

Background

The civil rights movement is a period of American history without clear boundaries, although generally speaking it is understood to include the 1950s and 1960s. The central issue of the movement was to end the legal basis for racial segregation and the subsequent struggle to enforce this ruling. The Southern United States is particularly associated with local attempts to avoid desegregation in favor of racial policies, ostensibly on the basis of defending states' rights against federal government encroachment. Aside from this central goal, the civil rights movement was a social phenomenon that touched every aspect of American life for citizens of all races.

During this period of heightened domestic tension, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) launched a sustained campaign of strategic legal battles, which culminated in the Supreme Court decision that struck down the doctrine of "separate but equal" in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Waves of protests and counter protests dominated the news media for years, and the heightened influence of the KKK terrorist organization led to countless murders in the Deep South. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 signed by President Johnson are also considered landmark achievements. These were only centerpieces, however, to a broad, complex, and tumultuous movement with many leaders both famous and forgotten. Among the best remembered leaders of this era are Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Malcolm X; Oliver Hill; Medgar Evers; Rosa Parks; and Thurgood Marshall. Though the civil rights movement may be something we learn about in history class, it still lies at the center of America's journey to define its values and present society.

At the same time that the civil rights movement brought domestic unrest inside the United States to new heights, on the international stage the USA was engaged in an extended conflict known as the Cold War. The Cold War developed gradually out of the power structure that emerged from World War II and lasted until 1991, when the USSR was formally dissolved. During WWII, the Soviet Union and United States fought together in their effort to combat Nazi Germany and the Axis Powers. When the war ended, however, a new bipolar world emerged in which two superpowers— and nuclear armed states—struggled against one another to extend their ideological, political, and economic influence. Cold War never erupted into direct armed conflict, but much of the world aligned with the capitalist Americans or the communist Soviets and engaged in localized conflicts on their behalf. Had the two superpowers directly gone to war, it is likely that an unprecedented nuclear conflict would have ensued. For this reason, in part, propaganda became an important tool in the Cold War, as the two aligned groups sought to indirectly influence other actors on the world stage and undermine each other. In the United States, especially, politicians were increasingly sensitive to the perceived threats of communist subversion and dissidents operating within the country. Though this threat was often exaggerated, it very much structured the atmosphere that guided government affairs.

In fact, the question of race relations often came up in the context of the Cold War, and vice versa. Soviets used segregation and mistreatment of black Americans to support the claim that communism was a better socio-political system, and American segregationists invoked the communist threat as a means to discredit the desegregation movement. Conversely, the U.S.

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federal government and civil rights leaders appreciated that continued segregation was an ever more embarrassing issue in international politics.

“Racial discrimination furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills, and it raises doubts even among friendly nations as to the intensity of our devotion to the democratic faith.”

Oliver Brown, et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka, et al. 347 U.S. 483 (1954)