political democratization, military strategy, the behavior of ethnic groups, and the alignments and antagonisms among countries.” Samuel P. Huntington edited*, Culture Matters,* Basic Books, 2000. Page XIV. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)