

TWO FRONT WAR: AN EXAMINATION OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE IN THE  
COLD WAR CONTEXT

By

Adam R. Wilsman

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Approved: Professor

Thomas Schwartz Professor

Dennis Dickerson

Throughout the course of American history, a tension has existed between domestic politics and American foreign policy. To a large extent, America's democratic institutions and its place as the world's primary hegemonic power account for this interplay. In formulating foreign policy decisions, America's political and diplomatic leaders often give careful consideration to the media and public opinion more broadly; decisions to go to war and make peace are rarely made without the careful weighing of domestic policy issues. At the same time, this interplay works in the opposite direction. As America acts in the world, it considers the ways in which its domestic situation affects its global standing. At no time in U.S. history has this interplay been clearer than during the Cold War. During this conflict, while the United States squared off with the Soviet Union abroad, the nation faced a racial crisis that had been brewing for centuries at home. The threat of disaster loomed with both the international conflict with the Soviets and with America's internal racial conflict. These two situations had a significant impact on one another. The context of the Cold War affected the black struggle for civil rights in two key ways. First, the nature of the Cold War as an international, ideological struggle in which the United States needed to set a strong example in the world emboldened civil rights leaders and ultimately benefited the movement. Second, the fear and paranoia that characterized American anticommunism during this era limited the civil rights movement and justified the oppression of key civil rights leaders. An examination of liberal Christian journals *Christianity and Crisis* and *Christian Century* demonstrates that religious thinkers understood this interplay and attempted to evoke it in their arguments in support of black justice.

One fundamental tactic of the civil rights struggle that emerged in the twentieth century was the undermining of the moral authority of mainstream American society. Civil rights leaders undertook this effort in a multitude of ways through their words and deeds. One way in

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

which leaders of the struggle did this was by revealing American hypocrisy with their rhetoric. Civil rights leaders from George Kelsey, in the early days of the movement, to Malcolm X, in the later days of the movement, held up a mirror to American society in an attempt to show Americans the gap between their principles and their practices.

Of course, the main way the religious leaders of the early movement undertook this task of undermining American moral intransigence was resorting to a religious argument. How can one who considers himself or herself a follower of Jesus Christ support the ungodly institution of segregation? How can a nation that so often professes its Christian nature be so racist? While this was certainly a key argument for early black religious leaders, there existed another, similar rhetorical tool. This religious criticism was often coupled with a political criticism.

American racism did not simply undermine the teachings of Jesus Christ, it undermined the very foundational principles of the United States. This sense, that American racism flew in the face of America's professed ideals found early expression in a post-World War II world. At that time, black Americans needed to confront the stark realities of American racism.

Throughout World War II, black men and women played a critical role on the home front and many black men gave their lives defending the United States from its fascist enemies. Despite these sacrifices, black soldiers returned home to an ungrateful nation and black workers were asked to return to their disgraced place in American society. The Allied rhetoric of freedom and democracy was revealed to be a farce. It was in this post-World War II world that black religious leader Howard Thurman expressed:

...The diseases in the body politic become much more acute in the minds of less-privileged persons such as Negroes. As these diseases are exposed to the searching diagnosis of the meaning of democracy, the gulf between the dream as uttered and the idea as practiced is wide, abysmal and deep. The measure of the

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

frustration of Negroes is in direct proportion to the degree to which the meaning of democracy is made clear and definitive.<sup>1</sup>

The rhetoric of democracy that so warmed the hearts of white Americans and rallied the Allied nations rang hollow to black Americans that had grown familiar to the hypocrisy of America's words. A little more than a decade later, in the wake of the monumental Brown decision, Benjamin Mays challenged America in a similar way when he expressed that America should "Tell the world honestly that we do not believe that part of the Declaration of Independence which says in essence that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."<sup>2</sup> To both Thurman and Mays, the divergence between the practices of American society and the foundational principles of that society was significant and troubling. Thus, this powerful rhetorical means by which movement leaders emphasized American hypocrisy had a history rooted deep in the movement.

During the Cold War, this rhetoric was especially powerful. This is due to the nature of the Cold War as an international ideological struggle in which America is the lone world power opposing the Soviet Union. While certainly, World War I and World War II were to a large extent global in scope, the Cold War which enveloped the world for over forty years was international in ways that World War I and World War II were not. Whereas some parts of the developing world were relatively unaffected by World War I and World War II, every region in the world played a part in the Cold War, including and perhaps especially the impoverished nations of Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Thurman, "F," in *Peace is the Way: Writings on Nonviolence from the Fellowship of Reconciliation*, ed. Walter Wink. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, c2000), 212-213.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Mays, "The Moral Aspects of Segregation Decisions," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 29, no. 9 (1956): 365.

While the Cold War was international in scope, it was largely ideological in nature. Each nation represented a set of ideas and a unique vision for the world. The citizens and leaders of the United States saw their country as the ultimate champion of freedom, democracy and capitalism. The leaders of the Soviet Union espoused world communism. In this war of big ideas, the United States and the Soviet Union both tried to capture the hearts and minds of the world's people and instill confidence in those people that their system was superior. This ideological battle set off dynamic propaganda campaigns on both sides. The struggle for the world's confidence was taken so seriously, things seemingly irrelevant to the war, like the race to land on the moon, became monumentally important to the leaders of each country. The belief in the United States that the Soviets were actively attempting to overthrow governments across the globe instilled in American leaders a special sense of urgency in this ideological struggle.

In this context, it was critical that the United States present itself well if it hoped to triumph in the Cold War. In presenting a certain image of the United States as a free, peaceful and prosperous society, propaganda only went so far. The United States needed to genuinely project its own positive self-conception to the globe. Let the people of the world see on their televisions, hear on their radios and read in their newspapers that the United States embodies the freedom and democracy that it espouses.

Of course, this American need to project a certain image was not lost on civil rights leaders and liberal intellectuals that supported the black struggle for justice. Just as when Thurman and Mays wrote, the black experience in America continued to be an obvious transgression of America's espoused ideals. An examination of liberal Christian periodicals of the Cold War era, namely, *Christianity and Crisis* and *Christian Century* reveal that liberal

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

religious thinkers understood this and were able to critique the United States from this angle with greater power than ever.

Writers for these religious journals posed questions about what the racial crisis in America meant to the nation's Cold War aims. Speaking of Western Europe just a few short years after World War II had crippled the continent, Paul Albrecht of *Christianity and Crisis* wrote

Racial discrimination in the United States is unquestionably the greatest obstacle to European-American understanding and the most powerful weapon in the hands of opponents of American policy...Europeans naturally see the discrepancy between American ideals and American practices in simpler terms than we do...Europeans feel that American preaching about democracy is hypocritical...The more rapid progress America can make in solving the Negro-White problem, the greater will be the cordiality with which Europeans will welcome American proclamations about the meaning of democracy.<sup>3</sup>

The Marshall Plan and all other economic means to prop up Europe are not sufficient tools with which to secure European partnership in the Cold War. The United States needed to demonstrate its sincerity by practicing its principles within its own nation.

If the United States could not safely assume it had the loyalty of its wartime allies in post-War Europe, it certainly could not assume the allegiance of the developing world. By the mid-twentieth century, the de-colonization movement was sweeping the globe. New countries sprang up all over the world and exerted their independence. Regardless of their relative military and economic power, these nations were all of critical strategic importance in the Cold War as exemplified by Cold War conflicts in relatively weak nations like Vietnam, Korea, Cuba and Nicaragua. However, the United States faced particular challenges in its attempts to secure the loyalties of these new nations. First, the weakness of these new states made their governments susceptible to takeover and their impoverished citizens susceptible to communist rhetoric.

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<sup>3</sup>Paul Albrecht, "As Others See Us," *Christianity and Crisis* 10.4 (1950).

Second, many of the new nations were run and populated by non-whites and consequently, the United States operated from a position of disadvantage immediately.

The strategic importance of the developing world and the disadvantage that the United States needed to deal with as a result of its own racist institutions was a subject of many liberal religious writers. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote for *Christianity and Crisis* in 1951, “The fact is that we labor under great moral handicaps in Asia. We are the white world; and a colored continent has not forgotten the long history of the white man’s arrogance.”<sup>4</sup> If America hoped to win allies in the Cold War struggle, it would first have to shed the image of a white supremacist nation. Of course, the danger of losing the confidence of the developing world was exacerbated by the Soviet Union’s persistence to subvert developing governments. In a 1951 article in *Christianity and Crisis*, Liston Pope argues,

The communists do not need to fight if they can gain power by infiltration, and they try to mask aggression behind indigenous revolutionary forces. In Asia and Africa they seek to capitalize on movements for independence from imperial rule and on the widespread resentment of white chauvinism.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, an already dangerous situation in which the United States could lose its power and influence in much of the world was exacerbated by an image problem, difficult to overcome, that the United States could not deal with non-whites on a level of equality. Add this resentment of American racism to the sense that America, as a Western power, is in many ways culpable for colonialism and the U.S. has many disadvantages to overcome in this ideological battle. Writing for *Christianity and Crisis* in 1958, Herbert Butterfield concludes,

At heart we know we have been put on the defensive—we know we have been put into retreat—by the problem of resentful people who are still under some form of subjection. And we have been losing the sympathy of the uncommitted

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<sup>4</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Ten Fateful Years,” *Christianity and Crisis* 11.1 (1951).

<sup>5</sup> Liston Pope, “Wanted: Positive Goals for America,” *Christianity and Crisis* 11.5 (1951).

nations...Against Russia we have one strong card and one only: the doctrine of liberty and the self-determination of peoples.<sup>6</sup>

The answer to this critical problem to American foreign policy is to return to the core values of the American Creed, the “doctrine of freedom.” This doctrine, held by many of the religious leaders, is compelling and persuasive to the disinherited of the world just as communism is, but the United States needed to embody those values that it expressed or have the world see through the gilded nature of American claims.

This rhetoric did not occur in a vacuum nor did it only come from civil rights leaders. This sense that the United States was not living up to its stated ideals clearly troubled some Americans, but the limits that this failure placed on American foreign policy objectives was likely more compelling to foreign policy experts and political leaders. After all, the fate of the world was at stake and the undeniable blemish that was America’s racial crisis was costing the United States strategically. As early as 1947, the Truman administration was officially expressing concern over this problem. In that year, the administration released a report outlining the reasons why the civil rights crisis needed to be addressed in a profound way.<sup>7</sup> One of those reasons was that the civil rights situation handicapped American foreign policy makers.

Secretary of State Dean Acheson explained in a letter to the Chairman of the Fair Employment Practices Commission:

The existence of discrimination against minority groups in this country has an adverse effect upon our relations with other countries. We are reminded over and over by some foreign newspapers and spokesmen that our treatment of various minorities leaves much to be desired...Frequently we find it next to impossible to formulate a satisfactory answer to our critics in other countries.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Herbert Butterfield, “Western Policy and Colonialism,” *Christianity and Crisis* 18.14 (1958).

<sup>7</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 79-80.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.



Here, Acheson makes an argument that is consistent with the rationale of liberal Christian thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr. The logic of this line of argumentation was too powerful, the potential consequences of inactivity on this front too great, for leaders in the United States not to act.

As a consequence, one way in which the United States waged the Cold War was to further the cause of civil rights domestically and in so doing taking away a powerful propaganda tool from the Soviet Union and its allies. Mary Dudziak effectively demonstrates this point in her book Cold War Civil Rights. In her work, Dudziak points out attempts by the United States government and its embassies to project an image of racial healing with news stories and speakers that it presented to the world. This was part of a concentrated effort by the United States government to answer the critics of its racial hierarchy and perhaps more importantly, diffuse a dangerous Cold War scenario in which America's allies and its enemies would reject American power out of concern and anger in American hypocrisy.

However, television stories of racial progress in the United States were not enough, political leaders in the nation needed to take concrete action. The United States government did so in two key ways. First, by desegregating the armed forces during the Truman administration. Second, by reacting decisively to the school segregation crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas during the Eisenhower administration. While some might point out that these two efforts took place independently of the Cold War and government leaders pursued these policies for political reasons, it is clear that the foreign policy effect instilled within these leaders a sense of urgency that they otherwise would not have had

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

without the treachery of the Soviet Union looming. The Cold War context played a key role in waking American leaders from the doldrums of their extreme gradualism.

The desegregation of the armed forces was of critical importance to members of the United States government sensitive to the racial crisis and its effects on foreign policy. Of the many gross injustices exacted upon blacks in the United States, few were as vile as those injustices committed against black soldiers returning from war. This particular problem had a long history. During the Civil War, blacks fought valiantly for the North and for the South. Their sacrifice, however, was grossly underplayed in the national narrative in the aftermath of the war as the North and South attempted to reconcile.<sup>9</sup> During the Spanish-American War, black soldiers faced similar injustice. Blacks were exported to island nations in which they witnessed other oppressed members of the African Diaspora; again, their contribution was grossly underplayed. This American tendency to take for granted black sacrifice continued well into the twentieth century with black soldiers fighting and dying for the United States in the World Wars and coming home to the same kind of extreme racism that they had hoped to overcome by sacrificing themselves for their country. The segregation of the army exacerbated black feelings of frustration. The United States could not afford to send these long disgruntled and oppressed men overseas to reveal the sickening depths of American racism and oppression to the world.

How would non-whites in the developing world react to seeing segregated units in their nations? How was the United States to overcome the inevitable resentment that would result? These were questions that leaders in the United States hoped they would

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<sup>9</sup> Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 195-205.

not have to answer. Truman and many in his administration felt compelled to act on this Cold War imperative. James Carey, member of the President's Committee on Civil Rights argued that there existed a

...Paradox of massing an army in World War II to fight for the Four Freedoms, and in engaging in that work they segregate people on the basis of race...Segregation is wrong wherever it exists but when our Government holds up before its citizens the Constitution, with the Bill of Rights, saying to every man that he is a citizen and appealing to him for loyalty in peace and war on that basis, then I don't think we have any right to permit the pattern that has grown up in any section of the country to dominate the national policy.<sup>10</sup>

Just a few short months later, on July 26, 1948, the Truman administration issued Executive Order 9981. This Executive Order mandated the rapid integration of America's armed services. With it, Truman argued for equality of opportunity within the services regardless of "race, color, religion or national origin."<sup>11</sup> If the Truman administration wanted to confront the sense in the developing world that the United States was another racist imperialist nation like so many Western colonialists before them, the desegregation of the army was a fine way to start. Furthermore, in undertaking this measure, the United States was also going a long way in undercutting Soviet Union propaganda campaigns.

Of course, the Truman administration, as the first administration to deal with the harsh new realities of a world mired in Cold War was not the last administration to fight the war at home by confronting America's racist institutions. The presidential administration of Republican Dwight Eisenhower also waged war against the Soviet Union in this way. As a member of the Republican Party, Eisenhower was in many ways less sensitive to the plight of blacks in American society than Truman. Civil rights were not a critical issue to his administration. Nevertheless, when racial crisis struck in Little Rock, Arkansas, the Eisenhower

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<sup>10</sup> Dudziak, 84.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

administration acted strongly in the favor of the civil rights movement. In the context of the Cold War, however, Eisenhower made an obvious choice. In September of 1957, the denial of nine black high school students at Little Rock's Central High School and the resulting harassment of those students and their families drew the attention of the international media. News of America's school desegregation crisis and the ugliness that this crisis brought out in Southern whites infuriated members of the world press and empowered America's detractors.

With the eyes of the world upon the United States, the Eisenhower administration needed to act decisively to diffuse the situation. As Mary Dudziak points out in Cold War Civil Rights, "If slavery had been the benchmark against which American racial progress had been measured in the past, Little Rock provided a new measure, as the Cold War required more of the leader of the free world."<sup>12</sup> Clearly, more was at stake for the United States than the fate of nine high school students in Little Rock, Arkansas.

While this point was clear to many in the United States government, President Dwight Eisenhower understood what was at stake with special clarity. He expressed, "Overseas, the mouthpieces of Soviet propaganda in Russia and Europe were blaring out that 'anti-Negro violence' in Little Rock was being 'committed with the clear connivance of the United States government.'"<sup>13</sup> Eisenhower had a strong perspective on this problem having been told repeatedly by American embassies across the globe about the international impact of the Little Rock crisis.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence, a man criticized in America as being too supportive of segregation and a man who made his distaste for the Brown decision clear to many of his top advisers made some of the most monumental government decisions in the history of the civil

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 118.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

rights era.<sup>15</sup> On September 20<sup>th</sup>, Eisenhower's Justice Department secured a court injunction ordering Governor Faubus of Arkansas to cease using his national guardsmen to bar the school from the nine black students. On September 24<sup>th</sup>, the President ordered in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division of the United States Army and on the following day that division ushered nine black students into Little Rock Central High School. In the aftermath of this diffused racial crisis, Eisenhower expressed to the nation,

At a time when we face grave situations abroad because of the hatred that communism bears toward a system of government based on human rights, it would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence and indeed to the safety, of our nation and the world. Our enemies are gloating over this incident and using it everywhere to misrepresent our whole nation. We are portrayed as a violator of those standards of conduct which the peoples of the world united to proclaim in the Charter of the United Nations.<sup>16</sup>

Few would argue that these were the words of a man that loathed racism and its institutional counterpart in America, segregation. The black struggle for rights simply was not that important of an issue to the Eisenhower administration, as demonstrated by this administration's legislative legacy. However, Eisenhower could see clearly the ways in which the Little Rock crisis was hurting America's standing in the eyes of the world. As a former general and an undeniable Cold Warrior, Eisenhower was sensitive to this particular argument as exemplified by his uncharacteristic intervention in racial affairs in September of 1957.

While in this manner the context of the Cold War benefited the movement, in other ways, it hurt the movement. To understand the ways in which the Civil Rights movement was limited by the Cold War, one must consider the American mindset during this era. While the United States waged proxy wars across the globe to halt the expansion of Soviet communism, war was waged within the borders of the United States as well. However, this war was not waged by

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 133.

armies and its tools were not guns; this war was waged by anticommunists whose weapons were governmental organizations like the House Un-American Activities Committee. In this way, the ideological struggle against communism was waged domestically as well as internationally.

Ultimately, if this domestic repression had focused upon communists, the Civil Rights movement would have been largely unaffected. When the movement was being conceived in the 1920s and 1930s, this may not have been the case. In America, the years between the wars represented the era of the popular front. After the initial red scare of 1919, an unofficial alliance emerged between American liberals and communists. These two groups worked together in a vast array of progressive campaigns often those involving labor struggles. While looking back, this unofficial alliance seems peculiar given the fervent anticommunism of the Cold War era, but one must consider that the 1920s and 1930s oversaw the emergence of fascist dictatorship in Europe. With this historical development, liberals and progressives looked to one another as allies against totalitarianism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this unofficial alliance was badly damaged when the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany agreed to a non-aggression pact in 1939. The alliance was demolished with the onset of the Cold War following World War II.

During the popular front era, the Communist Party had ties to the black struggle for justice. At different points, important black thinkers like Richard Wright, Max Yergan, Ralph Ellison, Paul Robeson and W.E.B Dubois all counted themselves as members of the Communist Party.<sup>17</sup> However, the alliance between blacks and communists did not last long and had to a large extent broken apart long before the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact. Black intellectuals involved in the movement quickly realized that they were being used as pawns of the Soviet

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<sup>17</sup> Gilbert S. Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the Struggle Against Racism in America* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 136-137.

Union and the black struggle for justice was being subordinated to much grander Soviet schemes.

The hostility that existed between the NAACP and the Communist Party in the 1930s exemplifies the fall out that occurred between blacks and communists in 1930s America. Whereas the Communist Party had attempted alliance with a number of black organizations and had infiltrated many, it never aspired to a mutually beneficial relationship with the NAACP. Instead, the Communist Party saw the NAACP as a competitor for black followers and financial support. The struggle between the two organizations may have reached its peak in 1931 with the Scottsboro case. This case, widely considered a milestone in terms of its importance to the black struggle for equality before the law, was an enormous source of animosity with both groups fighting one another for the right to defend the Scottsboro boys.<sup>18</sup> A vicious rhetorical war ensued and the NAACP took a strongly anti-communist turn as a result. This moment resonated throughout the black movement. It became clear that the communists could offer the movement little genuine aid. Writer for *Christianity and Crisis*, Liston Pope, expressed in his 1951 article “Vacuum on the Left,”

Since the Russian Revolution, and especially since Stalin’s rise to power, the Communists have been adventurers and opportunists rather than genuine leftists, and they have brought disruption to innumerable progressive organizations and discredit to many liberal ideas. They have done far more harm to movements for social reconstruction than to the status quo, and far more than vested interests have been able do.<sup>19</sup>

It was clear to many in the black struggle, the communists were not trustworthy allies and civil rights leaders were thought wise to distance themselves from communist “aid.”

Given that the black movement had sufficiently distanced itself from the communists by the Cold War, why did Cold War era anticommunism have an adverse effect upon the civil rights

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

<sup>19</sup> Liston Pope, “Vacuum on the Left,” *Christianity and Crisis* 11.14 (1951).

movement? The societal atmosphere of the era accounts for this effect. The United States had just witnessed the conclusion the most costly war in world history. World War II oversaw the development of frightening new weapons, new weapons that enabled the Nazi-perpetrated Holocaust. The war concluded with the explosion of two nuclear weapons that had left two cities leveled and a nation devastated. As a consequence, at the onset of the Cold War the prevailing atmosphere in America was fearful and distrustful. American citizens cast a wary eye on not only perceived communists, but also leftists more generally. In this atmosphere of fear, the United States government was able to undertake repressive means to pursue perceived dissenters and cultural outsiders.

It was in this tense atmosphere that the United States government and especially the F.B.I. clamped down on troublesome outsiders to maintain American society. Among the F.B.I.'s favorite targets during this era were blacks involved in the black struggle for justice. Book-length studies have been dedicated to the F.B.I.'s harassment of civil rights leaders and organizations, namely Kenneth O'Reilly's Racial Matters: The F.B.I.'s Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972 and Ward Churchill's Agents of Oppression: The F.B.I.'s Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement. The extensiveness of government oppression has been well documented. In no other era in American history have so many underhanded techniques been utilized to undermine popular movements. The Cold War atmosphere of fear enabled the government to undertake these controversial measures unchecked by American society at large.

The experiences of two of the most dynamic leaders of the civil rights movement demonstrate the degree of government harassment. Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X both experienced extensive government harassment. While government investigation of perceived



radicals was certainly not a new trend, the sickening degree to which the government went to harass and discredit these men was unprecedented. The F.B.I. often pursued civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X with its secret COINTELPRO missions. While the secretiveness of these programs was one of their defining characteristics, the underhanded nature of their tactics was perhaps the single most distinguishing factor.

The harassment of King began in May of 1961. In that year, the F.B.I. grew concerned with King when he played a role in orchestrating freedom rides throughout the South.<sup>20</sup> F.B.I. director J. Edgar Hoover, a man suspicious of King's alleged ties to a number of American communists, was one of the first to propose the government surveillance of King.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the 1960s, the government's surveillance of King gradually intensified, perhaps as a result of his opposition to the Vietnam War and his increasing emphasis on class struggle. Eventually, F.B.I. surveillance of King evolved from basic information gathering into outright spying. For example, in 1962, in an effort to gain information on King, the F.B.I. wiretapped the offices of a number of his leading advisors.<sup>22</sup> In 1963, Robert Kennedy approved the wiretapping of King's home, SCLC office and a number of hotel rooms that King was known to frequent.<sup>23</sup> Government surveillance reached a new peak in 1964 when the F.B.I. compiled a videotape of King's adulterous affairs, which the organization used in an attempt to blackmail King.<sup>24</sup> The F.B.I. held nothing back in its attempts to harass Martin Luther King Jr.

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<sup>20</sup> David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King Jr.: From "Solo" to Memphis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), 21-22.

<sup>21</sup> Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days Of Rage*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 94.

<sup>22</sup> Garrow, 46-47.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>24</sup> Isserman and Kazin, 94.

As a result of his association with the Nation of Islam, the F.B.I. also harassed Malcolm X. In 1953, the F.B.I. began collecting extensive information on Malcolm X.<sup>25</sup> By 1963, the government was so concerned with the confrontational rhetoric of the Nation of Islam that the F.B.I. infiltrated the group, an action that enabled the Bureau to intensify their surveillance of Malcolm.<sup>26</sup> As in the case of King, the government's interest in Malcolm X may go beyond simple information gathering, as conspiracy theories abound regarding the role of the government in the assassination of Malcolm X. Many infer that the assassination committed in 1965 resulted from the government's exploitation of a rift between Malcolm X and his former spiritual leader, Elijah Muhammad.<sup>27</sup>

While certainly most civil rights leaders and their liberal allies could not have known the depths of government oppression during the Cold War era, many of them sensed that the government had grown more aggressive in its pursuit of political radicals. Many of the writers in *Christian Century* and *Christianity and Crisis* noted this troublesome change in their work. In challenging this government tendency, these thinkers used a familiar rhetorical tactic: utilize the Cold War context to show that the nation's increased activity in harassing dissenters hurt the nation more than anything. One common way to do this was to point out the ways in which the United States was becoming more like its totalitarian enemy, the Soviet Union. One 1966 article in *Christian Century* about the failure of integration argues

Ironically enough, many of the people who for years have been horrified by communism because it does not permit its citizenry a meaningful vote are now equally horrified at the prospect that Negro Americans might use the vote to better their living conditions and improve their chances in life.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Robert L. Jenkins, *The Malcolm X Encyclopedia*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 221.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>28</sup> "Integration Has Failed," *Christian Century* 83.52 (1966).

Again, these religious liberals point out the hypocrisy inherent in the nation's racial practices.

The 1968 article, "Repressive Trend Accelerates" in *Christian Century* makes a similar type of argument as the writer cites the progress of liberalization that is occurring in the Soviet Union

...It might be well to remind ourselves that if Russia is making some small progress in the direction of freedom of expression, the United States seems to be retrogressing... It would be a sad irony indeed if 'the land of the free and the home of the brave' were to see its cherished civil liberties gradually eroded away while such liberties were being gradually achieved by the U.S.S.R.<sup>29</sup>

In the emotionally charged atmosphere of the Cold War in which many Americans and their leaders held a Manichean conception of the world whereby the Soviet Union represents all that is evil and godless, this was a devastating critique.

These writers resorted to another familiar rhetorical tool, calling upon America's professed religiosity. Having established that the kind of fervent anti-communism that justified the unchecked repression of the Cold War era was un-American, thinkers moved on to express that it was un-Christian as well. To many, the virulent nature of anti-communism made it like a false religion itself. John A Mackay of *Christianity and Crisis* argued in 1953,

A new form of idolatry, a religious devotion to something other than God and His Kingdom is gripping the popular mind in our country. Detestation of Communism is producing in certain circles a religious fervor and this fervor is creating a substitute religion. A passionate, unreflective opposition to the communist demon is coming to be regarded as the one and only true expression of Americanism and even Christianity.<sup>30</sup>

This statement reflects not only the desire to confront those in the United States who had lost sight of their Christian values, it also reflects the tendency of many of these liberal religious writers to deny the idea that the Cold War is a spiritual conflict. The idea that this conflict was religious in nature, the Godly opposing the Godless, was resisted by many of these thinkers.

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<sup>29</sup> "Repressive Trend Accelerates," *Christian Century* 85.5 (1968).

<sup>30</sup> John A. Mackay, "The New Idolatry," *Christianity and Crisis* 13.12 (1953).

This is likely a result of their universalism. These Christian writers were reluctant to express the goodness and evilness of different peoples; all are equal in the eyes of God.

Ultimately, just as early religious thinkers in the civil rights movement argued that black men and women needed to maintain their moral core as they undertook the battle for justice, the United States too needed to maintain its moral core as it waged war against the Soviet Union. In 1950, Edward L. Parsons of *Christianity and Crisis* argued

In this war against Communism anything goes: smearing characters, guilt by association, conviction without hearings, trust, not in truth but in suppression, and in our foreign relations trust not in our moral purposes but in military force; all in substance meaning that we meet Communism by using the methods which when used by Communists we condemn, all expressing the conviction that in war ‘ethics are out.’ In war, so goes the thought, morals no longer count. But morals do count, because God still rules.<sup>31</sup>

Economic and military dominance in the world was not all that was at stake in the Cold War. The values of the United States were also at stake, whether those values be the political values deeply embedded in American institutions, or the religious values that have played a dominant role in American culture since the nation’s inception.

In conclusion, the Cold War ultimately had two main effects on the civil rights movement. The first effect was beneficial. In a world in which the United States was competing with the Soviet Union for the loyalty of smaller nations, image was important. The racial crisis in America presented an image problem that American leaders needed to confront. The second effect was harmful. Cold War era anticommunism enabled the United States government to repress political dissenters without remorse. An examination of Christian periodicals of the Cold War era, *Christianity and Crisis* and *Christian Century* verifies that liberal Christian thinkers were aware of this dichotomy and attempted to exploit it to further the cause of the civil rights movement.

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<sup>31</sup> Edward L. Parsons, “Ethics and the ‘Cold War,’” *Christianity and Crisis* 10.9 (1950).

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