

# ***World War II, the Cold War, and the Long Civil Rights Movement in America***

**Zheng Zhuo<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Charterhouse, Godalming, Surrey, England, United Kingdom, GU7 2DX*

*a. ZhengZhuo@charterhouse.org.uk*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** The civil rights movement in America serves as one of the most fundamental struggles for equality in the 20th century, as activists including Martin Luther King Jr. and civil rights groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and the National Urban League strived to end racial segregation and discrimination in America. Despite the significance of domestic developments throughout the civil rights movement, it is also important to acknowledge the effects of global events and international relations on its progresses. This paper attempts to focus on examining this aspect of the civil rights movement by looking at two case studies: the World War II and the Cold War. Through exploring previous works discussing their impacts on the course of events during the movement, it may be suggested that the latter wasn't simply a domestically-motivated social struggle free of foreign influences and that global crisis at the time (such as the Second World War and the Cold War) and the civil rights movement weren't parallel events with little connections. On the contrary, as many scholars suggested, the fact that the civil rights movement took place during those two long-lasting battles was no coincidence.

**Keywords:** civil rights, racial segregation, propaganda, communism

## **1. Introduction**

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall suggested in her work 'the Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past' that the developments of the movement extended beyond the 'classic phase' of the 1950s-1960s and began in the late 1930s whilst remaining to be impactful in the 1960s and 1970s by 'inspiring a movement of movements'[1,2]. Through combining works such as John David Skrentny's article 'The Effect of the Cold War on African-American Civil Rights' and Hall's acknowledgement of the 'Long Civil Rights Movement', it may be inferred that the struggle for racial equality in America had long been subject to the effects of international events from the 1940s to the later stages of the Cold War. Illustrating this often-overlooked aspect of the civil rights movement can help to construct a more comprehensive outlook and provide contemporary audiences with a perspective different to the 'nation-based account' that dominates high school classes in America[3]. Furthermore, such depiction would provide yet another example of how foreign influences could affect and shape domestic politics for historians, political scientists and relevant discourses in the future, as they might find similar connections when looking at the increasing recognition of socialism in particular countries after the Second World War, the economic policies in US today following the Russian-Ukraine war, etc. Herein, this paper focuses on exploring attempts at desegregating the US

military during World War II, as well as how a critical world audience and anti-communism affected the movement's advances during the Cold War. Additionally, it will finish on the idea that the legacies of the Second World War have facilitated the impacts of the succeeding Cold War on the movement, hence suggesting a linkage between the two events. By looking at works of Skrentny, Philip McGuire, and Mary Dudziak, it may be speculated that academic works regarding this theory would continue to increase. At the same time, however, it's essential that efforts made by domestic activists and groups aren't overlooked or watered down, since they remain to be the backbone of the movement's advancements.

## **2. World War II: the Struggle for Integration in the US Military**

In order to prepare itself for potential aggression from the axis powers, the US government needed to mobilise its army during the Second World War. As a result, alongside white inductees, an increasing number of African Americans sought to join the US military. However, racial discrimination within the armed forces was rampant at the time. From the exclusion of blacks when drafting to the separation of combat units and training facilities, African-American military personnel suffered from extensive inequalities in the armed forces whilst wishing to fight for a 'free and democratic world'. Hereinto, excuses such as 'illiteracy' were used by the War Department to deny blacks from being accepted as soldiers. It was admitted by Henry Stimson, the Secretary of War at the time, in his journal that the 'rigid requirements for literacy' were adopted for the purpose of restricting 'the number of coloured troops' and that 'good, but illiterate [white] recruits' shouldn't be excluded for the same reason[4]. As a result, whilst the War Department deprived many African-Americans of the opportunity to serve, they felt guilt-free to recruit competent white soldiers who shared the same deficiency in literate abilities.

The official stance of the War Department on segregation within the US military had been clear. On the 9th of October 1940, announced alongside the guidelines for the treatment of black personnel in the army was a general statement proclaiming that the War Department's policy of segregation 'has proven satisfactory over a long period of years and to make changes would produce situations destructive to morale and detrimental to the preparation for National defence'[5]. Such official refusal to experiment with integration in the armed forces sparked protests and considerable oppositions amongst black leaders and civil rights groups, namely the National Urban League and the Citizens' Nonpartisan Committee for Equal Rights in National Defence, who publicly challenged the veracity of the statement and emphasised their abhorrence of racial segregation and discrimination within US troops[6].

The situation was aggravated by Stephen Early, the press secretary of Roosevelt, who kicked a black policeman in the groin for unintentionally getting in his way when boarding the presidential train. With the embarrassing incident taking place just before the 1940 presidential election, civil rights leaders demanded the government to make military concessions by threatening to cut down black votes. They clamoured for the abolition of segregation in the US military and numerous assignments of African-Americans to important posts, including the appointment of Judge William Hastie as the assistant secretary in the War Department. Except for the abolition of segregation, the Roosevelt administration agreed to all of the other demands in exchange for black votes while individuals like Hastie, different from previous 'rubber stamp officials' who were dedicated rather to appeasing dissents than to promoting the interests of African Americans, took a determined attitude towards promoting desegregation within the armed services.

Apart from the aforementioned activists and organisations, the struggle for integration within the US military was propelled by many other social groups. For instance, African-American physicians had been fighting arduously for the inclusion of blacks in military medicine. During the mobilisation phase, only a small number of black medical personnel were allowed to operate in separated black

wards across the country. Furthermore, officials of the War Department stated that integration would result in disharmony and that white soldiers should be able to enjoy 'the same privileges of rest and relaxation that they enjoyed at home', hence suggesting that they should not be disturbed by the company of black doctors and nurses[7]. Some officials even inferred that African-American physicians are mentally inferior to their white counterparts and are therefore unqualified to serve in medical services within the military[8]. The National Medical Association (NMA) and black communities were infuriated by these arrangements and statements. They not only demanded more black medical personnel to be included but also called for the establishment of mixed medical facilities. In response, War Department officials and the surgeon general's office agreed to expand the number of coloured physicians and dentists within the armed forces. However, they refused to make concessions surrounding integration and relations between the NMA and its opposing parties remained to be uneasy. Tensions peaked in early 1942 with the establishment of the first all-black hospital at Fort Huachuca and the appointment of Colonel Midian Bousfield as the commander in charge, as both of the actions were carried out without consulting the NMA[9].

As America was dragged into the war by Japan's attack on the Pearl Harbour, the Pittsburgh Courier, the largest black newspaper in the country, called for a 'double victory', suggesting that the triumph against racial discrimination and segregation within the country was equally important as the war efforts made against the axis powers and what they stood for. This proclamation received overwhelming support from the newspapers' audiences as they found the continuing practices of Jim Crow in America no longer tolerable. Furthermore, the campaign helped to suggest the hypocrisy of the US government by portraying the dissonance between the cause that US troops were fighting for and the country's treatment of African Americans within its borders. Although the effects of the 'Double-V Campaign' were limited as it achieved little in ending segregation in America, it may be argued that such an effort set the tone for future struggles against racial inequalities after the Second World War by unifying black communities.

To some extent, the Second World War provided civil rights activists and organisations with an opportunity to further their quest for domestic racial equality due to the nation-wide participation in the war and the cause of freedom that American soldiers were fighting for abroad. Although the advances made by civil rights activists and groups were arguably limited and segregation within the army remained until 1948 when Truman signed Executive Order 9981, they were, as suggested by Philip McGuire, 'the beginning of an end'[10].

### **3. The Cold War: a Double-edged Sword**

It may be argued that, during and after the Second World War, a rising global emphasis on human rights protection began to emerge. This can be attributed to various events including Franklin Roosevelt's promotion of the 'Four Freedoms', the issuing of the Atlantic Charter, the establishment of the United Nations, etc[11]. In Article I of the UN Charter that was put together in 1945, the third clause proclaimed that the United Nations should 'promote and encourage respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion'[12]. This was further strengthened and developed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was declared by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948.

At the centre of this new liberal international order stood America, one of the most outspoken advocates of a free and democratic world. However, racial segregation and other brutal and unequal treatments of African Americans were prevalent within US borders at the same time. As John David Skrentny suggested, this gap between the rhetoric used by America towards the remainder of the world and its domestic realities (similar to what the 'Double-V Campaign' was alluding to) was acutely seized upon by the Soviet Union and its allies, who used this contradiction to demonstrate the untrustworthiness and hypocrisy of America's democracy through an extensive level of

propaganda[13]. The State Department estimated that almost half of Soviet propaganda in the 1950s surrounded racial inequalities in America[14]. Furthermore, such criticisms and concerns came from not only the Communist world but also from friendly nations, namely third world countries in Africa and Asia, as they significantly challenged America's world legitimacy in its ideological struggle against the Soviet Union and impaired its foreign relations. Letters exchanged between US officials and incessant reports coming from US ambassadors stationed abroad illustrated this situation accurately. In a letter sent by Dean Acheson, the Secretary of State at the time, to the Fair Employment Practices Commission on May the 8th, 1946, it was pointed out that the presence of racial discrimination in America has 'an adverse effect' on its foreign relations as it creates a climate of 'suspicion and resentment in a country over the way a minority is being treated in the United States', which is a significant barrier to the two countries' ability to develop 'mutual understanding and trust'[15]. Therefore, US political actors who were actively engaged with foreign relations (such as the President, US ambassadors and secretaries of state) were deeply concerned about the developments of the civil rights movement and were pressured to weigh in on them in order to defend America from criticisms abroad. In August 1953, President Eisenhower established the USIA (U.S. Information Agency) which was specifically designed to counter Communist propaganda. Such government inclination contributed significantly to the leverage gained by civil rights activists within the country as political elites and leaders had a vested interest in progressing their movements and broadcasting any positive developments to the rest of the world.

Apart from US political actors, it was indicated by Skrentny that the Cold War has also affected civil rights activists' strategies in combating racial inequalities. With the establishment of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and its Subcommission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in 1946, civil rights activists began to seek global attention in order to pressure US officials to take action. In 1947, the NAACP petitioned directly to the United Nations and accused the US government of denying African Americans their fundamental human rights. The petition was modified and introduced to the UN Commission of Human Rights by the Soviet Union, which made it seem all the more humiliating. The effort was followed by the Civil Rights Congress's petition in 1951 which raised the charges to genocide – a vaguely defined term at the time. These strategies have attracted extensive global attention to racial issues in America and have, as a result, embarrassed US officials whilst forcing them to make statements endorsing the civil rights movement.

Nonetheless, the Cold War didn't only stimulate positive changes within American society. As Wilson Record addressed in his book 'the Negro and the Communist Party' in as early as 1951, numerous political leaders and government officials publicly associated the civil rights movement with communism, which was deeply abhorred by many domestic audiences influenced by McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare at the time[16].

Furthermore, African American leaders were placed under close surveillance by the Federal Bureau of Investigation who gained approval from both Kennedy and Johnson to wiretap their activities and use the acquired recordings to undermine their legitimacy within the country. One of the most vocal and active leaders of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr., was constantly harassed by FBI agents who were relentlessly yet futilely attempting to uncover evidence of King's collusion with the communists in Moscow. It can be argued that such government tendencies manifested an evident concern amongst political leaders in America of communist infiltration into the civil rights movement which has undoubtedly impeded the efforts made by activists in the country.

#### 4. Conclusion

In summary, whilst the Second World War offered activists and groups a platform to raise their grievances and achieve minor progress, the cause of freedom that allied soldiers fought for during the war helped to construct a rising global emphasis on human rights protection which in turn led to a

critical world audience led by the Soviet Union and its allies who scrutinised and criticised racial inequalities in America. Meanwhile, the Cold War also gave rise to opposing voices against the movement as the latter was sometimes associated with a communist plot. Through these theories, it may be reasonably suggested that the civil rights movement is far from being a purely domestic struggle in which international events and tensions had little relevance. Instead, its complexity extended beyond the US borders and the impacts of external pressures proved to be long-lasting and significant. Nonetheless, examples as such are by no means limited to the discussed case studies in this paper and the discussions of the Cold War remained to be broad and unspecific. For instance, it can be addressed that the Vietnam War has helped to expose existing divisions within the movement between moderate and militant groups, with the former being reluctant to endorse anti-war protests and the latter being the opposite[17]. It is likely that future works regarding these areas would focus on smaller events and their connections with the civil rights movement as scholars strive to reach a more balanced account of its developments.

## References

- [1] Hall, J. D. (2005). *The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past*. *The Journal of American History*, 91(4), 1233–1263. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3660172>
- [2] Gosse, V. (2002). *A Movement of Movements: The Definition and Periodization of the New Left*. *Companion to Post-1945 America*. 277-302
- [3] Gaines, K. (2007). *The Civil Rights Movement in World Perspective*. *OAH Magazine of History*, 21(1), 57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25162103>
- [4] Stimson, H. (May 12, 1942). *Stimson Diary*.
- [5] War Department Press Release. (October 9, 1940). *The Adjutant General's Office*. NARG 407.
- [6] *New York Age*. (October 26, 1940). *(The statements were reprinted in this black newspaper)*
- [7] Hine, D.C. (1989). *Black women in white: Racial conflict and cooperation in the nursing profession, 1890-1950*. Bloomington u.a.: Indiana Univ. Pr. 169-70
- [8] McAfee, L.B. (June 19, 1941). *Activation of Medical Companies, Sanitary, Negro Personnel*.
- [9] Hine, D. C. (2003). *Black Professionals and Race Consciousness: Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, 1890-1950*. *The Journal of American History*, 89(4), 1279–1294. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3092543>
- [10] McGuire, P. (1983). *Desegregation of the Armed Forces: Black Leadership, Protest and World War II*. *The Journal of Negro History*, 68(2), 147–158. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2717718>
- [11] Address by the President, 87 Cong. (1941). Rec. 44, 46-47.
- [12] United Nations. (24 October 1945). *Charter of the United Nations*. 1 UNTS XVI
- [13] Skrentny, J. D. (1998). *The Effect of the Cold War on African-American Civil Rights: America and the World Audience, 1945-1968*. *Theory and Society*, 27(2), 237–285. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/657868>
- [14] Nichols, L. (1954). *Breakthrough on the Color Front*. New York: Random House. 9.
- [15] President's Committee on Civil Rights. (1947). *To Secure These Rights*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office. 146
- [16] Woods, J., Aloe, B., & Weinberg, C. R. (2010). *The Cold War and the Struggle for Civil Rights*. *OAH Magazine of History*, 24(4), 13–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23210195>
- [17] Simon Hall. (2003). *The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam*. *The Historical Journal*, 46(3), 669–701. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3133567>