

American Dilemmas, 1930S–1955

Intellectual Crosscurrents

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Black Internationalism

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Fighting for Civil Rights in the Courts



Thurgood Marshall, Donald Gaines Murray, and Charles Houston

The years during and after World War II were rife with expectations of a new world order. In February 1941, before U.S. entry into the war, *Time* publisher Henry Luce predicted, in an editorial in his magazine, the dawning of “the American Century.” Luce foresaw that the United States would emerge from the ruins of war as the most powerful nation in the world, and he exhorted Americans not to “bungle it,” as they had after World War I, by embracing isolationism. American political and economic hegemony, which demanded the export of all things characteristically American—culture, technology, aid, and the “great principles of Western civilization—above all Justice, love of Truth, the ideal of Charity.”

A different vision of America’s future was offered in the article “Certain Unalienable Rights” by Mary McLeod Bethune, the black New Dealer and founder of the National Council of Negro Women. Doubtless Bethune too valued Justice, Truth, and Charity, but for her such words remained empty platitudes when black Americans were denied the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of full citizenship in the land of their birth. Writing in 1944, Bethune enunciated what African Americans wanted—the “opportunity to make real what the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and the Bill of Rights say.” American leadership of the free world required leadership at home so that blacks, like other Americans, were guaranteed the right to vote, an end to lynching, an integrated military, equal employment opportunities, fair access to public housing and social security, and interracial cooperation.

Bethune’s perspective was more in keeping with that of Henry Wallace, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s vice president between 1941 and 1945, who in a speech in May 1942 explicitly rejected Luce’s business-oriented American Century. Foreseeing instead the “century of the common man,” Wallace argued that America must lead in building world peace, which he defined broadly to mean “a better standard of living for the common man, not merely in the United States and England, but also in India, Russia, China and Latin America. . . .” Bethune also ended her article on an internationalist note, identifying African Americans as part of “the depressed and oppressed masses all over the world.” But she also consciously addressed women worldwide: “We will reach out our hands to all women who struggle forward—white, black, brown, yellow—all.”

Throughout the 1940s, Americans who denounced racial inequality at home and colonialism abroad called attention to the gap between the nation’s ideals and its practices. In the latter part of the decade, as the Cold War began to pit the United States against the Soviet Union, antiracist dissent would itself pose dilemmas for many socially conscious Americans—civil rights and labor activists, scholars and literary figures, and politicians and entertainers. At a time when such activism was frequently labeled subversive or un-American, those who fought racial discrimination made difficult, consequential choices as to their allies and tactics as they pursued international causes, legal challenges, labor protest, social scientific research, and artistic production. Postwar African Americans did not doubt that America stood poised to lead the free world, nor did they doubt that America’s dilemmas were theirs as well.

Intellectual Crosscurrents

In 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois had characterized the “Negro Problem” as the psychological dilemma of being American and Negro—a tortured mindset of dueling identities, with “two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.” Forty years later, the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal characterized the “Negro Problem” in a different way. Myrdal

also saw it as a psychological dilemma—no less irrational and contradictory—but one that was roiling the minds of white Americans.

Writing at a time when the United States and its allies waged war against fascism and Nazi racism abroad, Myrdal found American whites' dilemma to be a moral issue—the failure to live by the democratic creed they treasured so dearly. Their racial discrimination exposed the nation's Achilles heel. This contradiction was developed at length in Myrdal's 1,400-page opus *An American Dilemma* (1944). Selected by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to undertake this ambitious study, Myrdal's interpretation became increasingly influential in the years after its publication and especially as the Cold War unfolded.

Most black leaders in the 1940s and 1950s welcomed Myrdal's huge study, perceiving his assessment to be an affirmation of a long held awareness in their community. Myrdal's work in fact drew on the research findings and raw data of sociologists, historians, economists, political scientists, psychologists, anthropologists, and other social-science specialists. Thirty persons were commissioned to collaborate on the project. Certainly substantial was the contribution of political scientist Ralph Bunche, whose research and writing formed part of Myrdal's finished work. Bunche had even preceded Myrdal in articulating the disparity between the nation's ideals and its actions. In his book *A World View of Race* (1936), Bunche concluded that “no other subject can so well illustrate the insincerity of our doctrines of human equality and the great disparity between our political theory and our social practices as that of race.”

On a more fundamental level, African Americans understood that racism and the creed of “liberty and justice for all” had co-existed far too easily in the history of America. Over the centuries, during peacetime and especially during wars and their immediate aftermath, countless African Americans had demanded equal citizenship as they pledged allegiance to their country through service in the armed forces and other forms of patriotism. From Revolutionary War-era poet Phillis Wheatley to Langston Hughes, who in 1938 wrote “America was never America to me” in his poem “Let America be America Again,” black writers insisted that America as a symbol contradicted American realities. That conviction only deepened in the World War II and postwar years.

Myrdal and numerous other scholars in the 1940s and 1950s emphasized the destructive effects of this dilemma on black communities. A large number of studies by black and white scholars emphasized pathological and dysfunctional images of black life—highlighting illiteracy, crime, delinquency, disease, and family instability as manifestations of frustration and the difficulties of living with the stigma of inferiority. Those studies, which usually focused on black social and economic conditions, came out of the research of such federal departments as the Office of Education, the Department of the Interior, and the Department of Commerce. Educational institutions—for example, the Institute for Research in Social Science of the University of North Carolina and the Department of the Social Sciences of Fisk University, sought to present graphic, scientific findings on the status of blacks in American society. The works of black social scientists E. Franklin Frazier, Charles S. Johnson, and Kenneth Clark, and white social scientists Howard Odum, Rupert Vance, Gordon Blackwell, and Guy B. Johnson, among others, provided hitherto unavailable information concerning blacks and the worlds in which they lived.

In a series of significant volumes, the American Council on Education published the findings of the American Youth Commission, which had studied the effect of the proscriptive



School segregation

In 1948, West Memphis, Arkansas, spent \$144.51 for the education of each white student in the classroom, while it spent \$19.51 for the education of each of the African American students.

influences of American society on personality development among African American youth. The studies of these investigators—among them Frazier, Johnson, Allison Davis, John Dollard, W. Lloyd Warner, Ira D. A. Reid, and Robert L. Sutherland—revealed that the vast majority of black youth did not get an opportunity to share in the American dream of equal opportunities. They explained that the environment of black youth often forced young people to react in a manner regarded by the larger society as shiftless, irresponsible, and aggressive. Opportunities for young African Americans to live normal lives were so few as to challenge, for them, any hope of achieving the American dream.

Some of these studies did make recommendations for improving the status of blacks in American life, but the researchers' primary concern was revealing facts rather than outlining programs of action. Some, like Myrdal, explicitly advocated social engineering. Indeed, *An American Dilemma* articulated and gave shape to a growing liberal civil rights consensus within the federal government and also civil rights organizations. For example, the Truman administration's civil rights report *To Secure These Rights* (1947) referred to *An American Dilemma*, as did the NAACP legal team's argumentation. Later, in its landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court cited Myrdal's book in striking down the legality of segregated public education.

Black and white scholars' rhetoric of social pathology to describe the debilitating effects of racism and segregation played a strategic role in the legal assault on Jim Crow, but this type of "damage imagery," as historian Daryl Scott terms it, also evoked "contempt and



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pity.” In the 1940s and 1950s, the dominant scholarly interpretation of black pathology and victimization tended to go too far, departing from earlier scholarship that affirmed racial pride and also from that which emphasized black agency in the struggle for economic rights and racial justice. Its privileging of assimilation over black cultural distinctiveness would prove untenable to scholars in the post-1960s and to a generation of African Americans who lauded black pride and black power.

The Emphasis on Assimilation and Culture

In the 1940s, however, the emphasis on assimilation prevailed. It was one thing to speak assertively of racial expectations, as did the cross-section of black leaders whose essays appeared in *What the Negro Wants* (1944), edited by Rayford W. Logan at the request of the University of North Carolina Press. The diverse group of radicals, liberals, moderates, and conservatives spoke in a unified demand for full citizenship and full participation in American life. Their assertiveness provoked the director of the press, W. C. Couch, to write his own introduction expressing disagreement with the black writers’ position. But it was quite another thing to speak assertively of black cultural difference in the 1940s, as did the white anthropologist and civil rights advocate Melville Herskovits. Such a position posed a difficult question in regard to individual identity and to racial representation in the fight for equality and dignity in America: Did black distinctiveness simply come down to a culture of pathology? Or were patterns of distinctiveness actually rooted in an older, African heritage?

By the 1940s, social scientists had begun to challenge the biological premise of race. The work of Columbia University-based anthropologist Franz Boas at the turn of the twentieth century, and later of his students (who included Herskovits, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Zora Neale Hurston), took exception to race as a biological construct. Instead, they emphasized culture as the primary explanation of group differences. Their scientific approach to culture demanded extensive fieldwork, based on a value-free examination of the values, mores, art, family structure, and other social institutions within the context of a specific ethnic or social group, instead of judging one group by another group’s standards for the sake of racial hierarchy.

The influence of such “culturalists” was evident in the work of those who advocated educational models that emphasized the pluralistic character of the United States. For example, in the late 1930s, the Department of Interior under New Dealer Harold Ickes promoted such ideas through the radio series *Americans All*, *Immigrants All*, which featured weekly programs on specific immigrant groups, as well as blacks and Jews. Historian Barbara Savage notes that phonograph recordings of individual *Americans All* programs were made available to civic organizations, libraries, and schools—elementary and secondary school teachers being among the largest targeted audiences of the show.

However, the implications of cultural explanations led to two different conclusions about race, one toward assimilation and the other toward distinctiveness. For some scholars, the conclusion was self-evident: If race was not biologically constructed, African-descended persons in the United States had already become, or at least were on the way to becoming, little different in their cultural patterns from other assimilated ethnic immigrant groups. Assimilation, it was argued, would occur most rapidly in contexts of racially integrated, urban settings.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the white sociologist Robert Park and his former student, black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, each described migration to northern and western cities as ultimately an acculturating process, despite problems of marginalization and social

rupture. Even earlier, Franz Boas in the first decade of the twentieth century and his student Melville Herskovits in the 1920s, both white anthropologists, had measured the head size of different ethnic and racial groups (a form of study termed anthropometry) to argue that in cities over time the intellect, culture, and even physical appearance of the different groups were converging within a range of characteristics understood to be the “American type.”

In the 1920s, Herskovits had articulated this assimilationist viewpoint in a research project that used anthropometric measurement and genealogical information, in order to study African Americans in Harlem and at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Publishing his findings initially in journals and later in the short book *The American Negro: A Study of Racial Crossing* (1928), he concluded that “I do not claim the term ‘race’ for the American Negro and I certainly do not claim that there is anything but the most striking type of mixture represented in him.” Clearly at odds with his own later work in the 1930s and 1940s, Herskovits in the 1920s stressed racial assimilation. In his chapter in Alain Locke’s edited anthology *The New Negro* (1925), he portrayed blacks in Harlem as follows:

[That] the [Negroes] have absorbed the culture of America is too obvious, almost, to be mentioned. They have absorbed it as all great racial and social groups in this country have absorbed it. And they face much the same problems as these groups face. The social ostracism to which they are subjected is only different in extent from that to which the Jew is subjected. The fierce reaction of race-pride is quite the same in both groups. But, whether in Negro or in Jew, the protest avails nothing, apparently. All racial and social elements in our population who live here long enough become acculturated, Americanized in the truest sense of the word, eventually. They learn our culture and react according to its patterns, against which all the protestations of the possession of, or of hot desire for, a peculiar culture mean nothing.

Herskovits’s chapter aroused the indignation of Locke and others who envisioned *The New Negro* as showcasing the unique heritage and genius of black culture and with it, the authentic black voice and dialect of the rural folk and urban mass. Suggesting to Herskovits that he revise his chapter, Locke asked, “Does democracy require uniformity? If so it threatens to be safe, but dull. . . . Old folkways may not persist, but they may leave a mental trace subtly recorded in emotional temper and coloring social reactions.”

By 1940 Herskovits had made an about-face. Going against the academic mainstream, he boldly proclaimed the survival and the importance in the New World of African cultural patterns—words, names, music folklore, religion, and art. His research in Africa and South America (particularly Brazil), and the Caribbean represents the first significant exploration and analysis of what scholars today term the African diaspora. Historian Walter Jackson notes that Herskovits was “genuinely startled” by the extent of similarity between African and New World cultures. His groundbreaking book *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), also funded by the Carnegie Corporation, posited the presence of “African survivals in the New World—cultural patterns that appeared strongest in areas in South America and the Caribbean, where slavery and the slave trade had lasted longest and where blacks had come in far larger numbers and had lived under conditions of greater cultural autonomy.

Herskovits argued that blacks in the United States, although in much more contact with whites, also exhibited identifiable “Africanisms,” as he termed behavioral patterns with traces of African worship practices and beliefs, family structure, and the arts. In the case of

Window in Time

Africanisms in African American Culture

What if the cultures of Africa from which the New World Negroes were derived, when described in terms of the findings of modern scientific method, are found to be vastly different from the current stereotype? What if these cultures impressed themselves on their carriers, and the descendants of their carriers, too deeply to be eradicated any more than were the cultural endowments of the various groups of European immigrants? . . . What if the aboriginal African endowment were found, in certain respects, even to have been transmitted to the whites, thus making the result of contact an exchange of culture—as it was in the case of other groups—rather than the endowment of an inferior people with habits of a superior group? Let us suppose, in short, it could be shown that the Negro is a man with a past and a reputable past; that in time the concept could be spread that the civilizations of Africa, like those of Europe, have contributed to American culture as we know it today; and that this idea might eventually be taken over into the canons of general thought. Would this not, as a practical measure, tend to undermine the assumptions that bolster racial prejudice?

Source: Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), 29–30.

the United States, Herskovits did not identify specific areas of origin in West Africa as he had done of South America and the Caribbean, but he did argue for a “base line” of West African culture, with black religious life serving as a prime exemplar of African survivals.

Herskovits was not unaware of the political implications of his message, which he interpreted as a vindication of the existence of rich cultural heritage—traditions that disproved what he perceived to be the myth that “the Negro is thus a man without a past.” Herskovits believed in the social importance of this argument—that it would develop a sense of pride in African Americans and would rid Africa of the stigma attached to it by refuting misinformation that fueled race prejudice.

For some, including historians W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson and linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner, the recognition of one’s African heritage and the survival of its culture was eminently worthy of study. Du Bois called *The Myth of the Negro Past* “epoch-making.” Herskovits had drawn on Turner’s research, whose later publication in book form, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949), investigated African linguistic patterns among the black people on the Sea Islands off the South Carolina coast.

Harvard-trained Carter G. Woodson, known today as the Father of Black History, favorably reviewed Herskovits, praising his scientific method and his refutation of the dominant scholarly assumption that blacks had no reputable history or culture to pass on. Graduating in 1912 with the second black doctorate from Harvard’s history department (after W. E. B. Du Bois), Woodson authored numerous historical monographs and articles. In addition, in 1915 he

The Popularization of Black History

founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (today titled the Association for the Study of African American Life and History), in 1916 began publication of the *Journal of Negro History*, served as its editor until his death in 1950, and established the publishing company the Associated Publishers, which made possible the publication and distribution of books on black historical topics. Woodson is credited, above all other historians of his time (including W. E. B. Du Bois), for professionalizing black history.

Yet Woodson also intended the mission of the Association, as it was commonly known, to be the popularizing of black history. To reach a wide audience, in 1926 he launched the annual February celebration of Negro History Week (now Black History Month). In 1937 he created a secondary-school-level publication, the *Negro History Bulletin*. In the black community, Woodson gathered around him a cadre of scholars and teachers, who would multiply in number by the 1940s to include blacks and whites and would expand the scholarship and readership of black history. Indeed, John H. Franklin, a member of the Association, published the first edition of *From Slavery to Freedom* in 1947, its success at the time due to the growing respect for this field of study inside and outside the academy.

Often termed a black nationalist on account of his support of Marcus Garvey and his strong advocacy of racial self-help, Woodson had argued persistently for the importance of knowledge of both African and African American history and culture as a corrective to an unhealthy, assimilationist education. In his polemical book *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933), Woodson lambasted “highly educated” blacks for what he believed to be traits that were devoid of racial pride and thus useless—and even dangerous—to the advancement of black people.

In the 1940s, however, the majority of black scholars did not align with the Herskovits thesis of African survivals. The most noted criticism of this controversial book came from the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, who argued that the passage of time and the “peculiar circumstances” associated with the Middle Passage, slavery, emancipation, and later urban migration had caused blacks to adapt to new situations and contexts, leaving only “scattered memories” of Africa. Preceding Herskovits, Frazier had already established this viewpoint in his book *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), in which he argued that “Probably no people in history has a people been so nearly completely stripped of its social heritage as the Negroes who were brought to America.”

Most black scholars and civil rights proponents rejected Herskovits’s emphasis on African culture. Some even compared him to the earlier generation of white New South thinkers and writers such as Joel Chandler Harris, DuBose Heyward, Ulrich B. Phillips, and Charles W. Johnson of the all-white Society for the Preservation of Spirituals. Clearly interested in and fascinated by a distinct black regional culture, the New South group held racist presumptions about the “Negro’s place” in society while simultaneously endeavoring to conserve those Old South idiosyncrasies that they deemed “authentic” to black people.

For African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s, a romanticized discussion of cultural distinctiveness, including the black-inspired musings of the Harlem (New Negro) Renaissance, came under increasing scrutiny and attack from those who perceived the primacy of economic over cultural solutions to racial inequality and who perceived race relations as masking economic conflict. E. Franklin Frazier went so far as to depict the culturalist perspective as “a lot of foolish talk about the peculiar ‘contributions’ of the Negro and his deep ‘spirituality’”

Abandoning the Culturalist Perspective

Black intellectuals such as Frazier and those civil rights leaders who shared his perspective saw the focus on an African past and its cultural legacy as a distraction from the struggle for inclusion in American social, political, and economic life at a time when racial barriers had begun to fall in electoral politics, the New Deal, organized labor, the American Left, the armed forces, and even (with regard to Jim Crow laws) the federal judiciary.

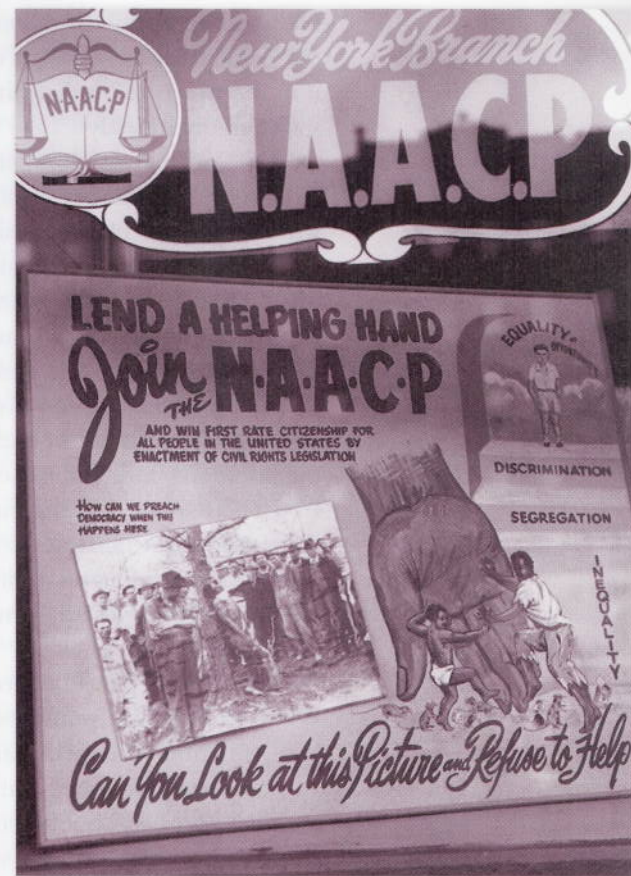
In the social and political milieu of the 1940s, they argued, an enthusiastic reception and valorization of an African cultural inheritance posed a troubling dilemma—one that implicitly suggested, if not confirmed, the inability of blacks, unlike all other groups, to fit fully into American society.

The times were inhospitable to Herskovits's way of thinking, and his critics fretted over his interpretation. They voiced concerns about the book's political implications for the struggle for racial equality. One reviewer, the white sociologist Guy B. Johnson, whose work shared some similarity with that of Herskovits, worried openly that despite the good intentions of *The Myth of the Negro Past*, an "immensely practical problem is how to prevent this book . . . from becoming the handmaiden of those who are looking for new justifications for the segregation and differential treatment of Negroes." Ironically, Alain Locke, who years earlier had criticized Herskovits for understating black cultural distinctiveness, now maintained that the "stubborn survival" of Africanisms unwittingly created an attitude that blacks are "unassimilable."

Literary and Dramatic Arts

The pervasive damage imagery of black life that appeared in social science literature was also captured in artistic literary form. The acclaimed novelist Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man* (1952), declared that the sociology of black life "presses upon the Negro writer's work." For Ellison and others of this period, the question would be how that story should be told in an art form. Black writers did not agree on the answer. Some, like Richard Wright, a communist supporter in the 1930s, believed that it was the black author's role to represent the voice and oppressive conditions of the black working class. In his introduction to St. Claire Drake's and Horace Cayton's *Black Metropolis* (1945), Wright connected this important social-science study of Chicago to his own novel *Native Son* (1940), also set in Chicago.

Wright concluded that the scholarship of Drake and Cayton portrayed "the environment out of which the Bigger Thomases [the protagonist in *Native Son*] of our nation come." Wright's reference to contemporary social science was explicit, noting that Drake and Cayton's findings endorsed those of Gunnar Myrdal in *An American Dilemma* (1944). For Wright, the pathology imagery was useful for understanding the dehumanizing effects of racial oppression.



1948 NAACP poster

In the postwar years, the NAACP launched annual campaigns to recruit members. This 1948 poster is typical of their appeal.

He wrote in his introduction to *Black Metropolis*: “White America has reduced Negro life in our great cities to a level of existence of so crude and brutal a quality that one could say it in the words of Vachel Lindsay’s *The Leaden-Eyed* that ‘It is not that they starve, but they starve so dreamlessly’.”

Disagreeing with Wright, James Baldwin rejected the heavy emphasis on racism’s pathological manifestations in black life. In his 1949 essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin identified Wright and his *Native Son* as a style that delimits the fullness of black cultural expression and underestimates the vast capacity of personhood to reach beyond racial identity. “The failure of the protest novel,” wrote Baldwin, “lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization [racial] alone that is real and which cannot be transcended.”

Since the turn of the twentieth century, the question of transcending one’s racial identity as a scholar or artist had posed a dilemma—what Du Bois had called “twoness”—and the question continued to be debated in the artistic community during and after the 1920s. In the 1940s and 1950s African American literary artists became more varied in their subject matter, but most developed their plots and poems around everyday social issues that affected blacks, such as migration, urban life, wartime conditions, race riots, restrictive housing, and labor. A few also became famous with artistic works that made no reference to race or black characters.

Among the poets of this period was Melvin B. Tolson, then a professor of English at Wiley College. He published poems in newspapers and magazines during the 1930s and won numerous prizes and awards. Although his volume of poems, *Rendezvous with America*, was not issued until 1944, one of the collection’s principal poems, “Dark Symphony,” had been published previously in the *Atlantic Monthly*. While at the University of Michigan, Robert Hayden won the Jule and Avery Hopwood Prize for his poems, and his first volume, *Heart-Shape in the Dust*, was published in 1940. In 1966 his poetry won first prize at the World Festival of Negro Art at Dakar, Senegal.

Owen Dodson, one of the youngest of the well-known poets and playwrights, became seriously interested in writing while a student at Bates College. After writing traditional and experimental verse for several years, in 1946 he collected his works in a volume, *Powerful Long Ladder*. Two young women who also won recognition as poets were Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks. While on the Chicago Federal Writers’ Project, Walker wrote “For My People,” which later won first prize in the Yale University competition for young poets.

Stephen Vincent Benét praised Walker’s work generously when it was published in 1942. Her novel *Jubilee*, winner of a Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship, was published in 1966. Meanwhile Brooks’s volume *Street in Bronzeville* appeared in 1945. Five years later her *Annie Allen* won the Pulitzer Prize, and more than a decade after that she was named poet laureate of Illinois. Later, in 1985–1986, she was selected poet in residence at the Library of Congress, a post that was elevated at the end of her tenure to poet laureate of the United States.

A profusion of prose writers appeared on the scene during and after the Depression. Among them was Arna Bontemps, who said that he had watched the early stages of the Harlem Renaissance from a grandstand seat. Subsequently he became one of its most productive contributors. In 1931 his *God Sends Sunday* appeared, followed by two historical novels, *Black Thunder* (1936) and *Drums at Dusk* (1939). Bontemps also became one of the most successful writers of children’s books. Later he turned to nonfiction materials, writing with Jack Conroy *They Seek a City* (1945), an engrossing account of black urbanization.

(The revised edition appeared in 1966 under the title *Any Place but Here*.) Bontemps's *They Have Tomorrow* (1945) offered a series of biographical sketches of promising young African Americans.

Two black southern writers produced novels of African American life in the Deep South: George W. Henderson wrote *Ollie Miss* (1935) and *Jule* (1946); George W. Lee shed considerable light on black life in Memphis with *Beale Street* (1934), followed two years later by *River George*. Meanwhile, a promising young writer, Waters Turpin, was using materials of the Upper South for his novels. As a native of the eastern shore of Maryland, Turpin dealt with a familiar area in his works, *These Low Grounds* (1937) and *O Canaan* (1939). The latter novel focused on migration north.

Novelist William Attaway pointed to new areas and materials for the African American writer. In *Let Me Breathe Thunder* (1939), Attaway showed that an African American could deal successfully with a work made up primarily of white characters. In *Blood on the Forge* (1941) he indicated the wealth of materials to be found in industrial communities experiencing racial competition in the struggle for existence. This theme of racial friction was exploited to a greater degree by Chester Himes in his 1945 novel, set in a wartime industrial community, *If He Hollers, Let Him Go*. Himes, who had attracted attention with his short stories in black-owned and white-owned magazines alike—*Opportunity*, *Esquire*, and *Coronet*—vividly demonstrated the impact of the war on black migrants to industrial communities and the bitterness stemming from frustration and despair. Ann Petry, winner of a Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship, depicted the problems of a young African American woman attempting to live a respectable life in a blighted section of a large city. Her 1946 novel *The Street* had wide circulation and received considerable praise.

In the 1940s, the best known of the younger African American writers was Richard Wright. Considered a master of the short story when his *Uncle Tom's Children* appeared in 1938, Wright won even greater acclaim for *Native Son* (1940), which immediately placed him in the front ranks of contemporary American writers. With stark, tragic realism, Wright described the literally murderous frustrations of a young black man living in a Chicago slum and the efforts of a Marxist lawyer in his defense. The book compared favorably with the best similar works in American literature. It was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and enjoyed considerable success in general bookstores.

Richard Wright and *Native Son*

In 1941 Wright brought out *Twelve Million Black Voices*, a folk history of African Americans. In 1945 *Black Boy*, a quasi-autobiographical account of Wright's childhood and youth in Mississippi, was also a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Although there was disagreement over the accuracy of the work as an autobiography, there was no dissent about its power as a story of life among poor, oppressed black southerners. *The Outsider*, which appeared in 1953, did not receive the favorable critical acclaim of Wright's earlier works, but by that time he was firmly established as one of the country's major writers.

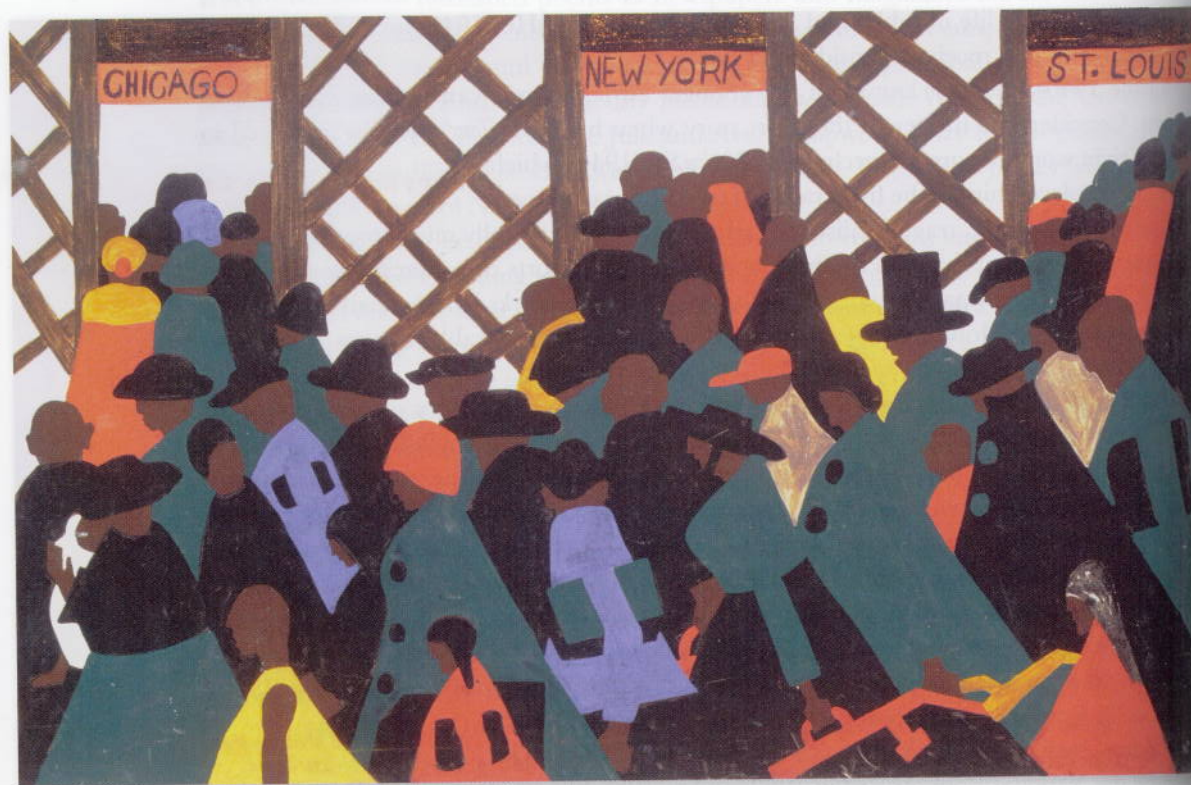
Ralph Ellison, who has been compared by some critics with Richard Wright for his talents as a writer, received even greater acclaim than Wright for his novel *Invisible Man* (1952). The book's complex and sophisticated rendering of Ellison's insight into race relations problems and their effect on blacks received the National Book Award in 1952, and in 1955 Ellison received the Prix de Rome and went to the American Academy in Rome to work on a second novel. His volume of essays, *Shadow and Act*, was published in 1964.

Ralph Ellison and *Invisible Man*

Perhaps the most widely read black writer of the 1940s was Frank Yerby. In 1944 he won the O. Henry Memorial Award with his short story "Health Card." In 1946 *The Foxes of Harrow* remained on the best-seller list for many months and reportedly approached the million-copy mark. In succeeding years, he published numerous novels; all of them reached the best-seller list, and some were filmed in Hollywood.

In the post-World War II years, several other African American writers won critical acclaim. John Oliver Killens showed great talent in his novel of southern life, *Youngblood* (1945), and in his film scripts for the black actor and singer Harry Belafonte. His *And Then They Heard the Thunder* (1963) was regarded by many as the most important novel about blacks during World War II, and his *Blackman's Burden* (1965) contains lively essays on the question of race.

James Baldwin, who showed much early promise as an essayist and novelist, followed Richard Wright into a Paris exile. Unlike Wright, however, he returned to the United States. His books have received wide recognition: *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1960), and *Another Country* (1962). Through his novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956), whose subject was a love affair between two men, Baldwin called attention to his own homosexuality. Baldwin's work captured the social concerns of the 1950s and 1960s—racial consciousness, discrimination, and sexuality issues, and his later work addressed the ideological cleavages between the black power and civil rights movements.



Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration Series*, "Panel 1—During World War II, there was a great migration North by Southern African Americans."

Although campus theaters at many black colleges stimulated an interest in the dramatic arts, in the 1930s young African Americans had little opportunity to pursue an acting career if they wanted to play roles other than as servants. That situation, however, began to change in the 1940s, led by Paul Robeson's success in such important dramatic parts as Shakespeare's Othello, a role he had previously played in London, as well as by Hilda Simms in *Anna Lucasta*, Gordon Heath in *Deep Are the Roots*, and Canada Lee in *On Whitman Avenue*. The last two plays dealt with two of America's most pressing social problems: the return of African American soldiers to southern communities and the housing of blacks in northern cities. With the advances gained by these productions, African Americans could look forward to a more secure place in the American theater.

American blacks in the field of drama made a significant step forward with Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959. This moving story about the housing problems of an African American family won the New York Critics Circle Award. Hansberry's inspiration for the play came from her own family's experience in obtaining housing. In 1940 her father, Carl Hansberry, took a lawsuit all the way to the United States Supreme Court in the case *Hansberry v. Lee*. Hansberry won the case, but the technical issues on which the decision was rendered did not solve the larger question of the legality of restrictive covenants. Lorraine Hansberry's second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, was produced shortly before her death in 1964.

Although James Baldwin's novels and essays won for him his greatest acclaim, he did enjoy moderate success with his plays. Baldwin's most outstanding drama was *Blues for Mister Charlie*, produced in 1964.

Black Internationalism

When the international conference for establishing the United Nations opened in San Francisco late in April 1945, black Americans, like other peoples around the globe, hoped that the meeting would create formulas to eliminate war and its causes and to guarantee freedom and security. African Americans saw in this gathering an opportunity to air their grievances and to aid in reciprocal ways the freedom struggles of all peoples of color. In assuming this internationalist perspective, which included expressions of solidarity with the African and Asian liberation struggles, American blacks could see themselves and their struggle as more than a national problem. It placed them squarely within a world population of 400 million black people.

This perspective predated the United Nations. For black Americans, the new global forum served to continue ongoing conversations across national boundaries that began early in the century, but blossomed in the social milieu of the 1920s, the era of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and of the American black arts renaissance—creating a virtual seedbed of diasporic and transnational movements that in most cases continued to be active during the Great Depression and World War II. In this richly vibrant political and cultural era, blacks of varying ideological persuasions worked together across the Atlantic in numerous, often competing efforts, that included the French-speaking African and Caribbean *négritude* movement of the 1930s–1950s (launched in Paris by Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, Léon Damas of French Guyana, and Aimé Césaire of Martinique); the Pan-African congresses; and various labor and left-leaning organizations in the African diaspora and on the African continent.

For generations of black Americans, Ethiopia held biblical and black nationalist meanings. From Phillis Wheatley to Marcus Garvey and beyond, black leaders quoted "Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands." The rhetorical strategy of linking the black American identity to ancient (and also modern) Ethiopia, as a metaphor for Africa, proved no less effective in the early 1930s, when Ethiopia alone had managed to remain independent after the rest of the continent succumbed to European imperialism. When Mussolini's Italy invaded Ethiopia in October 1935, American blacks closely followed the unfolding events, which culminated in the Italian conquest and Emperor Haile Selassie's exile in England.

The Italian aggression had the greatest effect in unifying and galvanizing black communities in the United States and abroad. Shocked and alarmed by the situation in the beleaguered African nation, black Americans rallied in protest demonstrations and organized Ethiopia relief drives in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, New Orleans, Cleveland, Kansas City, and many other cities.

This was also true of cities around the world. In London, for example, in August 1935 the International African Friends of Ethiopia, which later became the International African Service Bureau, was founded. Among the members of this London group were Trinidad-born Marxist intellectuals George Padmore and C. L. R. James, as well as Jomo Kenyatta, who would later become president of his country, Kenya. James also promoted Ethiopia's defense as editor of the news organ *International African Opinion*.

In the United States, Ethiopian independence was ardently championed by the scholarly community—Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Bunche, E. Franklin Frazier, Willis Huggins, and Oliver Cox, all of whom drew historical and current connections among imperialism, fascism, colonialism, and racism, thus linking the fate of segregated colored races throughout the world. Howard University professor Ralph Bunche typified the sentiment of other black scholars when he wrote in an article in the *Journal of Negro History* in 1936 about the effect of fascism and imperialism on Africa.

Black New Yorkers founded the International Council of Friends of Ethiopia under the leadership of historian Willis N. Huggins, who at his own expense traveled to the League of Nations headquarters in Geneva in 1935 to plead for Ethiopia. His appeal to the League, although futile, expressed what he termed the resounding "righteous indignation by the people in the western world who are bound by racial kinship to the ancient and illustrious Ethiopian people."

Throughout 1935, civil rights organizations as well as individual black churches and denominational bodies criticized both the United States government and the Vatican for failing to intervene at the League of Nations on behalf of Ethiopia. During their annual meetings, leaders of these organizations particularly stressed the plight of Ethiopia. The NAACP appealed to the Secretary of State Cordell Hull and to the League of Nations to check Italian aggression. Rev. Lacy Kirk Williams, president of the National Baptist Convention, Inc., with its several million members, appealed to black Baptists to aid in the cause of Ethiopian freedom. The black ecumenical Fraternal Council of Churches passed a resolution stating that "while by sympathy, principle and ideas we are Americans to the core we cannot be deaf to the cry that comes from a menaced nation in the land of our fathers' fathers!"

Black newspapers featured numerous pro-Ethiopia articles, editorials, and advertisements. They covered Haile Selassie's speech before the League of Nations in June 1935. The *New York Age* urged "Africans outside of Ethiopia" to come to the defense of their "kin

Window in Time

Ralph Bunche Denounces European Conquest in Africa

The doctrine of Fascism, with its extreme jingoism, its exaggerated exaltation of the state and its comic-opera glorification of race, has given a new and greater impetus to the policy of world imperialism, which has already conquered and subjected to systematic and ruthless exploitation virtually all of the darker populations of the earth. Those few peoples, such as the Ethiopians, who have been able to retain a meager measure of precious freedom, are now in imminent danger of losing even that.

Source: Ralph J. Bunche, “French and British Imperialism in West Africa,” *Journal of Negro History* 21 (January 1936): 31–46.



and the *Pittsburgh Courier* sent its historian-news analyst, J. A. Rogers, to cover the Italian-Ethiopian war. Upon his return, Rogers published the booklet *The Real Facts about Ethiopia* and gave lectures on the subject to many black and white groups. But not until 1940 did Great Britain, by then at war with Italy and Germany, conclude an alliance with Ethiopia and others to restore Ethiopian independence.

The overthrow of Spain’s democratic republic by Generalissimo Francisco Franco and his establishment of a fascist dictatorship also stirred protest in some parts of the black community during the 1930s. In 1936 and 1937 black Americans were among the international volunteers (the American contingent was called the Abraham Lincoln Brigade) who went to Spain to support the Spanish Republican forces against Franco, who was backed by Hitler and Mussolini.

In contrast to the 1930s, during the mid to late 1940s the idea of freedom from colonial rule proved a more fluid, even viable proposition. Under the nonviolent movement led by Mohandas Gandhi, India won its independence from Great Britain in 1947. The changing international order did not escape Walter White, the executive secretary of the NAACP, who in 1945 declared: “A wind is rising—a wind of determination by the have-nots of the world to share in the benefits of freedom and prosperity which the haves of the earth have tried to keep exclusively for themselves. That wind blows all over the world.”

Evidence of this “rising wind” included the Pan African Congress, held in Manchester, England, in 1945, which was chaired by Du Bois, was attended largely by Africans and Caribbean blacks, and reflected the anticolonial protests during the 1940s of such working-class activists as Nigerian trade unionists, South African miners, and laborers in the Gold Coast Colony (the future Ghana) and Jamaica. The Pan African Congress in 1945, unlike earlier congresses that emphasized cultural kinship, stressed instead a unified black internationalism based on the similar condition of racial economic oppression.

Within the U.S. black community, the Council on African Affairs (CAA) was the foremost organization that kept the American public apprised of anticolonial activities in Africa.

The Rising Wind

Founded in 1937 by Paul Robeson and Max Yergan, formerly a YMCA director in South Africa and a leader in the National Negro Congress, the Council on African Affairs was particularly vigilant in alerting African Americans to political and trade union activism in South Africa, collecting food products and money to relieve famine in Africa, and bringing educational information about Africa to the American public. Paul Robeson headed the organization. William Alphaeus Hunton, Jr., served as its educational director and eventually its executive director. Other important early figures in the life of the organization included Yergan, Du Bois, Mary McLeod Bethune, Eslanda Goode Robeson (Paul Robeson's wife), scholar E. Franklin Frazier, and California newspaper publisher Charlotta Bass.

The Cold War and the McCarthy-era witch-hunts created fatal fissures in the CAA in the late 1940s, similar to the divisions in other organizations that initially comprised traditional liberals and leftists, such as the National Negro Congress, the Civil Rights Congress, and the Southern Negro Youth Congress—all of which were disbanded. Historian Penny Von Eschen notes that before the government targeted the CAA as a “communist-influenced organization,” the CAA was widely supported in black communities, hosting fundraising concerts for Africa and India that featured Robeson, Marian Anderson, Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, and other popular black artists. Its rallies drew thousands of people and were held in large stadiums, such as Madison Square Garden. The CAA rally in 1946 held at the Abyssinian Baptist Church and supported by Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the church's pastor and newly elected New York congressman, drew a crowd of 4,500.

In the postwar world, however, the United Nations functioned as the most important forum of international deliberation and, in the decades to follow, would grow more influential as a voice for independent African nations. The founding conference of the United Nations was held in late April 1945, two weeks after the death of President Roosevelt. This meeting to establish the UN charter convened three thousand delegates, representing fifty-one countries. The Great Powers—the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, and China—wanted to create the diplomatic machinery that would, once and for all, put an end to aggression. Colonial peoples wanted independence, or at least guarantees against further encroachments by the imperial powers.

The United Nations Charter

Among American observers accredited by the State Department to attend the organizational meeting at San Francisco were several African Americans, including Mary McLeod Bethune of the National Council of Negro Women, Mordecai W. Johnson, president of Howard University, and W. E. B. Du Bois and Walter White of the NAACP. Ralph Bunche, acting chief of the division of dependent territories of the Department of State, went as a member of the official staff.

African Americans maintained a keen interest in the delegates from the African and Asian countries, especially those from India, Liberia, Ethiopia, and Haiti. Most black newspapers with national circulations sent reporters to cover the conference. “Small Nations Demand Race Plank” and “British Evasive on Colonial Question” were typical headlines in the black press. When it became known that the black people of South Africa protested the treatment they were receiving at the hands of their government, the black press in the United States referred to South Africa's apartheid system as “Nazi-like domination.”

No previous international document had given as much attention to human rights as had the United Nations Charter. Its preamble reaffirmed “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of

MCA director in South African Affairs was paragon activism in South Africa, and bringing education headed the organization and eventually director and eventually organization included (Paul Robeson's wife), Clotilda Bass.

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nations large and small." Another passage in the Charter asserted that the UN would promote human rights and fundamental freedoms "without distinction to race, language, or religion."

Of the agencies provided for by the charter, African Americans took the greatest interest in the Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), whose purpose, according to UN guidelines, was "to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science and culture." At the first meeting of UNESCO in Paris, in 1946, one of the U.S. delegates was the African American sociologist Charles S. Johnson, formerly the editor of the National Urban League's magazine *Opportunity* and soon to become the president of Fisk University. In 1951 the black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier was appointed the director of UNESCO's Division of Applied Sciences, based in Paris. In this position, he traveled throughout Africa, establishing research projects and seminars at UNESCO-funded institutes.

UNESCO's Work

UNESCO boldly took on as one of its early projects the effort to debunk the concept of race. Scholars were acutely conscious of the importance of this task after a war in which Nazi ideas of Aryan superiority had led to the murder of millions of Jews. In the early 1940s, school textbooks in the United States and elsewhere continued to differentiate by races and racial traits according to a hierarchy of different European ethnicities, with Anglo-Saxons on top and Jews, Asians, and Negroes at lower levels. The UNESCO Statement on Race, published in 1950, sought to expose and eradicate not only the fallacy of Nazi doctrine but also the widespread popular understanding of race as biologically determined and inherited. At this time, for example, 71 percent of white Americans surveyed by an opinion poll said that they believed racial identity determined intelligence and that in this regard blacks were inherently inferior to whites.)

The panel called attention to such popular misconceptions and to outdated science, citing instead the most recent academic thought. For example, in 1935 the British biologists Julian Huxley (who served as director-general of UNESCO from 1946 to 1948) and A. C. Haddon had asserted in their co-authored monograph *We Europeans: A Survey of "Racial" Problems*: "With respect to existing populations, the word 'race' should be banished, and the descriptive and non-committal term *ethnic groups* should be substituted." Swedish scholar Gunnar Myrdal used the term *caste* in his landmark study *An American Dilemma* (1944), explaining that "the term *caste* is . . . inappropriate in a scientific inquiry, since it has biological and genetic connotations which . . . run parallel to widely spread false racial beliefs." Anthropologist Ashley Montagu, a vociferous opponent of race as a biological concept, took the leading role in the preparation of UNESCO's first statement on race in 1950, which pronounced race a "social myth."

However, as historian Michelle Brattain reveals, Montagu's efforts evoked both praise and condemnation. The controversial UNESCO statement of 1950 was overturned just two years later, fueling debates over the link between presumed racial differences (biological or cultural) and racial disparities in the form of income, education, and other social markers. In its second statement on race, published in 1952, UNESCO presented different conclusions from the first. Although not written in the language of the scientific racism of the 1910s and 1920s, the new UNESCO statement rejected the idea of race as "social myth" and, according to Brattain, despite its "more politically and scientifically palatable definition," returned to biological premises that "also affirmed older scientific traditions (and languages) by noting differences between 'non-literate' and 'more civilized' people on intelligent tests."

The UN's Trusteeship Council, established to safeguard the interests and welfare of non-self-governing peoples in former German colonies held under post-World War I League

of Nations mandates or in colonies taken from Italy and Japan after World War II, also attracted significant attention from African Americans. They wanted a far better system

The Trusteeship Council

than the one developed by the League of Nations after World War I. The League's Mandates Commission had failed to safeguard the welfare of dependent territories, and too frequently the mandatory powers administered the territories in their own interests. The UN Trusteeship Council differed from the old system because its membership included an equal number of countries administering trust territories and countries that had no such responsibility. In addition, people in the trust territories could submit petitions to the Council.

African American leaders expressed disappointment at the failure to end colonialism outright, and some, such as Howard University historian Rayford Logan, called America's attention to the Soviet Union's anticolonialist statements. Yet blacks were heartened to see Ralph Bunche join the UN Secretariat as director of the Trusteeship Division. Because of his persistent stand against racial discrimination in the United States, blacks trusted Bunche to use his expertise in advancing the welfare and interests of peoples unable to represent their own interests in the UN. He was appointed to the UN Special Committee on Palestine and drafted the 1947 reports proposing a partition of the land between Palestinians and Jews and recognizing the State of Israel. Bunche mediated the armistice that halted the Arab-Israeli war in 1948, for which in 1950 he became the first African American to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

African Americans also turned to the UN in the hope of getting a hearing for their own petitions for human rights and fundamental freedoms. They knew that the UN had no

The South Africa Resolution

authority to eliminate racial discrimination in the United States, but they also recognized the moral leverage they wielded as an oppressed minority in the nation that deemed itself leader of the free world. Black Americans were not oblivious of the UN General Assembly's acknowledgment, in the autumn of 1946, of India's charges that Indian nationals and their descendants in South Africa were victims of discrimination. By a two-thirds majority, the General Assembly passed a resolution requiring South Africa to report at the next meeting the steps that it had taken to rectify the situation. The United States, along with Great Britain, voted against the resolution, which made its success even more meaningful.

India's resolution became a signal victory for domestic minorities in other nations. The General Assembly also approved a resolution branding as a crime under international law the extermination of minorities and racial and ethnic groups, such as the Nazis had done. This resolution seemed to be further recognition of the rights of minorities. In an editorial in the *Crisis*, Du Bois correctly observed that the UN discussions on race were "far ahead of Versailles when President Wilson and the British would not even permit race to be discussed formally even in a committee meeting."

Encouraged by the charter and the early actions of UN agencies, the National Negro Congress (NNC) in June 1946 filed a petition with the UN's Economic and Social Council on

The June 1946 Petition

behalf of black people in America, seeking United Nations aid in the struggle to eliminate political, economic, and social discrimination. Opponents of the petition stressed that the treatment of African Americans in the United States was purely a domestic matter and that the UN charter prevented its intervention. African Americans countered by arguing that one of the UN's main purposes was international cooperation in solving problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character.

Writing on the subject, the distinguished African American lawyer Charles Hamilton Houston admitted that the UN did not have jurisdiction to investigate every lynching in Georgia or every denial of the ballot in Mississippi—but, he continued, “where the discrimination and denial of human rights reach a national level or where the national government either cannot or will not afford protection and redress for local aggression against colored peoples, the national policy of the United States itself becomes involved.” Arguing that the NNC petition did not fall outside the UN jurisdiction, Houston concluded: “A national policy of the United States which permits disfranchisement in the South is just as much an international issue as elections in Poland or the denial of democratic rights in Franco’s Spain.”

Houston’s remarks came at an embarrassing time for the United States. Earlier in 1947, news of a brutal lynching was broadcast to countries under Soviet domination by the U.S. government’s Voice of America network. That same May, an all-white jury exonerated twenty-eight men who had confessed that they had participated in the lynching. Outcry against that verdict was heard from London and Paris to Moscow.

In October 1947, the NAACP submitted to the United Nations a petition authored by W. E. B. Du Bois, which among other charges accused the United States of violating the human rights of its black citizens. Entitled *An Appeal to the World*, the document called on the nations of the world for redress. In 1948 the NAACP published the *Appeal* as a ninety-four-page booklet. Because it castigated President Truman, the *Appeal* embarrassed the administration, and equally offensive to U.S. leaders was its charge that the racism in Mississippi was more of a threat to the nation than was the Soviet Union. As with the NNC petition, jurisdictional objections were raised against the *Appeal*’s legal validity. Believing that the Soviets would use it for propaganda purposes, government officials—and even NAACP head Walter White—viewed unsympathetically Du Bois’s wish that the UN consider the petition. With the Cold War by now raging, former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a UN delegate and also on the NAACP’s board of directors, declined Du Bois’s request that she bring the document before the UN General Assembly. The *Appeal* got extensive coverage in the press but no hearing on the floor of the UN General Assembly.

In the aftermath of World War II, radical and liberal African American leaders united under the banner of anti-imperialism and shared a similar internationalist vision of social justice. As the Cold War continued in the early 1950s, antiracist and anticolonial efforts on the part of African American leftists and American leftists in general came under heavy governmental and popular attack and curtailment. The federal government revoked Robeson’s passport in 1950. At eighty-four years of age in 1952, Du Bois was denied his passport, one year after he won an acquittal for an indictment against him for activities deemed sympathetic to communism. In 1961 Du Bois moved to the now-independent African nation of Ghana, where he died in 1963.

However, many activists of the 1930s abandoned their former leftist positions. Ralph Bunche embraced liberal anticommunism, and in this camp continued to work ardently



Charles H. Houston

Houston, a lawyer who worked closely with the NAACP on the court cases that eventually ended segregation, was the architect of many successful strategies.

The Appeal

Black Internationalism

for racial equality in the United States and anticolonialism in Africa. Max Yergan not only recanted communism but also moved far to the right, becoming an anticommunist black conservative. Thoroughly disillusioned with communism, the novelist Richard Wright lived as an expatriate in Paris but remained a firm adversary of colonialism in Africa.

The 1940s through the 1960s were periods of active black internationalism. Over the course of these years, African American leaders increasingly witnessed a change in their self-image as defenders of the black world. Historically, they had seen themselves as enlightened advocates and agents in the rescue of downtrodden Africa. This would change with the mounting success of independence movements in Africa, particularly when in the late 1950s and early 1960s newly independent African nations joined the United Nations. In 1961, Du Bois, then living in Ghana, described this attitudinal shift: "American Negroes of former generations had always calculated that when Africa was ready for freedom, American Negroes would be ready to lead them. But the event was quite opposite. The African leaders proved to be Africans. . . . Indeed, it now seems that Africans may have to show American Negroes the way to freedom."

Labor Civil Rights

In the 1940s, African Americans became an integral part of the urban industrial workforce and a prominent part of organized labor. The prolabor policies of the New Deal (such as the National Labor Relations Board), the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and its inclusion of African Americans, the black community's World War II Double V campaign, and the federal government's establishment of the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) together all fueled the surge for unionization and united labor activism and the civil rights movement.

Unionized blacks owed their growing numerical strength to the unprecedented black migration from the southern states, due primarily to the North's booming wartime economy.

Blacks in the CIO In the 1940s, 1.5 million black southerners and an even larger number of whites from the region moved to industrial cities in the Northeast, Midwest, and West—areas that historian James Gregory calls the "southern diaspora." Race riots, such as the Detroit riot of 1943, highlighted the boiling urban cauldron of racial and economic tensions spawned by this massive migration. Yet migration also highlighted the politicization and empowerment of black workers. In Detroit tens of thousands of black workers entered the automotive industry, many of them in Ford's River Rouge factory. Through the United Auto Workers (UAW), an affiliate of the CIO, they demanded racial equality in the workplace, in housing, and in other aspects of life in the city.

The CIO's adherence to the industrial principle of labor organizing rather than organizing by specific crafts allowed blacks to enter the ranks of organized labor, since the great majority of them were concentrated in unskilled jobs. Although racial prejudice and reluctance to support equal opportunities for blacks existed among white industrial workers, the CIO articulated the official policy of racial diversity in its affiliate unions. Under the leadership of John L. Lewis, the CIO announced its position in 1938 of "uncompromising opposition to any form of discrimination, whether political or economic, based on race, color, creed or nationality."

The history of the labor movement in the 1930s and much of the 1940s, and in particular that of the unionization of white and black workers during these years, is tied to the

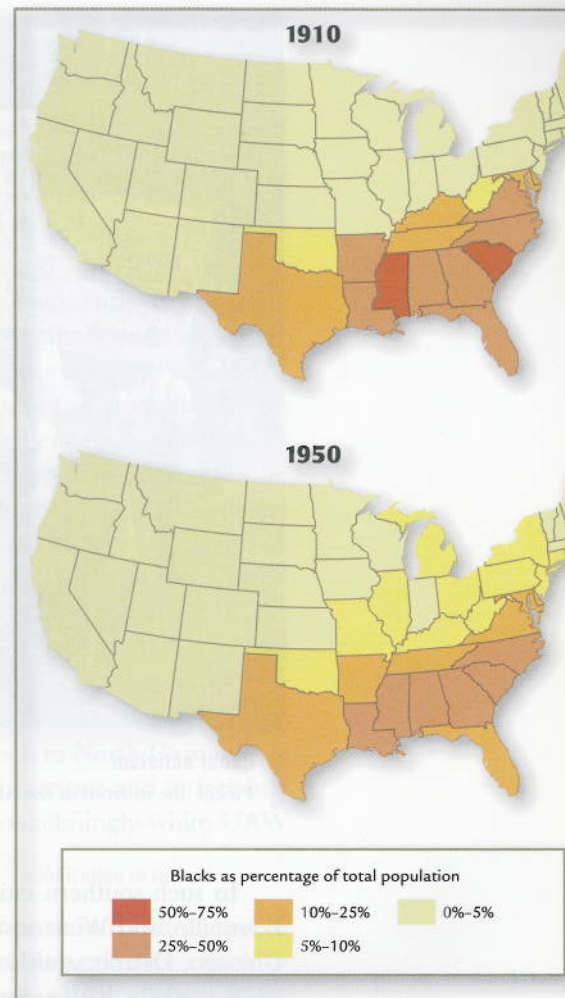
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history of the American Left. Some labor leaders in this period, but certainly not all, were communist sympathizers or active members of the Communist Party, USA. Before the late 1940s and the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Left played a visible role in the antiracist labor movement. In those years, leftists were integral and influential members of labor unions and civil rights organizations. To be sure, the communists often clashed with labor liberals and other left-oriented activists. White labor leader Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers and the CIO was staunchly anticommunist, despite the presence of leftist-influenced locals in his organization. Black socialist A. Phillip Randolph demanded that the planned 1941 March on Washington be all-black precisely to exclude communist infiltrators (who would have been overwhelmingly white).

The Great Depression had devastated the economy, leaving many Americans more conscious than ever of a widening chasm between haves and have-nots. African American demands for government intervention and economic justice during this crisis prompted the founding of black left-leaning civil rights organizations in the 1930s, such as the National Negro Congress and the Civil Rights Congress. However, even the older, traditionally liberal civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP and the National Urban League, had begun to emphasize the need for greater class consciousness, not simply race consciousness, as well as to advocate black-white unity within the working class. Three young, left-oriented Howard University professors—political scientist Ralph Bunche, economist Abram Harris, and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier—were primarily responsible for the NAACP’s new economic focus. At the NAACP’s Amenia Conference in 1933, they declared the organization’s traditional racial strategies out of date in an era when social forces demanded an antiracist labor movement.

In the 1940s, many working-class blacks and some whites engaged in the civil rights struggle through labor unions, since in the CIO labor leftists and labor liberals cooperated, if not always smoothly, toward the shared goals of economic justice and racial equality. Labor unions worked with moderate, liberal, and radical civil rights organizations in united-front campaigns—temporary alliances forged around targeted issues. For example, it was through such alliances that fifty-five bills against discrimination in employment were introduced in states with large industrial populations in 1945.

CIO unions often worked with such civil rights groups as the left-leaning Southern Negro Youth Congress and the National Negro Congress, as well as with local branches of the NAACP. CIO leaders endorsed those groups’ agendas, which included the fight for a permanent Federal Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) at the state and national levels, passage of antilynching legislation, and abolition of the poll tax. In much of the 1940s, the success of the CIO in cities with sizable black populations was attributed to such coalitions.



Black Migration

Maps showing a comparison of the declining percentage of blacks in the South

The Early Civil Rights Struggle



Labor activism

Picket line in front of the Mid-City Equipment Company in South Chicago in the 1940s.

In such southern cities as Memphis, Richmond, Charleston, Birmingham, Baltimore, Louisville, and Winston-Salem, as well as in northern cities such as Pittsburgh, New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles, labor activism included a concerted effort by black and white workers, left-to-center member unions, and left-to-center civil rights organizations. They worked together, as historian Michael Honey notes, in “a broad-based, interracial, and interclass popular alliance.” Black union workers had no doubt that their fight for jobs, promotions, better working conditions, and higher pay were as much racial issues as labor issues.

Despite real limitations from many racist white workers, “labor civil rights,” or what historian Robert Korstad terms “civil rights unionism,” represented a visible form of grassroots activism in the struggle for racial equality in the 1940s. As studies of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, of Memphis, Tennessee, and of other southern communities have revealed, CIO activism in support of black voting rights during the 1940s offered an early model for voting rights campaigns in later decades. Labor civil rights constituted an early, crucial part of the unfolding civil rights movement that would peak in the 1960s.

Black labor organizers played key roles in attracting nonunionized workers in industries with heavy concentrations of their own racial group. Such was the case in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where black workers outnumbered whites by a large margin at the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company but found themselves relegated to the dirty, physically demanding jobs. Racial disparities in pay, work conditions, and treatment served not only to privilege all white workers but also to discourage interracial unity at the anti-union company. According to Korstad, CIO efforts to unionize the Reynolds plant

**R. J. Reynolds in
Winston-Salem**

succeeded after two years of undetected persuasion by two black organizers from the leftist Southern Tenant Farmers Union. The organizers' message of black dignity and the right to unionize as an act of racial self-determination paid off in 1943, when black women stemmers revolted. The women, tired of their low wages and worsening conditions caused by a work speedup during a period of labor shortage, launched a work-stoppage and strike.

The strike proved so successful that eight thousand black workers joined the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA). By 1944 blacks won the fight to become Local 22 of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers (FTA), the new name of the UCAPAWA. In the FTA, black women, such as Moranda Smith, became union leaders and representatives and sat at the bargaining table with their white employers.

Black labor empowerment in Winston-Salem awakened a sense of assertiveness in the city's black residents. Leftist-influenced Local 22 mobilized a black voter registration drive in 1944 through the CIO Political Action Committee with the demand that black veterans be given the right to vote. Union members argued that black voting rights were a prerequisite to economic and racial advancement in a region where most blacks were disfranchised. A reporter from the black newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, was so impressed by the union's success in Winston-Salem that he wrote, "If there is a New Negro, he is to be found in the ranks of the labor movement." Local 22 also contributed to the growth in NAACP membership. For the first time, workers supported en masse the NAACP's membership campaign. The Winston-Salem branch grew from a hundred members (largely from the black middle class) in 1942 to nearly two thousand in 1946, becoming the largest branch in North Carolina.

In the 1930s, most blacks in Detroit had been reluctant to join unions and in fact had often functioned as strikebreakers, even though by 1939 the overwhelmingly white UAW had succeeded in forcing all the major automobile manufacturers (except Ford) to recognize it as the legal collective bargaining agent. A massive strike at Ford in April 1941, which in the following month culminated in Ford's recognition of Local 600 of the UAW, led the union to adopt aggressive efforts to unionize black workers. Nearly 9,000 blacks worked in Ford's mechanically efficient River Rouge factory. Their numbers were too large to ignore, but the task of incorporating them into the union posed a dilemma.

Unionization in Detroit

Black workers perceived a different relationship to Ford than did most whites. The company had sent recruiters into the South, luring black migrants to Detroit with the promise of job opportunity. Ford worked closely with black churches. According to historian Angela Dillard, "black ministers and churches functioned as agents of the Ford employment office." Ford workers and their families made up a sizable portion of every black church congregation, and the recommendation of a black minister determined the fate of a black job applicant. Although some white union members opposed equal opportunities for blacks, the UAW worked hard and strategically, joining forces with the few black ministers who did not feel beholden to Ford.

One such minister, Rev. Charles A. Hill, the pastor of the large Hartford Avenue Baptist Church, boasted of his earlier refusal to accept a large donation from the Ford Company during his church's building campaign—a position he took so that both he and the church could remain independent. Indeed, Hill's church of over 1,200 members became a hub of clandestine union-recruitment meetings. The establishment of Local 600, which by mid-decade boasted 60,000 members, drew ever-increasing numbers of African Americans into its ranks,

with blacks serving as UAW staff, as delegates to UAW conventions, and one, Shelton Tappes, as the recording secretary of Local 600.

The UAW began to work closely with the local NAACP, in which pro-union supporters such as Hill were also leaders, as well as with the left-influenced National Negro Congress and Civil Rights Congress. In 1942 the NAACP and CIO eventually became key partners in campaigns for the FEPC and for black occupancy in the Sojourner Truth Housing Project, which would otherwise have become “whites-only” public housing. The concerted effort won blacks the right to live in the housing project, but the victory was met with a violent white backlash when they attempted to move in. This racial violence was a precursor of the three-day Detroit race riot in June 1943 that brought federal troops to restore peace. The new labor committee of the NAACP contributed to a dramatic growth in working class members. Nearly 20,000 new members joined the Detroit branch of the NAACP in 1943, surpassing all other branches in the nation. In the 1940s, nearly 100,000 black Detroit workers held union membership.

In New York, labor unions with large black memberships similarly addressed issues of housing discrimination, police brutality, and racial disparities in hiring. They campaigned against the large number of blacks fired from their jobs immediately after the war. Historian Martha Biondi notes that the most actively antiracist unions were led by black leftists in the United Electrical Workers, United Public Workers, National Maritime Union, and Hotel and Restaurant Workers of America. New York did not have a single all-powerful industry that attracted black labor, unlike Pittsburgh (steel), Winston-Salem (tobacco), Detroit (automobiles), or Los Angeles (aircraft). Yet Ferdinand Smith, the vice president of the racially integrated National Maritime Union, was the highest ranking black person in the CIO.

The recruitment of Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 occurred against the backdrop of the united-front effort of blacks and whites, leftists and moderates, and labor and civil rights organizations in various parts of the city. Robinson’s recruitment is exemplary of labor civil rights activism over the integration of job sectors—in this case baseball. Although Dodgers owner Branch Rickey recalled the year 1942 as the time when he decided to hire a black player, his recruitment of Robinson occurred later, amid a broad-based community campaign.

The first person to make public the idea of bringing a black player into the major leagues in this most American of sports was the black Harvard Law School graduate Benjamin J. Davis. Ben Davis (as he was generally called) in 1943 ran on the Communist Party ticket to win the vacated City Council seat of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. (Powell’s election to the United States Congress had made him the first African American from New York in the House of Representatives.) In 1945, then-incumbent Ben Davis made a second successful bid for the City Council seat, using the baseball theme in his campaign literature to boldly urge hiring of a black player by one of New York’s three major-league teams. The cover of Davis’s campaign pamphlet presented two photographs side by side: a dead black soldier, obviously killed in action during World War II somewhere in Europe, and a baseball player with one leg raised in a pitcher’s stance and his arms wound up for a throw. At the bottom appeared the compelling words: “Good enough to DIE . . . but not good enough to PITCH!”

In May 1945 Davis introduced a resolution, which was unanimously endorsed by the City Council, calling for baseball’s integration. According to Martha Biondi, the City Council sent copies of the resolution to the owners of New York’s then-three teams, the Dodgers, the



Jackie Robinson in 1947

Jackie Robinson broke the racial barrier in America's favorite pastime and thrilled millions with his dazzling plays.

Yankees, and the Giants. The Metropolitan Interfaith and Interracial Coordinating Committee and the National Maritime Union made similar demands. Rickey recruited Robinson that summer and signed him with the team in the fall of 1945. However, Robinson started with the Dodgers's minor league club, the Montreal Royals, leading it to the International League championship in 1946. At the opening of the 1947 season, he joined the Dodgers and thus major league baseball, starting at first base. Robinson kept his dignity despite racist taunts from white ballplayers and spectators.

Labor civil rights reached a highpoint in the mid-1940s, but the glory days waned after 1947. Unable to withstand the anticommunist climate of the Cold War, with its dual aim of containing communism abroad and uprooting it at home, leftists' role in the civil rights movement declined precipitously, along with their heavy emphasis on securing economic justice and combating structural inequality. The same Cold War years bore witness to the resilience of the civil rights movement, but in a different form and with a broader emphasis on ending "second-class" citizenship for African Americans.

1947: Pivotal Year

The year 1947 presented a number of defining moments that led to the demise of the labor-left civil rights agenda and alternatively to the rise of the liberal-rights based movement. Several events determined those different outcomes.

In January 1947, events on the international scene were spurring anticommunist fervor. To President Harry S. Truman, world events appeared foreboding—Stalin's gulags (prison camps) in the Soviet Union, rising communist forces in Greece and Turkey, Soviet-style governments (called Soviet "satellites") in Central and Eastern Europe and North Korea, and the unfolding communist victory on the Chinese mainland (completed in late 1949). On March 12, 1947, Truman went before a joint session of Congress to outline his position defining the United States as the free world's leader and protector, in the form of offering military and economic assistance to nations threatened by what the president considered pro-Soviet communist forces.

Specifically, Truman called for military and economic aid to the beleaguered pro-Western governments of Greece and Turkey. To play this new and active role in the protection of democratic nations under communist threat, the United States had to assume a global stature it had not held before. The United States, Truman argued, could no longer stand on the sidelines as a spectator to international developments, since its own national security was at stake. Fears of national security intensified with charges of espionage against the influential government official Alger Hiss and leftists Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Although in recent years highly credible evidence has come to light that Hiss and Julius Rosenberg were in fact Soviet spies, Red-baiting, witch-hunts, and wild accusations by the influential Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin whipped the nation into near-hysteria about an alleged ubiquity of subversive communist activities.

McCarthy was eventually censured by the U.S. Senate for his methods. But even after his downfall in 1954, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), the FBI under its director J. Edgar Hoover, and other practitioners of what came to be called McCarthyism hauled thousands of ordinary men and women before government or private-industry panels, committees, and agencies for investigations of their pasts. Statements deemed to be in any way sympathetic to the Soviet Union were outlawed by the Smith Act. Most of the people charged with disloyalty or subversion were not members of the Communist Party or had long since abandoned communist sympathies. Journalists, writers, scientists, movie stars and Hollywood writers, musicians, politicians, teachers, and certainly labor unionists and civil rights advocates were routinely investigated, identified as "un-American," and labeled "Red" by intelligence agencies. As a result, many lost their careers and were subjected to social ostracism; some were even jailed and deported, or driven to suicide. (Only in the latter half of the 1950s did the American people increasingly discredit McCarthyism.)

In 1947 Congress dealt labor a direct blow when it passed, over Truman's veto, the Labor-Management Relations Act (generally known as the Taft-Hartley Act from its cosponsors, Republican Senators Robert Taft of Ohio and Fred Hartley of New Jersey). The Taft-Hartley Act strengthened employers' hands against labor, outlawed a variety of strikes and the "closed shop" (the requirement that workers had to join a union in order to hold a job), and cracked down on other union practices disliked by conservatives. It also required union officials to declare that they were not communists.

The legislation proved sufficiently antagonistic toward labor interests that AFL president George Meany and CIO president Walter Reuther, both staunch anticommunists, overcame their institutional rivalry and merged their organizations. With the formation of the AFL-

CIO in 1955, two African Americans, A. Philip Randolph and Willard Townsend, were elected vice presidents of the new organization.

Government policies and growing anticommunist popular sentiment doomed the leftist component of the labor and civil rights movements. The CIO purged its leftist white and black workers. After 1947, Winston-Salem's Local 22 of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers lost its standing with the **The Failure of Operation Dixie** National Labor Relations Board. This turn of events, plus the mechanization of tobacco production and black layoffs, led to Local 22's downfall. Nor did the CIO's much-heralded "Operation Dixie" unionization drive between 1946 and 1953 fare any better in the Cold War South. After a few early successes, Operation Dixie's drive to unionize an interracial southern workforce proved to be an uphill, ultimately unsuccessful battle. Pervasive rhetoric of anti-unionism, anticommunism, and anti-integration was interchangeably used to defeat the CIO effort.

White southerners noticed that the most successful interracial organizing had occurred in leftist CIO unions—for example, the FTA among tobacco workers, which had a racially integrated leadership and promoted racially integrated picket lines. Thus southern state and local governments, employers, churches, police, news media, white supremacist organizations, and in general white public opinion all sought to preserve and protect the racial and economic status quo. CIO organizers, who often relied on strategies effective in the North, did not fully understand the limits of those strategies in the context of the South's racial culture and labor conditions. Operation Dixie's demise left African Americans in that region without a vigorous protagonist in the house of labor.

Amid the national anticommunist uproar of the late 1940s and early 1950s, prominent New York leftists lost leadership positions in the labor movement. Ferdinand Smith was ousted from the National Maritime Union **The Demise of Left-Labor Civil Rights** and consequently from his high-ranking office within the national CIO leadership. The FBI arrested Smith in 1949 and deported him back to his native Jamaica in 1951. In July 1948, eleven national leaders of the Communist Party, including New York City Councilman Ben Davis (who had just run for re-election) were arrested under the Smith Act. The liberal-left coalition in both the labor movement and in the civil rights movement had broken down irreparably. Anticommunism exacerbated already existing differences and tensions and hardened ideological lines. The united-front strategy, which had brought together a number of groups of varying political persuasions (for example, the umbrella organization National Negro Congress), came under siege. Indeed, the NNC itself dissolved in 1947.

Detroit offers a vivid example of the demise of left-labor civil rights partnership. Growing tensions precluded working together for a common cause in which both partners really believed. For example, labor civil rights advocates were in agreement about the importance of preserving the FEPC, but in 1947 white and black liberals dissociated themselves from leftists who shared that goal. The Michigan Council for Fair Employment Legislation (later renamed the Michigan Committee on Civil Rights) was an interracial coalition of many groups, including the NAACP, the Jewish Community Council, and the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists. But it explicitly rejected the Communist Party and the leftist Civil Rights Congress, both of which had been longstanding vocal supporters of state FEPC laws.

In the fall of 1949, the NAACP made clear its anticommunist position while planning a national mobilization for congressional passage of civil rights legislation. The successful

mobilization brought more than 4,000 delegates from organizations across the nation to Washington. However, the Civil Rights Congress was barred from participating. In response to the disgruntled CRC chairman William Patterson, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP made clear that leftist politics were unwelcome and a detriment. Wilkins stressed that “in the present Civil Rights Mobilization we have no desire for that [leftist] kind of cooperation, or that kind of unity.” The NAACP was also advised by the CIO to exclude certain unions. At its annual meeting in 1950, the organization took a firmer stand. NAACP membership overwhelmingly voted for a resolution that would empower its board of directors to investigate local branches and suspend any dominated by communists. Warning against “wild accusations,” Walter White told his members “we do not want a witch hunt . . . but we want to be sure that we, and not the communists, are running [the NAACP].”

The wall between antiracist leftists and antiracist liberals, be they in labor unions or civil rights organizations, had become impenetrable. Nor were many, if not most, of the persons branded as leftists (they sometimes called themselves “progressives”), actually members of the Communist Party. Paul Robeson never joined the party, yet his reputation was severely tarnished, his passport was revoked, and many one-time friends, such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Walter White, and Jackie Robinson, distanced themselves from him. Du Bois would suffer similar recrimination, although he actually did join the party at the very end of his life. There was no denying, however, that communists had been involved in antiracist campaigns. The perception was sufficiently widespread for any white person in the South who supported black rights to be associated automatically with communism even if not a communist. That presented a serious dilemma to any white supporter of integration in the South, as well as to any organization, particularly the NAACP, that challenged Jim Crow laws. In southern states, fighting segregation was cause enough to be branded “un-American.”

Truman and Civil Rights

In 1946 President Truman appointed several interracial committees of distinguished Americans to inquire into the condition of civil rights and of higher education, as well as to recommend improvements. The higher education committee’s report, published in 1947, called not only for eliminating inequalities in educational opportunities but also for ending all forms of discrimination in higher education. That same year, the civil rights committee’s report, *To Secure These Rights*, demanded “the elimination of segregation, based on race, color, creed, or national origin, from American life”—that is, ending discrimination and segregation in public education, employment, health care, housing, the military, public accommodations, and interstate transportation.

News of the civil rights committee’s report and excerpts from it were featured in black and white newspapers throughout the United States. African Americans read its strongly worded condemnation of lynching and its denunciation of various forms of racial discrimination. Radio stations devoted time to discussing it. More than a million copies of the published report were distributed and sold. Civic groups held workshop discussion groups and forums on the report. NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall described *To Secure These Rights* as having an unparalleled and historic impact. “The problem of the Negro and other minority groups,” he declared, “is now before the public in a manner never equaled before.”

Just as Truman had proclaimed it America’s duty to lead and defend the free world internationally, so he charted a similar course at home. Speaking from the Lincoln Memorial in

Window in Time



The Right to Equality of Opportunity

It is not enough that full and equal membership in society entitles the individual to an equal voice in the control of his government; it must also give him the right to enjoy the benefits of society and to contribute to its progress. The opportunity of each individual to obtain useful employment, and to have access to services in the fields of education, housing, health, recreation and transportation, whether available free or at a price, must be provided with complete disregard for race, color, creed, and national origin. Without this equality of opportunity the individual is deprived of the chance to develop his potentialities and to share the fruits of society. The group also suffers through the loss of the contributions which might have been made by persons excluded from the main channels of social and economic activity.

Source: *To Secure These Rights*, the Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights, 1947, p. 9.

June 1947, he declared: "We must make the Federal Government a friendly, vigilant defender of the rights and equalities of all Americans. . . . Our National Government must show the way." Impressed with the president's words, the Committee on Civil Rights quoted them in *To Secure These Rights*. Never before had there been such fervent executive advocacy of racial equality; even Abraham Lincoln, who ended slavery, did not support racial equality.

Truman also publicly committed himself to integrating the armed services, and in 1948 he appointed a committee to study the problem. Its report, *Freedom to Serve*, outlined how integration was to be achieved. Acting on its recommendations, **Freedom to Serve** the Army adopted a new policy in 1949, opening all positions to qualified personnel without regard to race or color and abolishing the racial quota. The Navy and Air Force adopted similar policies. With very few incidents to mar the transition, the armed services of the United States moved steadily toward integration, which was implemented during the Korean War (1950–1954).

Finally, in 1948 Truman issued an executive order requiring fair employment in the federal service. "The principles on which our Government is based require a policy of fair employment throughout the Federal establishment without discrimination because of race, color, religion, or national origin," **The 1948 Election** he declared.

Conservative southern Democrats were outraged with many of Truman's liberal Fair Deal policies, and especially with the steps he was taking to advance desegregation. In 1948 some of these southerners walked out of the Democratic Party convention and formed the States' Rights Democratic Party, promptly labeled the "Dixiecrats" by the press and the public. The Dixiecrats nominated South Carolina governor J. Strom Thurmond for the presidency, hoping that he would siphon off enough southern electoral votes to throw

the election into the House of Representatives, where the South could bargain with Republican and Democratic candidates to back off supporting civil rights.

Truman's prospects in the 1948 election looked dim. The Republicans had swept 1946 midterms, and polls showed that the president's popularity had dwindled. For president, the Republicans nominated the bland but competent governor of New York, Thomas E. Dewey, who had a good record of support for civil rights. In the run-up to the election, Dewey seemed far ahead of Truman in the polls. Not only did Truman face the defection of southern Democrats, but there was also an insurgency on the left.

Liberal and left-wing Democrats were split, with Henry Wallace—Roosevelt's secretary of agriculture in the 1930s and his vice president for one term—advocating a strong liberal agenda at home and opposing the Cold War with the Soviet Union abroad. Wallace also staunchly supported civil rights. Especially because of his views on foreign policy, he was often portrayed by his opponents as a “Red” sympathizer. After being fired from Truman's cabinet for opposing the Cold War, Wallace was nominated for the presidency by a revived Progressive Party. But Wallace did win considerable support among black voters—many of whom were not leftists—because of his antiregulation and anticolonialist positions.

When the votes were counted on Election Day 1948, however, Truman was the surprise winner, confounding pollsters and pundits who had almost unanimously predicted Dewey's victory. So confident of that outcome had the experts been that polling stopped two weeks before the election. Thus the polls missed a massive, last-minute shift of labor, farm, and liberal Jewish voters back to Truman as the heir of FDR's New Deal. But the black vote was also decisive—and Truman got more than two-thirds of it. He had been the first presidential candidate in history to campaign in Harlem, and African Americans embraced Truman's liberal civil rights program for the future and gave him their votes, deserting both Wallace and Dewey. Blacks had come to believe in Truman's rhetoric for confronting the dilemma between national creed and practice and endorsed his liberal civil-rights agenda. In great measure, his victory was due to black support.

In 1952, after announcing his retirement from office, Harry Truman gave the Howard University commencement address, in which he called for a civil rights program backed “the full force and power of the Federal Government” to end discrimination against minorities. He declared that the more the nation practiced the belief in equality, “the stronger, more vigorous, and happier” it would become.

Civil rights liberals applauded the president but nonetheless admonished him that America could assure its moral credibility only with laws and policies that would reject charges of bigotry and discrimination—as the NAACP's leader Walter White told Truman: with laws and policies that would show the world that “we were constantly at work to narrow the margin between our protestations of freedom and our practice of them.” America was on trial.

Fighting for Civil Rights in the Courts

In the 1930s and 1940s, the NAACP legal team of Charles Houston, Thurgood Marshall, Robert L. Carter, and other black attorneys fought case by case in the courts for voting rights, equalizing teacher salaries, integrating higher education and interstate public transportation, employment equality, and equal access to housing.

The individual most responsible for developing the strategy for this all-out legal attack was Charles Hamilton Houston. One of the nation's earliest prominent black lawyers, Houston graduated from Harvard Law School in 1919, having been the first black editor of the elite *Harvard Law Review*. He returned to his native Washington, D.C., where he practiced law with his father in the firm Houston and Houston from 1924 until his death in 1950. At the same time he taught and held a deanship at the Howard University Law School. His students Thurgood Marshall, Oliver Hill, and others joined him after he became special counsel of the NAACP.

Charles Hamilton Houston

Houston is credited with developing the long-range legal strategy that eventually overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine, which in 1896 the Supreme Court had endorsed in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. His biographer Genna Rae McNeil argues that he weighed two choices—to attack separate-but-equal head-on or to take a long-range approach that would lay the groundwork for the final assault. Houston decided on the second strategy.

As counsel to the NAACP from 1935 to 1940, Houston successfully argued numerous cases before the U.S. Supreme Court and was instrumental in developing the legal strategy to outlaw racial discrimination in the United States. After returning to private practice in Washington, D.C., in 1938, Houston assisted Thurgood Marshall, now the head of the NAACP legal team. Some of the famous civil rights cases in which Houston continued to be involved included *Smith v. Allwright* (1944), a voting rights case that led to outlawing the Texas white primary; *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948), the housing case that overturned restrictive covenants; and the employment cases *Steel v. Louisville and Nashville Railroad* (1944) and *Tunstall v. Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen* (1944), which tackled the racial discriminatory practices of unions, certified by government agencies, toward their black members.

Houston's inspiring leadership was based on his belief in the lawyer as “social engineer.” The black lawyer, Houston told his students and colleagues, had a duty to be an advocate and instrument for racial equality. He therefore believed that black lawyers must work within the context of black communities, and for that reason he and Marshall traveled throughout the South, meeting with leaders and members of local NAACP branches and with black lawyers in the various states. Indeed, historian Patricia Sullivan's comprehensive study of the NAACP reveals that Houston and his protégé Marshall not only provided the foundation or groundwork for the legal destruction of Jim Crow but also functioned effectively on the ground, much like field workers. They attracted members into the branches, worked with local lawyers, mobilized residents to target discriminatory practices for local protest, and built support for the national NAACP agenda. In newspaper articles and in the *Crisis* Houston offered instruction with such titles as “How to Fight for Better Schools.” He also advised communities about finding suitable plaintiffs for cases, raising funds, and launching suits.

Community mobilization of this sort could be seen in Texas around the issue of voting rights. The courtroom contest that culminated in *Smith v. Allwright* was preceded by fervor among NAACP branches throughout Texas to pursue such a case. Twelve hundred delegates met in Corpus Christi to discuss and pledge monetary and other support for a voting rights challenge.

Of particular interest to local communities in the 1930s and 1940s was the legal assault on segregated public higher education. In communication with NAACP lawyers, African American communities in the South began to strategize around the problem of graduate level and professional school programs of public (state) universities that refused to admit their own black

Battling Jim Crow in Higher Education

residents. As legal victories mounted, Houston and Marshall felt ever more emboldened to challenge Jim Crow. Sullivan writes:

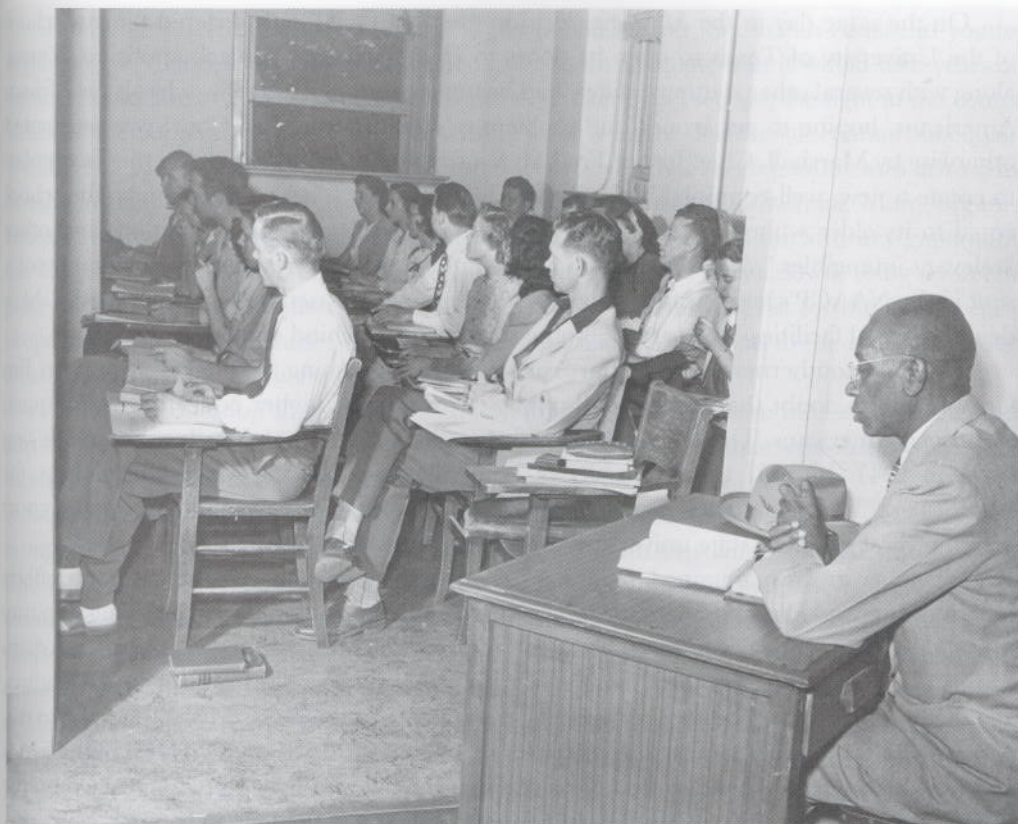
Local groups in communities around the South were investigating expenditures on education, appearing before local and state education boards to protest inequities. In some cases they secured additional funding for facilities and bus transportation; in others, such as Muskogee, Oklahoma, and Baltimore County, Maryland, legal challenges to discrimination at the elementary and secondary level were under way. Local groups in Jacksonville, Florida; Mobile, Alabama; and Atlanta, Georgia, were working to equalize teachers' salaries, and Thurgood Marshall spent time in Virginia and North Carolina at the request of several groups preparing to test salary differentials in those states.

In 1936 Houston and Marshall won a case against the University of Maryland in which the Maryland Court of Appeals ordered that a black student, Donald Gaines Murray, be admitted to the university's law school. (Six years earlier, the University had refused admission to Marshall himself.) Murray, a resident of Baltimore, sued Raymond A. Pearson and other officers and members of the Board of Regents of the University of Maryland to admit him into the law school. Murray had graduated with a bachelor of arts degree from Amherst College in 1934 and met all the standards for admission to the law school except color. Drawing on an argument that Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* would later make, Marshall argued: "What's at stake here is more than the rights of my client. It's the moral commitment stated in our country's creed."

The university's lawyers argued that the admission of blacks was not required, since the Fourteenth Amendment permitted the segregation of races for education, and it was the stated policy and practice of the state of Maryland to segregate blacks. The university sought to remedy the case by promising in the future to build a separate law school for blacks. The court ordered Murray's immediate entrance, however, noting that the state at that time had only one law school. The Murray case, like others to follow, referred to the specific state under litigation, and thus the fight against Jim Crow in higher education had to be waged on a state-by-state basis.

The next significant step toward providing graduate and professional training for African Americans grew out of the decision of the Supreme Court in the case of *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada, Registrar of the University et al.* In 1936 Lloyd Gaines, a state resident, applied for admission to the University of Missouri's law school. When rejected, he took his case to the courts, and when the state courts denied him relief he appealed to the federal courts. In the decision of the Supreme Court in 1938, Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes stated that it was the duty of the state to provide education for all its citizens and that provision for that must be made within the state. To provide legal education for white residents within the state and to fail to do so for blacks "is a denial of the equality of legal right to the enjoyment of the privilege which the State has set up, and the provision for the payment of tuition fees in another State does not remove the discrimination." The Supreme Court gave Houston the victory. Unfortunately, Gaines disappeared before ever attending the law school.

But legal victories continued to mount. In 1946 Ada Sipuel sought admission to the law school of the University of Oklahoma. The U.S. Supreme Court ordered the state to provide facilities for her, and the university regents arranged for the establishment of a separate law school. But she declined to attend this institution, which had been set up within two



George W. McLaurin, a 54-year-old African American student, sits in an anteroom, apart from other students, as he attends class at the University of Oklahoma in 1948.

weeks, and began the litigation all over again. Finally, in 1949 Sipuel won admission to the university law school. Meanwhile George W. McLaurin, who already held a master's degree, was admitted as a Ph.D. candidate to the University of Oklahoma's graduate school of education. His case drew public attention, because he was not treated equally. He was required to sit separately and away from the other students and assigned to special tables in the library and the cafeteria. McLaurin sued to remove those restrictions, since they handicapped his efforts to study, learn, and interact with other students.

Black communities across the nation closely followed the McLaurin case. According to Robert Carter, a crucial member of the NAACP legal team, a complication arose when certain sections of the black community began to question whether the NAACP should take the case. A columnist for the *Pittsburgh Courier* editorialized for the newspaper's national black readership that McLaurin's case might be considered too insignificant by the Supreme Court, given that he was already enrolled in the school. The reporter worried that the Court might rule against him, thus setting back another pending case as well as breaking the string of victories. In response, Marshall called a conference at Howard University to alert the public that the case would continue. On June 5, 1950, the Supreme Court ordered an end to the University of Oklahoma's segregation practices. This victory solidified even greater respect for the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc. (LDF), as the legal team was now identified.

On the same day as the *McLaurin* decision, the Supreme Court ordered the law school of the University of Texas to open its doors to Heman Sweatt, a black applicant. Texas, along with several other southern states, had begun creating separate law schools for African Americans, hoping to get around the problem of equalization. The Court was persuaded otherwise by Marshall. Chief Justice Fred M. Vinson's opinion indicated that the Texas plan to create a new, well-equipped but separate law school for blacks did not make the school equal to its older white counterpart because of the latter's alumni, reputation, and other "relevant intangibles." *McLaurin*, and to a greater extent *Sweatt*, revealed the beginning of a shift in the NAACP's legal strategy—away from arguments based on equalization (the sheer denial of equal facilities) to an attack on the very premise behind segregated education.

To white southerners, these Court rulings were frightening. The legal assault on Jim Crow left little doubt that, in time, all public institutions of higher education would open to African Americans. The University of Arkansas had already voluntarily admitted its first black in 1947. In 1951 the University of Louisville absorbed the Municipal College for Negroes and hired one black professor. Within a few years, either voluntarily or by court order, several southern state universities were admitting African Americans.

Wherever it was maintained, separate and unequal education had immeasurable effects on both white and black populations. In 1951 nine southern states revealed a glaring disparity

The Battle against Separate but Equal

between per pupil expenditures for blacks and whites. In Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and South Carolina, the average expenditure was \$135.60 per white student and \$74.50 per black. The differential for school property was even greater. Both friends and foes of segregation in education conceded that the bitterest fight would be waged on the level of elementary and secondary schools—and that fight was not long in coming.

Black schools in the South had suffered horribly during the Depression, when construction of new school buildings stopped almost entirely, teaching staffs were cut to the point where effective teaching was impossible, and miserably low salaries were slashed even further. While no southern community could afford to cut its educational expenditures without seriously impairing the effectiveness of its program, the slightest cut in African American education often had the effect of taking away the barest essentials in the educational program, including the teacher.

As migrants moved north and west in the twentieth century, their children continued to find segregated schools. Few states followed the lead of New York, which in 1900 prohibited separate schools. New Jersey, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana had some integrated high schools but not elementary schools. Most northern states were inclined to provide separate schools for blacks, especially where white patrons brought pressure to bear on school officials. In Kansas and Arizona, racially separate education was mandatory only on the elementary level, but in both these states, separate schools at the secondary level were common.

Where separate high schools were established in large cities, such as Gary and Indianapolis, Indiana, the schools constructed for the use of African Americans were modern and adequate in almost every detail. Some suggested that equalization through meticulous care in the construction of exclusive schools for blacks occurred mainly to counter the claim of unequal education, thus forestalling indefinitely the admission of blacks to white elementary and secondary schools. Support for segregation hardened also as white students engaged in strikes and violence to prevent African American students from attending schools open to all, and as white parents kept their children away from school in an effort to force the authorities to set aside separate facilities for blacks.

The South's determination to provide better public schools for African American youths highlighted two dilemmas. First, black schools were so inadequate that it would take years of significant funding to achieve even a semblance of equality; and second, the fight in the courts indicated the Supreme Court's incremental move away from the doctrine of separate but equal.

In 1952 the NAACP took to the Supreme Court five school segregation cases arising in South Carolina, Virginia, Kansas, Delaware, and the District of Columbia. Many organizations entered briefs on behalf of the black students' position, and the attorney general of the United States asked that the separate but equal doctrine be struck down, using a foreign policy argument. "Racial discrimination," he declared, "furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills, and it raises doubt even among friendly nations as to the intensity of our devotion to the democratic faith."

Perhaps no question in twentieth-century America aroused more interest at home and abroad than the debate about the constitutionality of segregated public schools. The NAACP threw down the gauntlet in the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* and won a historic victory on May 17, 1954. The case **The Brown Decision** brought four cases before the Supreme Court—from South Carolina, Virginia, and Kansas, whose district courts held public school segregation to be constitutional, and from Delaware, whose state supreme court took the opposite position, holding that the "equal protection" clause of the Fourteenth Amendment invalidated segregation provisions in the state constitution. On the same day, a second Supreme Court victory went to the NAACP's separate but related case *Bolling v. Sharpe*, which challenged segregated schools in the District of Columbia. In each of the cases that constituted *Brown*, local black lawyers (often leaders in state and regional NAACP chapters) worked closely with Thurgood Marshall, Robert Carter, and others from the New York national office. Most noteworthy was the tremendous courage and sacrifice of the parents of the children who served as plaintiffs in the local cases. They lived under threats, and some lost their jobs because of their suits.

Arguing the *Brown* case before the Supreme Court required standing not only on the precedent of cases that had been won over the previous decade but also on scholarly expertise. The NAACP's legal team had come to depend on that expertise, and during the 1940s its lawyers turned to scholars in the preparation of their arguments. For example, white sociologist Louis Wirth at the University of Chicago worked with the case *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948). Wirth's extensive knowledge of urban planning and racial residential housing patterns proved helpful to legal arguments against restrictive covenants.

In another NAACP victory, *Lyman Johnson v. the University of Kentucky* (1949), Marshall asked John Hope Franklin, who had recently been awarded a Ph.D. in history by Harvard, to make a comparative study of the white university and the Kentucky State College for Negroes at Frankfort with respect to library holdings, faculty, and departments of history. Franklin revealed the segregated black school to be woefully unequal. Franklin would also become part of the team of historians, sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists called on to help develop the NAACP's brief in the *Brown* case. Scholarly research proved especially useful in the *Brown* decision, when black psychologist Kenneth Clark's doll-test findings served as evidence to show the debilitating psychological effects of segregation on black children's self-esteem.

In 1954, after long deliberation under the skillful guidance of its newly appointed chief justice, Earl Warren, the Court rendered its historic *Brown* decision, unanimously and unequivocally declaring racially separate public education to be inherently unequal.

Segregated public schools, the *Brown* decision stated, deprived African Americans of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. "Separate educational facilities are *inherently* unequal," Warren wrote for the Court, thus overturning after more than a half-century the separate-but-equal doctrine of the 1896 *Plessy* decision.

The chief justice then conceded that formulation of the decrees to integrate presented problems of "considerable complexity" because of the great variety of local conditions and because of the wide applicability of the decision. He therefore invited the parties to the suits, the attorney general of the United States, and the attorneys general of those states requiring or permitting segregation in public education to offer suggestions during the Court's next term of court as to how relief should be granted.

Southerners, as a general rule, reacted to the decision with defiance. The governors of South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi threatened to abolish public schools rather than permit white and black children to attend the same schools. Fiery crosses were burned in some Texas and Florida towns, and scattered groups of whites organized to resist the decision. But if the *Knoxville Journal* surprised some, it spoke for many when it editorialized: "No citizen, fitted by character and intelligence to sit as a justice of the Supreme Court, and sworn to uphold the Constitution of the United States, could have decided this question other than the way it was decided."

In its May 31, 1955, ruling that called for "all deliberate speed" in desegregating schools, referred to as *Brown II*, the Supreme Court refused to mandate a timetable for carrying out desegregation, and it disregarded the Justice Department's original recommendation that local officials develop desegregation plans within ninety days after notification. By 1956 integration seemed to be underway in the border states of Maryland, Delaware, Missouri, and Oklahoma. However, in the majority of southern states "all deliberate speed" served to slow down rather than hasten the actual process of integration. Since the Supreme Court made the federal district courts primarily responsible for oversight of the implementation process, desegregation was thus placed in the hands of white southern federal judges at the district and appellate levels, many of whom fully shared local white prejudices.

Many white southerners expressed virulent and outspoken opposition. An editorial in a Richmond newspaper called the Supreme Court justices an "inept fraternity of politicians and professors" and declared that the Court had "repudiated the Constitution, spit upon the Tenth Amendment, and rewrote the fundamental law of this land to suit their own gauzy concepts of sociology."

Southern White Opposition

However, the president of the Southern Regional Council called the court's decree "wise, moderate, and workable," and a South Carolina newspaper, in an editorial entitled "We Can't Win," said, "Segregation is going—it's all but gone. South Carolina and the rest of the South can't reverse the trend."

But even if the South could not win, it was not ready to admit defeat. White resistance increased as African Americans pressed to desegregate schools. Among the new antiblack groups was the National Association for the Advancement of White People, with national headquarters in Washington, D.C. The organization was discredited in 1954, however, as a result of the numerous legal entanglements in which its executive director became involved. More widespread and more effective were the White Citizens' Councils, which a leading white Mississippi editor called the "Uptown Ku Klux Klans."

Frankly admitting their determination to resist enforcement of the Supreme Court's school desegregation decision, the councils called on their members to take economic

reprisals against blacks who were active in the fight to desegregate schools and against whites who favored compliance with the law. In some communities, African Americans retaliated by launching boycotts against businesses operated by members of the councils. Thus, by 1956 something akin to economic warfare was being waged in the South, with many business firms caught in the middle—regarded by whites as “soft” on the NAACP and by blacks as favorable to the White Citizens’ Councils.

Southern leaders fought the school desegregation decisions in other ways. They considered numerous plans to avoid compliance, including turning over the public schools to private organizations, criminalizing anyone who attended or taught mixed classes, and encouraging “voluntary segregation.” In the area of political theory they resurrected the doctrine of interposition—under which southern states asserted their right to interpose their own sovereignty in those extreme cases when the federal government allegedly exceeded its legal authority—that had originally been expounded by South Carolina’s chancellor William Harper back in 1832.

Early in 1956, the governors of Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi called on the southern states to declare that the federal government had no power to prohibit segregation, and they demanded the right to “protest in appropriate language, against the encroachment of the central government upon the sovereignty of the several states and their people.” The state legislators of those same states passed resolutions of interposition or nullification. In defiance of the Court, Virginia’s Prince Edward County closed down its public school system between May 1959 and 1964. White children were educated in private schools, such as the Prince Edward Academy, supported by tuition grants from the state and by tax credits. Black students had no such option and could receive education only by leaving the county or through the efforts of churches that tried to approximate classroom learning, often in their basements.

Since the NAACP had led in the fight for desegregation, it soon became the special object of attack in the resistance to change. The organization was widely denounced in the South as subversive, and in 1956 several states found various legal devices to virtually stop its operations. Thus in Louisiana an injunction was granted that restrained the NAACP from holding meetings until it had filed with the secretary of state a complete list of its membership. A local judge in Alabama granted an injunction against any further activities by the NAACP. The South Carolina general assembly called for its classification as a subversive organization. Meanwhile, a member of Congress from Arkansas entered into the Congressional Record about forty pages of “evidence” in an attempt to show that the officers and leading members of the NAACP were un-American.

The late 1950s and the 1960s would bring about a changing of the guard. A new generation of activists would lead the civil rights movement to end legal (*de jure*) and customary (*de facto*) racial discrimination. This younger, more impatient generation would take to the streets, employing mass but nonviolent confrontational tactics such as demonstrations, freedom rides, sit-ins, boycotts, marches, and voter registration drives. Local communities throughout the nation were refusing to wait for court decisions and for laws to change. One by one, they were mobilizing and together producing a national movement that insisted on freedom now.