

# **American Politricks: Sport, Civil Rights, and the Cold War**

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Half of Soviet anti-American propaganda in the early days of the Cold War focused on the oppression of African Americans. By arguing that the mistreatment of African Americans exemplified American attitudes towards all people of color, the Soviet Union sought to dissuade decolonized nations of color in Africa, Asia, and Latin America from aligning politically with the United States. Soviet propaganda was so effective that Secretary of State Dean Rusk publicly stated that domestic racial discrimination was the single biggest hindrance to American foreign policy objectives. Because Southern segregationists repeatedly stymied efforts to improve the material living conditions of African Americans, high-ranking U.S. government officials authorized an aggressive counterpropaganda campaign designed to manipulate international perceptions of American race relations. By juxtaposing international coverage of the 1957 Little Rock incident with the international attention garnered by Olympic decathlete Rafer Johnson's goodwill tour, I argue that the failed U.S. government propaganda efforts forced the U.S. to enact significant civil rights legislation.

## *Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative*

In 1946 Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk received two letters from President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights concerning the impact of race relations on United States foreign policy. Rusk responded to the letters by saying: "There is no question ...the moral influence of the United States is weakened to the extent that the civil rights

proclaimed by our Constitution are not fully observed in practice.” “Our failure to maintain the highest standards of performance in this field creates embarrassment out of proportion to the actual instances of violation.” Rusk was willing to acknowledge that “on a small scale” African Americans were affected by racial discrimination, but his judgment that foreign condemnation of racial oppression was more important than the prevalence of racial discrimination in the United States was crucial. Dean Rusk’s advice coupled together with a conservative Congress that was unwilling to support Civil Rights legislation led President Truman to focus on altering international perceptions of the nation’s race relations, rather than removing the legal impediments to African American advancement.

While defining the protests of African Americans, rather than segregation itself as the threat to national security the government began a campaign of silencing dissenting Black voices. For example, W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson, both harsh critics of American racism, had their passports revoked because of their ability to attract large international audiences. After working to marginalize prominent African Americans that were critical of American race relations, the State Department recruited prosperous African Americans who projected mainstream middle-class American values to participate in goodwill tours abroad. With this goal in mind, African American athletes, along with jazz musicians, and other artists were sent abroad as cultural ambassadors. By overemphasizing the extent to which social mobility was achievable for African Americans, the State Department tours sought to showcase African Americans as the preeminent citizens of the African Diaspora, rather than as victims of racism.

As part of its effort to influence Diasporic political alignments during the Cold War, the U.S. government tried to show that American policies were supportive of the liberation and rise of all people of color worldwide, and the touring athletes were depicted as symbols of America's commitment. Hence, Between 1945-1968, 117 sports teams, 535 athletic coaches, and hundreds of other individuals were sent to nations in Africa, Asia, the Near East, the Far East and South America under the State Department's Goodwill Tours Programs. The implication that the State Department hoped people would draw was that if social mobility was possible for Black Americans, other people of color worldwide could improve their social, political, and economic well being by aligning with the United States in its effort to promote capitalist democracy worldwide. Ultimately, the State Department wanted other peoples to conclude that the best "guarantee for a promising future lied in close cooperation with the United States and the Free World.

On September 2, 1957, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, announced that integration would not proceed the following day at Central High School in Little Rock. Faubus authorized a National Guard contingent to bar the entrance of nine black students who had been selected to integrate the school. Faubus' actions were puzzling because Little Rock had a moderate mayor, Governor Faubus' son attended an integrated college, and in 1948, Arkansas had been the first state in the South to integrate a state university without being prompted by a court order.<sup>1</sup> After the *Brown* decision, the Little Rock school board had developed a plan for gradual desegregation of its public schools: high schools would

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<sup>1</sup> Burk, p. 176; Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 29-31; **258-152**.

be integrated in 1957, junior high schools in 1960, and elementary schools in 1963.

Additionally, Governor Faubus did not have a history of race baiting.

After the African American students were prohibited from entering Central High School on September 3, the federal district court ordered desegregation to take place in a ruling the following day. An assembled angry mob caused the troops to again deny entrance to the black students seeking enrollment. Each day a larger white mob gathered to make sure that troops turned away any African American students seeking to integrate the school. As Faubus' use of state armed forces to oppose the authority of a federal court brought the most severe test of the *Constitution* since the Civil War, newspaper and television reporters arrived to cover the latest maneuvers that made the crisis the "first on-site news extravaganza of the modern television era."<sup>2</sup>

After weeks of political wrangling, the federal district court repeated its order to Governor Faubus to stop obstructing school desegregation at Central High School. With a hostile white crowd assembled, eight African American students entered the school through a side door on September 23. Upon hearing the news, the assembled crowd estimated at between five hundred and two thousand strong, grew more agitated. Groups of white students exited the school. Then Little Rock Mayor Woodrow Wilson Mann ordered the black students removed at midday because he feared violence. The next morning Mayor Mann called White House aide Max Rabb, the president's advisor on civil rights, to plead for the deployment of federal troops to stifle mob violence at the

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<sup>2</sup> Burk, p. 176; Sitkoff, pp. 29-31; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*, (New York: Touchstone Books, 1988), pp. 223.

high school. Aware of the international implications of the situation, the mayor argued that his call for help was in the interest of “democracy worldwide.”<sup>3</sup>

By authorizing the use of one thousand troops from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to keep order in Little Rock, President Eisenhower became the first President since Reconstruction to use armed troops to support the constitutional rights of African Americans. In a televised speech to the nation, President Eisenhower partly defended his use of troops because communist media outlets were using the Little Rock incident to portray the United States as a “violator of those standards of conduct which the peoples of the world united to proclaim in the Charter of the United Nations.” President Eisenhower estimated that it would be difficult to “exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence” of the nation abroad. Indeed, photographs and newspaper articles about Little Rock made front-page news internationally. In 1950 the State Department publication, *The Negro in American Life* suggested that slavery should be the benchmark by which the nation’s progress in race relations should be judged. However, after 1957, Little Rock became the new measuring rod for progress.<sup>4</sup>

The Little Rock incident, which occurred as the United Nations General Assembly was discussing Soviet aggression in Hungary, hurt the moral position of the Western world. The Soviet press seized upon the incident as a means to discredit American condemnation of Soviet actions in Hungary. One Moscow paper ridiculed United States Ambassador to the United Nations Henry Cabot Lodge’s speech on the crisis in Hungary because as he discussed the ideals of civilization, humanity and the rights of man,

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<sup>3</sup> Burk, pp. 184-185.

<sup>4</sup> Burk, pp. 174-176; Sitkoff, p. 32; Krenn, p. 88; Riley, p. 196; Borstelmann, p. 104; Dudziak, p. 121.

American papers “report unbelievable crimes and violations of the most elementary human rights which are taking place” in Little Rock. Another article leveled a charge of hypocrisy: “white-faced but black-souled gentlemen commit their dark deeds in Arkansas, Alabama, and other Southern states, and these thugs put on white gloves and mount the rostrum in the United Nations General Assembly, and hold forth about freedom and democracy.” In a telephone call to Attorney General Brownell, Secretary of State Dulles was concerned that the situation would severely hamper United States foreign policy objectives and be more detrimental in Africa and Asia than the Hungary issue was for Russia. Aware of the political fallout, American officials strove to distinguish Little Rock from Hungary by asserting that national authority in the United States had been used to “expand the freedom and equality of the individual,” but the Soviet used its national authority to suppress rights and freedoms.<sup>5</sup>

The violence at Little Rock brought scorn upon the United States from all over the world. Reports from the United States Information Agency suggested that in many parts of the world, Little Rock lowered international impressions of American race relations. However, in other instances where impressions were already low, Little Rock confirmed and solidified previously-held unfavorable attitudes. For example, an editorial from the newspaper, *Suluh Indonesia*, published in Djakarta, Indonesia said that Little Rock made it difficult to believe “U.S. Western Democracy is an invaluable thing which should be introduced all over the world.” An American diplomat asserted that before Little Rock,

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<sup>5</sup> Memo from Bern to Secretary of State, September 12, 1957, NA, 811.411/9-1257; “World Reaction to US Racial Integration Incidents,” September 12, 1957, DDEL, Ann Whitman File, Dwight D. Eisenhower (DDE) Diary Series, Box 27, Sept. 1957 Toner Notes; “Telephone Call to Attorney General Brownell,” September 24, 1957, DDEL, John Foster Dulles Papers, Telephone Calls Series, Box 7, Memo Tel. Conv.-Gen., Sept 2, 1957 to Oct. 31, 1957 (3); “Overcoming Adverse Reaction to the Little Rock Incident,” October 10, 1957, NA, 811.411/10-1057.

Israel had been “the enemy” in the Middle East, but the violence in Arkansas over school integration made America “the enemy.” Little Rock became so synonymous with American race relations that Vice-President Richard Nixon was greeted with chants of “Little Rock” as a hostile crowd attacked his motorcade in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1958.<sup>6</sup>

Foreign allies of the United States who had been tolerant and understanding of American efforts to address racial discrimination found their ability to bridle their criticism of the United States strained. Robert P. Chalker, the American Consul General at the embassy in Amsterdam reported that Dutch sentiment was concerned because the incident and the corresponding “weakening of America’s moral leadership in the world indirectly hurts America’s allies,” because racism was contradictory to the values of liberty, equality and equal opportunity. An article published in a Canadian magazine asked, “‘Is Little Rock any of our business?’” The article argued that Governor Faubus’ actions caused as much harm to Canada, Britain, and Western Europe as he did to the United States because for nations in Africa and Asia, “the most important thing about a white man is the way he treats a colored man, and of course they tend to judge a white man by his neighbors and friends.”<sup>7</sup>

It was popular during the 1950s to assert that racial discrimination in the South continued because of the constitutional division of power among federal, state and local

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<sup>6</sup> “Post-Little Rock Opinion on the Treatment of Negroes in the U.S.,” Office of Research and Intelligence, United States Information Agency, January, 1958, DDEL, Central Files, Subject Series, Box 99, USIA (2); “Public Reactions to Little Rock in Major World Capitals,” Office of Research and Intelligence, United States Information Agency, October 29, 1957, DDEL, Central Files, Subject Series, Box 99, USIA (1); “Editorial Reaction on Desegregation,” American Embassy Djakarta, October 7, 1957, NA, 811.411/10-757; Krenn, pp. 77-78; Borstelmann, p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> “Local Reaction to Racial Disturbances in the United States,” American Consulate Paramaribo, September 18, 1957, NA, 811.411/9-1857; “Little Rock, Arkansas,” American Consulate Amsterdam, September 16, 1957, NA, 811.411/9-1657; “Canadian Editorial Comment on Racial Tensions in the United States,” American Embassy Ottawa, November 6, 1957, NA, 811.411/11-657.

governments: an arrangement which the Eisenhower Administration claimed precluded federal interference in matters under state control, such as criminal justice and education. Given the global reach of American power, many foreigners were unconvinced of the sincerity of this position. One French citizen told the noted African American historian John Hope Franklin at a seminar in Salzburg, Austria, "It appears to the outsider that federalism stands in the way of nothing that the national government actually wants to do; but it is always used as an excuse for the national government's not protecting the rights of Negroes." Others publicly wondered how the United States planned to convince the world of the advantages of democracy when it could not get Governor Faubus to obey the laws of the land.<sup>8</sup>

In an attempt to ameliorate the damage caused by the violence in Little Rock, Christian Herter, the Acting Secretary of State, distributed a memo to American embassies worldwide titled, "Overcoming Adverse Reaction to the Little Rock Incident." Herter's advice to place the events at Little Rock into perspective, stress specific advancements that had been made in race relations, and remind the world that discrimination was not unique to the United States--was the predominant mode of dealing with racial crises in the Eisenhower Administration. Believing that Little Rock had been misinterpreted and misunderstood, Herter suggested that it be emphasized that the crisis arose because of the "force and strength of the American people's insistence upon complete equality." Herter advised that it be noted that in thirty-one of the nation's forty-eight states "public school integration was a reality."<sup>9</sup> Although this was factually true,

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<sup>8</sup> Borstelmann, p. 107; Letter from Marta Castillon Giffard to General Eisenhower, September 16, 1957, NA, 811.411/10-957.

<sup>9</sup> "Overcoming Averse Reaction to the Little Rock Incident."

there were still great disparities in the educational opportunities available to the average African American.

Secretary of State Herter expressed the opinion that African American athletes were “great value” to the government’s effort to alter international perceptions of American race relations. The American Consul General in Dakar, French West Africa, proposed that an effective response to Little Rock “would be the sending to Black Africa of American Negro athletes and athletic teams...The Africans at this stage are insatiably interested in sports.” Although Little Rock was damaging, a USIA report gauging post-Little Rock opinions about American race relations revealed that even after the violent incident, most nations with the exception of France believed that the status of African Americans had advanced over the previous decade. Sports, along with world opinion, improved educational opportunities, and the incidents at Little Rock were listed as reasons for the perceived rise in status among African Americans.<sup>10</sup>

Six weeks before President Eisenhower deployed troops, Rafer Johnson, the African American honor student at UCLA and world record holder in the decathlon--arguably the most physically and mentally demanding sporting event--had toured Leopoldville, Stanleyville, and Brazzaville in the Belgian Congo. The Consul General regarded Johnson’s visit as “an outstanding success.” Johnson’s willing to train with the Africans gave them feeling of importance and connection that was generally missing in their normal training efforts. The week of Eisenhower’s meeting with Governor Faubus in Rhode Island, Johnson was in Colombo, Ceylon, where his visit overshadowed Little Rock. At an afternoon weekend meet, Johnson won all seven events he entered and

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<sup>10</sup> Krenn, pp. 104, 110; “Post-Little Rock Opinion on the Treatment of Negroes in the U.S.”

broke four Ceylonese records: 100 meters, javelin, discuss and shot put. The *Ceylon Daily* reported that “he came, he saw and he conquered” referring to his athletic preeminence but also his exemplary behavior, willingness to sign autographs, and fraternization with the local citizens.<sup>11</sup>

Reports of racial violence were frequently reported in the Ceylonese press, but only two articles appeared during Rafer Johnson’s visit. Henry T. Smith, the Consul General in Colombo expressed his belief that the “restraint on the part of the press is in part due to the fine performance of Mr. Johnson and his personal qualities of leadership and charm.” Occasionally, local organizations and constituencies in host nations attempted to co-opt the significance of the tours. Such was the case when the *Time of Ceylon* suggested that Ceylonese sports fans should attend the meets in which Johnson was competing because it would be a show of sympathy “for all Negroes handicapped by the color of their skin.” The other article captured the traditional message that the State Department tried to propagate: the success of Rafer Johnson and other African Americans was testament to the fairness of the American democratic system.<sup>12</sup>

President Eisenhower’s 1960 Committee on Information Activities Abroad, otherwise known as the Sprague Committee, clearly expressed the purpose of goodwill tours involving African Americans: “to *define* and *influence* the African Diaspora.”<sup>13</sup> The primary aim of the propaganda campaign was to convince the relatively tiny educated

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<sup>11</sup> “American Specialists Program—Rafer Johnson,” American Consul General Leopoldville, March 27, 1958, NA 032 Johnson, Rafer/3-2753; “Rafer Johnson Visit,” American Embassy Colombo, September 26, 1957, 032 Johnson, Rafer/9-2657.

<sup>12</sup> “Rafer Johnson Visit,” American Embassy Colombo, September 26, 1957, 032 Johnson, Rafer/9-2657.

<sup>13</sup> “The President’s Committee on Information Activities Abroad: Africa, PCIAA no. 31,” Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, U.S. President’s Committee on Information Activities Abroad (Sprague Committee), Box 21, folder PCIAA # 31.

groups in the emerging nations that United States “policies and aims are in harmony with their own and will serve to advance their legitimate national aspirations.” Sports exchanges involving African Americans and integrated teams were crucial to the effort to forge cultural links, which the State Department hoped would lead to alignment with the United States.<sup>14</sup>

The civil rights bill passed in 1957--the first of its nature in eighty-two years--authorized the creation of a Civil Rights Commission to serve as a liaison between Congress and the State Department. Understanding the foreign policy implication of domestic civil rights, the commission asked the State Department for a report regarding the extent to which treatment of minorities impaired the country’s relationship with other governments and how communist bloc countries took advantage of racial unrest in their propaganda campaigns. The thirty-five-page report, “Treatment of Minorities in the United States—Impact on Our Foreign Relations” made several important observations:

1. American race relations helped shape foreign attitudes towards the United States. Therefore, shortcomings had an indirect impact based upon how the issue swayed public opinion.
2. The central focus of foreign nations on American racial issues centered around the plight of African Americans. Awareness of progress based upon successful desegregation was increasing, but high profile incidents of racial strife and struggle including the Emmett Till murder and the trial of Jimmy Wilson overshadowed reports of progress. The

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<sup>14</sup> “Africa: The President’s Committee on Information Activities Abroad,” July 11, 1960, DDEL, Sprague Committee, Box 4.

emotional impact, coupled with sensationalistic press accounts continued to dominate international discussion of race relations.

3. Interest was highest in Africa and Asia where racial discrimination in the United States was linked with white colonialism. Interest in Europe was largely based upon the reality that the gap between American principles and practice, gave a powerful weapon to the Communists who used discrimination to discredit Western democracy.
4. The issue weakens the United States moral position as the “champion of freedom and democracy” and reinforced doubts about the nation’s interest in the welfare of others, particularly peoples of color.

Because the issue received wide attention in non-Communist press, the Soviets no longer produced much original material on the subject. Instead, Moscow quoted and reprinted articles from the *New York Times* and other publications to increase the credibility of its attempt to expose the “American way of life” as morally bankrupt.<sup>15</sup>

The international coverage that characterized international indictment of United States racial transgressions were more visible than the propaganda efforts designed to alter international perceptions. Ultimately, it was the failure of the propaganda efforts that led to more significant reform. The quest to present the disturbances in “perspective” by emphasizing success stories was hampered because as news items they were, according to United States Information Agency (USIA) Deputy Director Donald Wilson,

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<sup>15</sup> Azza Salama Layton, *International Politics and Civil Rights Policies in the United States, 1941-1960*. (New York: Cambridge Press, 2000), p. 95; “Treatment of Minorities in the United States—Impact on our Foreign Relations,” NA, 811.411/12-458.

“competitively slow.” Wilson advocated swift action: federally protected access to public facilities, the right to vote, decent housing, and equal employment opportunity. The USIA Deputy Director supported his claim by arguing that “words will not enlist the world’s confidence in this country as a bastion of democracy. Only action can do this.”<sup>16</sup>

As civil rights continued to be a hindrance to U.S. foreign policy, President Kennedy delivered a nationally televised address detailing his plan to eradicate segregation on June 11, 1963. Proclaiming that it was the nation’s time to live up to the promises of the *Constitution*, Kennedy expressed the need for congressional action, he advocated three general legislative proposals: a public accommodations law, authorization for more effective intervention in school desegregation lawsuits, and tougher voting rights provisions. The President’s uncharacteristically fervent speech placed his support behind civil rights, in part, because the battle against communism required an end to racial tension in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

A State Department-produced “Memorandum for the President” distributed shortly after the president’s speech began by praising the President because “national and international acclaim of your forthright statement on civil rights has been remarkable.” However, the memo predicted that the racial situation was “fraught with danger” because “the determination of Negroes to achieve their constitutional rights is equal to the determination of those who would deprive them of these rights.” The report stressed the need for the government to pursue “sustained and vigilant action.” Warning the President that there would probably not be a “cooling off” period, the report suggested that the

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<sup>16</sup> “Racial Strife: The Overseas Impact.”

<sup>17</sup> Gerstle, p. 280; Riley, pp. 220-221; Pauley, p. 108; Borstelmann, pp. 160-161.

President's aggressive commitment to solving integration problems would be in the best interest of the nation.<sup>18</sup>

After President Kennedy's civil rights bill had been sent to Congress, Secretary of State Dean Rusk appeared before the Senate Committee on Commerce to discuss the foreign policy implications of the bill. Rusk read a prepared statement that addressed the potential foreign policy ramifications of the legislation. Rusk reasoned that failure to pass civil rights legislation would cause nations to question "the real convictions of the American people." Four themes were expressed as the principle contentions of Soviet propaganda: racism is inevitable in the American capitalist system; inaction by the United States Government is tantamount to support of the racists; recent events have exposed the hypocrisy of American claims to ideological leadership of the free world; and United States treatment of African Americans is indicative of its attitude towards people of color worldwide. The Secretary of State credited African American's loyalty and faith in democracy, along with progress towards eliminating racial discrimination laws and practices, and support from the executive and judicial branches of government with limiting the damage to America's international position. Rusk's closing admonition that "the United States cannot fulfill its historic role unless it fulfills its commitment to its own people," defined elimination of racial discrimination as fundamental to the internationalization of the "American Dream."<sup>19</sup>

Despite the efforts of Kennedy, Rusk, King, and others, the Civil Rights Bill was bogged down in Congress on November 22, 1963, when President Kennedy was

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<sup>18</sup> "Memo for the President on Civil Rights."

<sup>19</sup> "Statement of Secretary of State Dean Rusk Before the Senate Committee on Commerce Regarding S. 1732," July 10, 1963, NA.

assassinated. Less than a week after Kennedy's assassination, Lyndon Baines Johnson stood before a joint session of Congress and admonished them to pass the bill as a memorial to the slain president. Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964. The act banned discrimination in employment, federally assisted programs, public facilities, and public accommodations. The federal government was given the power to initiate lawsuits to desegregate school districts, and to withhold federal funds from reluctant school districts. The Equal Employment Opportunities Commission and Community Relations Service were created to mediate discrimination problems. After the passage of the law it was no longer legally permissible to discriminate based upon the grounds of race, color, religion, or national origin.<sup>20</sup>

Civil rights activists considered the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act a huge victory for the civil rights movement because it went beyond mere symbolic declaration and the walls of segregation in public accommodations fell with very little resistance in the South. International support and praise for this advancement came from across the globe and created an environment where many government officials felt as if they had gotten the upper hand on the racial issue in the United States. It is important to note that this important legislation grew out of the failure of the more popular propaganda campaigns that were designed to manipulate international perceptions of American race relations. It was only after these goodwill tours failed to significantly alter international perception that the U.S. turned to legislative reform.

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<sup>20</sup> Riley, pp. 220-224; Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000*, (New York: Viking, 2001), pp. 282-283.