ANTI-COMMUNISM AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Did Cold-War politics bolster the civil rights movement?

Viewpoint: Yes. Cold War politics worked in favor of the civil rights movement because the United States needed to strengthen its image as a model democracy among emerging nations and could not afford to be embarrassed abroad by its domestic racial problems.

Viewpoint: No. Anti-Communism harmed civil rights groups more than it helped them, forcing these organizations to keep a narrow focus on desegregation while distancing themselves from African American leaders with leftist sympathies.

It is commonly argued that Cold War anti-Communism helped the American civil rights movement. After World War II, African Americans who had fought against fascism came home to a racist society. At the same time a global struggle to end colonialism was in progress, with the United States and the Soviet Union vying for influence in the newly independent nations, mostly in Africa and Asia. For the United States to stand for freedom in the eyes of the world, it had to improve the status of its own minority groups—particularly African Americans, with their dual legacy of slavery and racial discrimination.

Thus, in December 1946 President Harry S Truman appointed the President's Commission on Civil Rights, whose report, "To Secure These Rights" (1947), helped bring national attention to the issue. In 1954, during the height of the Red Scare, the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed segregation in public schools in the Brown v. Board of Education case. Three years later, President Dwight D. Eisenhower was forced to send troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, where Governor Orval E. Faubus was attempting to prevent the court-ordered integration of Central High School. President John F. Kennedy, at first interested mainly in keeping the civil rights movement under control, spoke about the moral imperative of racial equality shortly before his assassination in 1963. Thus, some historians who argue that Cold War anti-Communism forced the U.S. government to take some long-overdue steps to solve what the noted economist and sociologist Gunnar Myrdal had called the "American Dilemma" can make a good case.

On the other hand, one can also argue that the goals of the civil rights movement were limited by anti-Communism. During the 1950s and early 1960s the movement focused narrowly on desegregation, while doing little to address the glaring poverty of blacks in the urban North as well as in the South, at least in part because addressing economic issues might have increased the vulnerability of the movement to charges that it harbored communists and communist sympathizers. Hoping to avoid such accusations, major civil rights groups excluded people with broader political agendas, particularly those with ties to the Left. These organizations distanced themselves from such important African American leaders as W. E. B. Du Bois, wrote communist-exclusion clauses into their constitutions, and expressed loyalty to U.S. Cold War foreign policy. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was subject to allegations from within and without the movement that he had communist advisers both in the 1950s and in the 1960s, when he spoke out against the...
Vietnam War. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was particularly tenacious in its attempts to disrupt and discredit the movement by associating it with communism.

**Viewpoint:**
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The conclusion of World War II ushered in an era during which U.S. race relations became for the first time a major focus of international attention. Despite the visible wartime contributions of African Americans on both the battlefield and the home front—as well as the well-publicized “Double V” civil rights campaign linking victory over fascism abroad with victory over racism at home—the immediate postwar years did not bring a marked improvement in American race relations. Racial violence and the defeat of important fair-employment legislation suggested that wartime racial reconciliation would be negated by the same sort of backlash against civil rights that had followed World War I. Yet, a few years after this initial postwar period, a broad coalition of black and white activists, attorneys, and journalists, supported by official and semi-official pressure from the federal government, had come together to promote a new era of American civil rights reforms. While individual contributions deserve much credit for these successes, the main reason that the movement flourished was the international pressure that the nexus of the Cold War and worldwide decolonization brought to bear on American domestic institutions.

After World War II strong nationalist movements emerged in regions seeking to break away from European colonization. For centuries western European nations had exercised political and economic control over much of Asia and Africa. Weakened by the war, these European colonial powers were no longer strong enough to deny colonies their freedom. Between 1947 and 1980 dozens of new nation-states came into being. The United States and the Soviet Union saw these new nations as potential allies, and each superpower tried to bring the former colonies into its sphere of influence.

At the end of World War II, it seemed likely that the United States would establish itself as a close friend of these independence movements around the world. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” declaration expressed the basic commitment of the United States to self-determination, and many nationalist leaders called the American Revolution against British colonialism an inspiration for their own struggles. Debates at the new United Nations (UN) focused on the global problems of racism and colonial oppression. In the late 1940s the United States supported the struggle of nationalist Indonesians against Dutch colonial power, even though the Netherlands and the United States were close allies.

It soon became apparent, however, that the loss of income from their colonies would undermine the postwar economic recovery of two key allies, Great Britain and France. Moreover, since many of the colonies were sources of crucial resources for the United States, American policy began to favor the order and stability of colonial control rather than the likely political chaos and uncertain loyalties of newly independent nations. Thus, while American rhetoric seemed to support anticolonialism, American interests favored stable colonial regimes. For many politicians, challenging European colonialism also threatened to upset the Atlantic alliance. European security had a higher priority in U.S. policy than racial harmony at home or abroad.

With the deepening of the Cold War the colonies became even more vital as sources of raw materials to build the U.S. military arsenal. As it became clear that many nationalist movements were destined to succeed, however, the United States risked losing its access to these resources if it continued to support colonial powers. It also faced the possibility that new nations would fall under Soviet influence. As new nations emerged, American policy makers began to realize that positive international perceptions of the United States could be an effective counterbalance to a foreign policy that was not consistently favorable to nationalist movements. In the cold war of international perceptions, the civil rights struggle therefore took center stage.

Victory for the Soviets in this war of words would have created an unacceptable shift in the global balance of power between the two postwar superpowers. Both the United States and the Soviet Union provided considerable developmental assistance and military support to new nations, trying to secure their favor. The effort to win the support of the Third World, however, depended on propaganda as well. The Soviet Union and its communist allies questioned American rhetoric of “freedom” and
“liberty” by pointing to American segregation and racial violence, raising the question of how the United States could claim to be a friend to the new nations of Africa and Asia when it continued to oppress and segregate its own minority population. With the added urging of African American civil rights leaders, American federal officials realized that if the United States were going to win the loyalties of new nations of color, it would have to demonstrate to them that it was a model democracy.

Under the Democratic administration of President Harry S Truman, the federal government began to commit itself fully to civil rights. Though strong and effective dissent from the southern wing of the Democratic Party kept the Truman administration from pursuing the full range of civil rights legislation it would have liked to have passed, important precedents were established. One of President Truman’s most notable civil rights achievements was his 1948 executive order desegregating the U.S. armed forces. Truman also made racial reconciliation part of his official rhetoric. Though his administration never had enough political capital to achieve all the civil rights reforms it might have wanted and though it was often distracted by international Cold War events that seemed more pressing than domestic race relations, Truman began a new trend in American domestic policy by placing civil rights on the national political agenda.

Another factor that influenced the course of the civil rights movement was An American Dilemma (1944), a highly influential study by the well-known Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal. One of his conclusions was that American racism had nearly run its course and was existing as a thin veneer over an emerging foundation of racial harmony. Civil rights leaders were heartened by the Truman administration’s new focus on civil rights and inspired by Myrdal’s argument that one more good push could effectively puncture American racism once and for all. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) took up its legal strategy of fighting racism in the courts with renewed vigor. Its challenge to segregated public schools resulted in one of the most important landmarks in the history of American jurisprudence, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954), in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools were inherently unequal and that public schools throughout the country should be desegregated with “all deliberate speed.” Supported by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, this case had the potential for signaling the end of segregation in all areas of public life. Chief Justice Earl Warren was especially involved in the decision, working to achieve a unanimous 9-0 ruling, which he hoped (in keeping with Myrdal’s reasoning) would strike a powerful, and perhaps fatal, blow to segregation by removing its judicial support.
Throughout the world, the ruling on Brown v. Board of Education seemed to signal more positive changes in American race relations. The decision was hailed throughout the foreign press, suggesting that the international community was starting to see the United States as moving toward a future of racial harmony.

The importance of addressing civil rights problems was magnified in the postwar era by new and expanded communications technologies. Television, radio, and telephone all brought information directly to the emerging nations the United States was trying to attract as allies. The media informed viewers, listeners, and readers at home and around the world of the progress of American civil rights. The media could dramatize events in the civil rights struggle, heightening their immediacy. In the late 1950s the media brought a series of highly charged racial confrontations into homes around the world.

The Little Rock crisis of 1957 had the potential to negate the positive publicity generated by Brown v. Board of Education. While the world watched, Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas decided to defy a federal court order to desegregate the schools in his state by calling out the Arkansas National Guard to stop nine African American students from attending Central High School in Little Rock. A broad spectrum of international newspapers reported the Little Rock affair with headlines such as “Armed Men Cordon Off White School: Racial Desegregation in Arkansas Prevented” (Times of India) and “Troops Advance Against Children!” (Komsomolskaya Pravda). Faubus’s attempt to maintain segregation was reported and discussed from East Africa to East Asia. The effect of Little Rock on the American image abroad was immediately apparent to the U.S. government as well as the American people, with many newspapers predicting a negative international impact. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles publicly stated that opposition to desegregation hurt international relations.

The nation looked for leadership to President Eisenhower, who prior to Little Rock had not wanted to promote integration too vigorously because he feared it would endanger national unity. Faubus’s actions were an embarrassment to the Eisenhower administration and endangered its foreign-policy objectives. After failed negotiations with the governor, Eisenhower sent troops of the 101st Airborne Division of the U.S. Army to enforce the federal ruling. U.S. soldiers escorted the nine students to Central High School. The story of an American president standing up to the forces of Southern racism created another positive story in the battle for the “hearts and minds” of the Third World. President Eisenhower was well aware of this aspect of his actions. In a radio address to the nation about the Little Rock crisis, he stated:

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.

Federal intervention at Little Rock was widely seen as evidence that the executive and judicial branches of the U.S. government were working actively to end racism and racial discrimination. Thus, because of Cold War foreign-policy objectives, the civil rights agenda was legally established and reinforced. For many in the Eisenhower administration the Cold War propaganda value of sending federal troops to Little Rock overshadowed the fact that the action set a precedent of federal commitment to enforcing integrationist rulings.

The U.S. government also tried to bolster the image of American society by sending African American emissaries around the world. The goal of the program was to place middle-class African American professionals in the world spotlight as evidence that it was possible for African Americans to succeed in the United States.

Critics have pointed out that as representatives of the United States, these African Americans were generally limited by the government’s agenda and did not always speak out against U.S. racial inequity. Also, some believed their example worked against the greater good of the movement because they created a false impression of the status of African Americans in general when they were, in fact, exceptions to the rule. One of the best known of these African American “cultural ambassadors” is world-renowned contralto Marian Anderson. The State Department sent Anderson on several international tours during the 1950s. In Asia during the Little Rock crisis, Anderson fielded questions about Faubus and white Americans’ resistance to desegregation.

Anderson had become a symbol of the civil rights movement in 1939, when the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) denied her the use of Constitution Hall for a concert in Washington, D.C. In the ensuing controversy many public figures, including Eleanor Roosevelt, drew attention to the injustice, and later that year Anderson performed her Free-
dom Concert at the Lincoln Memorial. From that day forward Anderson was used as an example of African American triumph over bigotry.

While Anderson had great symbolic value to the civil rights movement, she tried to remain relatively apolitical. When she traveled the world for the United States Information Agency (USIA), she answered questions about racial discrimination by remarking that the United States had made great strides toward equality. This approach angered many people promoting a civil rights agenda. For instance, in response to an Edward R. Murrow *See It Now!* documentary on Anderson’s Asian concert tour, Ralph Matthews wrote for the *Baltimore Afro-American* a disparaging article on State Department tours in general and Anderson’s tour in particular. He argued that, if African American artists “wind up their stint still in the good graces of the powers that be somewhere along the line they have sold the race short on the international market.” To Matthews and others, Anderson seemed to have let down the civil rights cause when she supported the U.S. government’s Cold War agenda. However, there is evidence that Anderson eventually used the status and influence she gained through her tours on behalf of the United States to wield considerable power in the battle against racial inequality.

Because earlier Anderson had been a good USIA “ambassador,” she was sent as a U.S. delegate in 1958 to a UN meeting that was relatively controversial because it dealt with issues of decolonization. The United States opposed the proposal that the colony of British Cameroon should be joined with the British colony of Nigeria to form the new independent nation of Nigeria, and Anderson reported the government’s position. After many people accused her of betraying the cause and said she should work for both African and African American empowerment, Anderson told the press that the U.S. government’s position did not necessarily reflect her own opinion. This statement was broadcast worldwide, and the next day the U.S. government position changed. Subsequently, Anderson became more outspoken against racial inequities in the United States.

Because of her public stature, Anderson was able to challenge the racial status quo and bring about change. Other African Americans were also able to use the stature they gained by touring the world in support of the U.S. Cold War agenda to give weight to their efforts for the equitable treatment of all peoples.

When President John F. Kennedy entered office in 1961, he promised progress in civil rights, but he did not use White House pressure to support the movement until black lead-ers threatened to embarrass his administration in the eyes of the world with the massive March on Washington in August 1963. After lobbying behind the scenes to prevent the march, the Kennedy administration voiced public support for it at the last minute, understanding the unfavorable image it would create for itself by failing to do so. As civil rights activists continued to demonstrate, federal officials were increasingly obligated to respond favorably to their demands to avoid embarrassment abroad. The culmination of the alliance between civil rights activists and Cold Warriors came when President Lyndon Baines Johnson successfully engineered the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, formally guaranteeing political and civil rights for African Americans and other traditionally oppressed groups.

While some historians argue that the Cold War limited the civil rights movement, that story is incomplete. The civil rights movement received legal and political support from politicians and government agency personnel who sought to avoid negative international publicity regarding domestic human rights concerns. Furthermore, the State Department gave an international podium to many civil rights activists. While they faced considerable pressure to make their statements conform to government policy, they were sometimes able to use their positions to influence government support for the equitable treatment of African Americans. Overall, Cold War concerns forced the U.S. government to become more pro-active toward African American empowerment and issues of civil rights.

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**Viewpoint:**

No. Anti-Communism harmed civil rights groups more than it helped them, forcing these organizations to keep a narrow focus on desegregation while distancing themselves from African American leaders with leftist sympathies.

World War II was a watershed in African American history. During the war black people fought segregation at defense plants, lunch
counters, soda fountains, and the voting booth. After the war, the alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union ended, and they became rival powers competing for political, economic, and ideological hegemony in Europe and for allies among the European colonies of Africa and Asia, which were clamoring for national independence. This Cold War generated an American national-security state designed to contain the spread of Soviet communism abroad, and it spawned a crusade against suspected internal communist subversives. Anti-Communism gave the burgeoning civil rights movement leverage for advancing its agenda. The United States was asserting its new role as the bulwark against Soviet “totalitarianism,” making the White House and the State Department sensitive to world opinion. Segregation threatened the American image as the guardian of freedom and democracy against communism. Among other things, the need to project this image deepened divisions between conservative Southern Democrats, who wanted to maintain the racial status quo, and the more liberal national Democratic Party, which was dependent on Southern support but was beginning to understand the negative impact of racial discrimination on the image of the United States among newly independent nations.

On balance, however, anti-Communism hampered the early civil rights movement far more than facilitating it. Anti-Communism marginalized the African American intellectuals, artists, journalists, politicians, and labor leaders with the most expansive political agendas. It also delayed the emergence of the civil rights movement for almost a decade, and it forced the movement to restrict its goals to strictly domestic, integrationist concerns. Furthermore, anti-Communism gave segregationists a potent language with which to assail the movement and provided justification for an extensive program by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to destroy the civil rights movement and its leadership.

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, a broad left-liberal black coalition sought to redefine the rights of Asians and the African diaspora within an internationalist framework. Since the 1930s, many black activists had been aligned, with differing degrees of closeness, with the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) and its Popular Front against fascism. Through the Council on African Affairs (CAA), a fund-raising entity and information clearinghouse, these activists linked the nascent liberation movements abroad to struggles against American racial oppression. Pre-eminent members of the CAA, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Shirley Graham, Paul Robeson, and W. Alpheaus Hunton viewed the Atlantic Charter and United Nations (UN) as vehicles for securing domestic civil and economic freedoms, colonial representation in international bodies, and ultimately African and Asian independence from European colonial powers. Articulating Pan-Africanist politics, the CAA opposed apartheid in South Africa and that government’s attempt to annex South-West Africa. In 1945 Du Bois was centrally involved in convening the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester, England; he also organized a mass petition against the United States for denying human rights to African Americans. Meanwhile, the Civil Rights Congress (CRC), formed in 1946, united the strategies of legal action and mass mobilization in a campaign for civil liberties, and organized against the state executions of black Southerners, many of whom were accused of murdering or raping whites. Involving race, gender, and sex, these cases were often avoided by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Like the CAA and Du Bois, the CRC used international means to expose U.S. racism. Most notably, it published and delivered before the UN a petition, We Charge Genocide (1951), describing the crimes against humanity committed by the United States against black people.

The CAA and the CRC grew increasingly critical of U.S. foreign policy, particularly the American willingness to accept the continuation of colonialism. Yet, the growing preoccupation with stopping the spread of communism abroad and with safeguarding “internal security” was already crystallizing a new political landscape. In the hysteria created by U.S. labor unrest, the spread of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, the communist revolution in China, the Korean War, and espionage trials of alleged communists, any substantive criticisms of U.S. foreign and domestic policy were viewed as tantamount to disloyalty and sabotage. Burdened with lawsuits filed by the U.S. Attorney General’s Subversive Activities Control Board, the CAA folded in 1955. A similar fate befell the CRC around 1956. The National Negro Labor Council (NNLC), committed to a program of black civil rights, fair union representation, and greater job opportunities, also fell victim to the federal government’s anti-Communism. Formed in 1951 by labor radicals and militant organizers, the NNLC was defunct within five years. Clearly, Communists were involved in the leadership of the CAA, CRC, and NNLC, as well as in the rank and file. Yet, these organizations were not simply “front groups” steered by the party. Many people, convinced of the need to reform society, worked with Communists at some point during the Depression and the war. Whether subscribing to formal socialist doctrines, inde-
While the Kennedy and Johnson administrations expressed support for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s integrationist agenda, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was investigating the civil rights leader. In an 8 January 1964 memorandum to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, William Sullivan, assistant director of the FBI Domestic Intelligence Division, wrote:

PENDENT radical views, social-gospel thinking, or secular-progressive liberalism, participants in these political communities raised pertinent questions about civil liberties, fair employment, racial and union democracy, human rights, colonial emancipation, and international peace.

Black Cold War liberals were complicit in suppressing these dissident voices. Seeking safety in the developing postwar consensus, many black newspapers dropped militantly left-wing columnists and correspondents. Black college administrators fired faculty who were called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HCUA) for questioning about their progressive activities. NAACP executive secretary Walter White and assistant secretary Roy Wilkins distanced their association from black activists with progressive or radical leanings. The board ousted Du Bois as special research director in 1948, and White prohibited NAACP members from supporting Henry Wallace's 1948 Progressive Party presidential campaign against Democratic incumbent Harry S. Truman. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), founded on a platform of "nonviolent goodwill action," passed a resolution in 1948 forbidding cooperation with so-called communist-controlled groups. When baseball player Jackie Robinson, an icon of integration, denounced Robeson before HCUA, he sent the powerful message that racial progress could occur only through African Americans' accommodation to Cold War imperatives. In this environment, activists such as Hunton, Du Bois, and Robeson were imprisoned, harassed, and denied the right of travel, many of them driven to the sidelines of black political life.

In exchange for the loyalty of the "mainstream" black leadership, the Truman administration supported reforms such as the desegregation of the armed forces, the banning of discrimination in federal employment, and the establishment of the President's Committee on Civil Rights. Even Truman's moderate civil rights platform was enough to spark the defection of the Southern Democratic wing, leading to the formation of the States Rights Party (or "Dixiecrats"). Domestic Cold War repression had a general chilling effect on American political culture at large, casting suspicion on all efforts at changing the status quo. Demagogic politicians such as Senator Theodore Bilbo (D-Miss.), Congressman John Rankin (D-Miss.), and Senator Herman Talmadge (D-Ga.) equated black civil rights and communism, charging that the goal of racial integration was part of a vast communist conspiracy. The most avid red-baiters were often the most ardent segregationists, lending anti-Communism a sharply racist edge.

Despite their acquiescence to Cold War realities, both CORE and the NAACP had to defend themselves against charges of Soviet domination. Alongside Du Bois's writings, librarians banned the NAACP's publication, The Crisis, which Du Bois had edited from 1910 to 1934. Federal authorities lobbied to include the NAACP among groups covered by the Communist Control Act, the same law used to destroy the CAA and CRC. In the South, NAACP members faced economic reprisals and vigilante terror, particularly after the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954) Supreme Court ruling, which ordered the desegregation of public schools. The Florida legislature appropriated funds to investigate communist involvement in the NAACP, while South Carolina enacted a law prohibiting teachers from belonging to the organization. Investigative committees in Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Georgia, Tennessee, and Arkansas all attempted to stifle the NAACP through court injunctions and legislation. Between 1956 and 1958 the NAACP was outlawed altogether in Alabama. Withering under this assault, the national NAACP office severely curtailed the activities of its branches, which bred a reluctance to engage in local struggles around job discrimi-
nation and other issues. Gradual legal action became the order of the day. Thus, while the wartime militancy had readied black America for a mass "democratic upsurge" in 1945, the ensuing Cold War climate put an end to many initiatives on behalf of racial democracy and arrested the development of a mass movement for nearly ten years.

Paradoxically, the suppression of the NAACP in Alabama created the space for community mobilizations, such as the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955. Yet, the Montgomery Improvement Association and other such groups blossomed in spite of anti-Communism, not because of it. While the boycott catapulted the young Martin Luther King Jr. into the national spotlight and led the way to a mass-based civil rights movement, anti-Communism severely narrowed the range of acceptable demands and ideological expressions. Although black nationalist and radical trends existed in the 1950s, they were largely consigned to the fringes because the political atmosphere favored liberal strategies. The movement therefore unfolded within an orthodox Cold War framework that conceded legitimacy to the prerogatives of American foreign policy. (When, in the late 1960s, moderate civil rights leaders such as King belatedly voiced opposition to the war in Vietnam, critics were outraged precisely because he violated the unspoken maxim that international affairs were off limits to black activists.) Early on, prominent civil rights leaders did not directly challenge the U.S. claim to be the champion of democracy. Instead they stressed how segregation provided fodder for Soviet propaganda. Divorced from the Pan-African radicalism and anticolonialism of activists such as Du Bois or Robeson, major organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) focused mainly on a liberal program of domestic reforms. While issues of economic justice were deeply embedded in this agenda for desegregation and black voting rights, civil rights protesters were compelled, initially at least, to de-emphasize them.

Apologists for segregation used "communist subversion" as a handy shibboleth to attack basic democratic demands for political inclusion. As King's stature grew nationally and globally, opponents attempted to discredit him by claiming he was a puppet of communist advisers. Several small movement-support organizations—the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Southern Conference Educational Fund, and Highlander Folk School in Tennessee—were all accused of taking part in a planned "communist infiltration" of the civil rights movement. When youthful organizers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) launched voter-registration projects throughout the South, sheriffs, governors, and White Citizens Council stalwarts derided them as "outside agitators." Double-edged rhetoric not only dismissed them as interlopers but also labeled them as participants of lurid, communist-inspired plots. When demonstrators were attacked by police or mobs, civil rights opponents often blamed the violence on "communist instigators." In the midst of CORE's 1963-1964 boycott of the Jefferson Bank in St. Louis, Missouri, the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, an active foe of black civil rights, published a ten-part series on the organization's alleged communist ties. The articles were clearly designed to undermine public support for the boycott. Senator James Eastland (D-Miss.), chairman of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, also pointed to the "red" backgrounds of participants in civil rights demonstrations in St. Louis, New York City, Cleveland, and San Francisco, as well as in the South. In making such claims, detractors attempted to draw attention from the grievances articulated by the civil rights movement by shifting the focus to the disrepute of those involved.

These interwoven strategies of race baiting and red-baiting mirrored FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's campaign to immobilize the movement, sanctioned under the guise of containing domestic threats to American security. Since his earliest days in the General Intelligence Division of the U.S. Justice Department during World War I, Hoover had associated "The Negro Question" with insurrection. American presidents since Woodrow Wilson had accepted Hoover's elastic definition of "subversion," and the Truman administration had allowed him to develop the criteria for the federal loyalty tests instituted in the late 1940s. From the beginning of the Cold War, the FBI had been part of the matrix of repression that also included congressional hearings, federal laws, and executive orders by Presidents Truman and Eisenhower. After legal precedents reined in the worst excesses of red hunting, the FBI embarked on covert counterintelligence operations against civil rights groups, employing many of the methods used against the communist "menace." The bureau began compiling a dossier on King in the late 1950s. In the aftermath of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, William Sullivan, assistant director of the FBI Domestic Intelligence Division, wrote an influential report that revealed FBI anxieties about the growing momentum of the civil rights movement and its connection to amorphous communist conspiracies. Discussing King, Sullivan declared: "We must mark him now, if we have not before, as the most dangerous Negro in the future of this Nation from the
standpoint of communism, the Negro, and national security...."

With authorization from the Justice Department, surveillance of King and the SCLC was drastically expanded. Agents could never substantiate claims of communist "infiltration," but Hoover nonetheless made many attempts to smear King's reputation. Unenthusiastic about protecting civil rights workers or investigating their beatings and murders, FBI agents monitored the SNCC voter-registration drives in 1963–1964 in search of communist sympathizers. The agency shaped opinion in the White House and on Capitol Hill, manipulating media coverage of the movement through false and distorted information fed to "cooperative media," including the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, the Birmingham News, the Long Island Star-Journal, and the New Orleans Times-Picayune. By 1967 these actions had paved the way for expanded counterintelligence measures aimed to "disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize" a wide range of civil rights and black nationalist organizations through paid provocateurs, wiretaps, office raids, and "dirty tricks." Working with local law enforcement and U.S. Army intelligence, the FBI initiated a community surveillance and informant program to monitor the sentiments and activities of urban black youth.

Anti-Communism did help to create political conditions for some civil rights successes in pressuring the federal government to end its indifference to legal racism. Yet, the impetus for change came not from Congress, the Oval Office, or even the Supreme Court, but rather from African Americans themselves. As they organized, "national security" concerns were invoked as a means of subverting their freedoms of speech, assembly, and petition, while protecting institutionalized inequality. Consequently, anti-Communism provided a vehicle for abusing and isolating many committed black progressives who had been involved in social-justice movements since the 1930s. While the Southern black struggle scored remarkable victories (notably through the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act), anti-Communism slowed its early development. Cold War politics also imposed boundaries on the movement's articulated goals and gave segregationists a ready-made weapon for mass resistance to these objectives. Accusations of communist control were used to justify the state-sponsored repression of early civil rights leaders, as well as the younger generation of black activists who came of age in the late 1960s.

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