Did the American Civil Rights movement encourage sympathy with communism?

**Viewpoint:** By focusing attention on Soviet totalitarianism and mistreatment of minorities, the Cold War compelled Americans to change their own position on race relations and advance a civil-rights agenda.

**Viewpoint:** The Cold War made apparent to many Americans the hypocrisy of their own nation.

Is it a coincidence that the American Civil Rights movement emerged just as the United States was getting involved in the Cold War? Probably not, as Jonathan Rosenberg argues in his essay. The Cold War, pitting American freedom against Soviet totalitarianism, made Americans look at themselves and see that all was not well in their own “house.” President Harry S Truman, who oversaw the Berlin Airlift, the Korean War, and the Marshall Plan, which were all aimed at combating Soviet aggression, also ended segregation in the American armed forces and appointed the President’s Committee on Civil Rights in 1946.

On the other hand, as Anthony Connors maintains, if the conflict pointed to the discrepancy between American ideals and American practices, not all Americans believed the United States was bound to reform. W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, came to believe that American racism was endemic to the American system. Rather than joining Martin Luther King Jr. and Thurgood Marshall in overturning segregation, Du Bois at this time publicly embraced Marxism, ran for the U.S. Senate on the Socialist Labor ticket, and then renounced his native land for exile in Ghana.

Du Bois’s exile has been something of a puzzle and at the time caused many, black and white, to reevaluate Du Bois’s intellectual position. Nevertheless, Du Bois, a powerful critic of society, must also cause us to reevaluate our own notions of how history happens and how men and women analyze and interpret the events they experience. Why did the Cold War and the Civil Rights movement begin almost simultaneously? Was there a relationship between the two? Truman and Du Bois certainly thought so, but they differed on what was the definition of that relationship. The difference forms one of the intellectual puzzles of history. We must remember that though the relationship is a puzzle today, at the time of Du Bois’s exile it seemed to have grave consequences.
Viewpoint: By focusing attention on Soviet totalitarianism and mistreatment of minorities, the Cold War compelled Americans to change their own position on race relations and advance a civil-rights agenda.

Few would question the proposition that the post-1945 struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union had a transformative effect on international relations. Before it ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Cold War had touched the lives of people on every continent, consumed vast wealth, and contributed to the development and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction that still plague the security of nations. Lest one forget, the East-West conflict was no mere “cold war,” for in that it never became a shooting war between the superpowers, it did contribute to the course of hot wars throughout the developing world—struggles responsible for the deaths of countless soldiers and civilians. It seems difficult, then, to overestimate the profound implications the Cold War has had on the lives of peoples and nations in the post–World War II era.

However, the East-West confrontation did more than shape world politics; it also influenced domestic life in the United States, leaving few aspects of society unaffected. Perhaps the most obvious effect was the emergence of the “national security state.” Defense expenditures increased dramatically as a proportion of government spending, the buildup of complex systems of nuclear and conventional weapons, and governmental support for the technologies and industries that attended the development of these novel instruments of war, became a top priority. The fundamental aim of this massive increase in military spending was to deter war with the Soviet Union, which was itself developing a highly destructive arsenals, and to enable the West to prevail in the event of a clash between superpowers.

One consequence of the East-West conflict, then, was to increase the size of the U.S. government, as it became essential to plan and implement the military buildup that flowed inexorably from the global competition. Moreover, during the Cold War, American policymakers came to believe that developments in every corner of the world—from Korea to Guatemala, from Germany to the Horn of Africa—were vital to national security. Those charged with formulating U.S. foreign and defense policy saw international politics as a zero sum game, a notion that led the United States to commit vast resources to preserve its expanding security interests and to assume much of the burden for defending other nations from Soviet communism, which was seen as a threat to world freedom.

In addition to transforming American foreign and defense policies and causing an enlargement in government, the East-West conflict reconfigured domestic life in myriad ways that were far from clear at the time and that often remain obscure. The Cold War profoundly affected social, cultural, and political life in postwar America; it influenced what Americans read, what they saw at the movies and on television, how they worshiped and were educated, and where they lived and worked. It shaped the contours of family life, gender relations, and childhood and profoundly affected the trajectory of domestic politics. The Cold War also powerfully influenced the most significant social question of the postwar era—the struggle for racial justice—supplying the Civil Rights movement with heightened energy and, many believed, greater legitimacy.

Perhaps it is not surprising that a global conflict that many thought democracy and freedom against tyranny and oppression would have significance in the context of a domestic struggle, at the heart of which lay questions about democracy, freedom, tyranny, and oppression. One consequence of the Cold War—at a time when the United States had become the international guarantor of democracy—was that it compelled many Americans to question the legitimacy of Jim Crow, the system of legal racial oppression that scarred life in the South. In retrospect it seems obvious that America’s self-proclaimed role as world protector of freedom and democracy (whether either was actually threatened is arguable) would have collided with the reality of a system of state-sanctioned racial persecution that denied the blessings of freedom and democracy to one in ten of its citizens. Thus, the Cold War called into question the validity of the American creed.

For those leading the crusade for racial justice, the Cold War served as a perfect vehicle with which to advance their domestic aims. From the late 1940s on, as the American government began to assume responsibility for defending the world from the perceived threat of Soviet communism, civil-rights leaders pointed time and again to the inconsistency between the country’s mission abroad and the persistence of segregation at home. Reference to this discrepancy, which civil-rights leaders often described as rank hypocrisy, became a central element in the rhetoric of the Civil Rights movement.

Further strengthening the view that Jim Crow and the Cold War were uneasy partners was a transformative international development, the anti-imperial struggles waged around the world. Race-reform leaders asserted repeatedly that if the United States wished to command the loyalty of peoples of color in the developing world—and they
claimed this to be vital during the Cold War—it was necessary to end domestic racial persecution. In the words of one black leader, the Reverend James H. Robinson, the creation of a real democracy in the United States would make it possible to gain the support of colonial peoples and "to win this great mass to our way and use their whole weight on the scales against communism."

In a variety of places—at conferences and meetings, in newspapers and magazines, on the radio, and in churches—those who fought for racial justice asserted relentlessly that Jim Crow was incompatible with America's international role. Leading figures in the Civil Rights movement made this point repeatedly, and the words, for example, of Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the century's foremost race activists; A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; and Martin Luther King Jr., were unambiguous: effective world leadership demanded that the United States practice at home what it preached abroad. White declared in 1947 that this country had no business spending "dollars and lives" to demand democratic governments throughout the world when it had failed "completely to provide democracy in Mississippi."

Throughout the Cold War this view was articulated time and again by virtually every important civil-rights leader.

Those listening to civil-rights rhetoric in the Cold War years would have recognized that race leaders were determined to use America's posture in the East-West struggle to help advance the movement's aims. Beginning in the late 1940s, the reformers' unrelenting message—that Jim Crow would prove costly to the United States on the international scene—began to take hold. At the NAACP's annual conference in 1947, President Harry S Truman observed that the "support of desperate populations of battle-ravaged countries must be won... We must have them as allies." Linking the Cold War to civil rights, he declared, "Our case for democracy should be as strong as we can make it. It should rest on practical evidence that we have been able to put our own house in order." The president argued that the nation could "no longer afford the luxury of a leisurely attack upon prejudice and discrimination" and claimed it was up to the federal government to "show the way."

The chief executive established an organic connection between Cold War foreign-policy concerns and progress on civil rights. If Truman was the first president to make explicit this interrelationship, he
would not be the last. Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson, along with leading government officials, offered similar observations throughout the Cold War, averring in public comments, as well as in private conversations and correspondence, that the persistence of Jim Crow weakened America’s position in a dangerous world. Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson observed in 1946, “discrimination against minority groups in this country has an adverse effect upon our relations with other countries,” often making “it next to impossible to formulate a satisfactory answer to our critics” in other lands.

Not only presidents and policymakers advanced the idea that U.S. race relations was a liability in the East-West conflict; it was acknowledged in the legal arena that domestic racial oppression weakened the position of the United States on the world stage. The amicus curiae brief filed by the U.S. Department of Justice in the celebrated case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, in which the Supreme Court ruled in 1954 that the “separate but equal” doctrine in education was unconstitutional, argued that desegregation was in the national interest, in part because of foreign-policy concerns. The Justice Department noted that Brown was significant because the “existence of discrimination against minority groups . . . furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills, and raises doubts . . . as to the intensity of our devotion to the democratic faith.” Clearly, it was impossible to disentangle the challenge of domestic race relations from the Cold War.

In the wake of this landmark decision, newspapers in the United States and throughout the world declared that Brown had weakened the communist cause, and Channing Tobias, a civil rights activist, declared that the “propaganda value of this ruling for America and the free world in the . . . struggle against communism is beyond measure.” Even Eisenhower, hardly a supporter of the Civil Rights movement, declared that the case was enormously important to the “cause of freedom in the world.” The idea that progress on civil rights was inextricably connected to the struggle abroad was put forward explicitly in several other key civil rights cases, and civil rights leaders were largely responsible for pushing the idea that American world preeminence depended on the construction of a genuine democracy in the United States.

Progress in civil rights after 1945 flowed from a complex set of factors: economic and demographic changes, an extraordinarily effective group of black leaders, and a gradual but undeniable evolution in public attitudes that delegitimized institutionalized racial oppression. These are some of the elements that aided the process whereby Jim Crow would be dismantled in the South, a slow but steady transformation that by the mid 1960s enabled African Americans to participate more fully in the American democracy. In addition to these critical developments, America’s determination to fight communism around the world—a commitment that had broad appeal and a deep impact on postwar America—played a key role in helping the country realize that legal racial persecution and democratic government were incompatible.

The Cold War altered domestic politics and culture in the United States after 1945, and Americans saw the competition between capitalism and communism as a struggle between freedom and tyranny. As the global contest unfolded, it compelled Americans to consider more fully the domestic inequities and international implications of race relations in the United States, and it convinced presidents, policymakers, and average people that the fight against communism overseas made it imperative to create a genuine democracy at home. In so doing, the Cold War provided the Civil Rights movement with considerable energy and supplied it with a degree of momentum and legitimacy that it would not otherwise have had.

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**Viewpoint:**

The Cold War made apparent to many Americans the hypocrisy of their own nation.

In 1961 African American leader and NAACP founder W. E. B. Du Bois applied for membership in the Communist Party of the United States of America (CP-USA) and soon thereafter became a citizen of the newly independent, Marxist-oriented African nation of Ghana. Some critics attributed his decision to senility—he was, after all, ninety-three years old. Others considered it a meaningless gesture of defiance, more an expression of anger than of considered opinion. It was, however, an altogether logical decision, one that reflected a lifetime of frustration over intractable racism in America as well as a growing conviction that economic factors were at the root of racial inequality. Communism, with its theoretical emphasis on the economic welfare of all, held a powerful attraction for him. Beyond the abstract appeal, Du Bois’s own personal history—of harassment and discrimination in the United States and of respect and privilege behind the Iron Curtain—was a strong determinant in his decision.

Du Bois was the preeminent black intellectual in America in the first half of the twentieth century. The first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University (1895), he published more than two thousand essays, editorials, and articles, as
well as nineteen books. In 1903, in *The Souls of Black Folk*—still one of the most lyrical and powerful expressions on race relations in America—he announced that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line," and he spent the remaining sixty years of his life in an uncompromising effort to resolve that problem. While he occasionally enjoyed public esteem (*The Souls of Black Folk* was well received), his life was one of growing separation from the mainstream American way that he saw as continuing on a path that would never willingly allow social, political, and economic equality to African Americans. His increasingly global outlook, evidenced by his participation in several Pan-African and United Nations-sponsored congresses, convinced him that the problem of color was worldwide and directly related to Western imperialism and the exploitation of African and Asian peoples and resources. This internationalism is critical to understanding his attitude toward communism. He was attempting to resolve not just an American problem, but one that required a global solution.

For the most part, Du Bois was not an uncritical advocate of communism. In his application letter to CP-USA Chairman Gus Hall, he noted that he had once been a member of the Socialist Party but resigned after endorsing Democratic candidate Woodrow Wilson for President in 1912, and that he had castigated the CP-USA in the 1930s for its handling of the Scottsboro case, in which nine black youths were convicted of gangraping two white women. In particular, he disagreed with the Communists' dogmatic unwillingness to support desegregation because if desegregation were to succeed without the revolution of the working class, it would contradict communist theory. As late as 1940 he claimed, "I was not and am not a communist. I do not believe in the dogma of inevitable revolution to right economic wrong." Communism, though, appeared to be the only viable alternative to capitalism. Furthermore, the Soviets proclaimed economic equality as their highest goal and in some sense fostered a real cross-racial society (although hidden under the cloak of communist brotherhood—a bond that later dissolved in the breakup of the Soviet Union). In comparison, Du Bois saw little evidence of economic and social progress for blacks in the United States. His personal treatment in communist countries, as well as the suspicion and harassment of his own government, makes the logic of his communism intelligible.

One of the paradoxes of Du Bois's support for Soviet communism was his elitism, a haughty attitude that earned him little affection among black leaders. Early in his career Du Bois had developed the theory of the Talented Tenth, an elite corps of black intellectuals who would lift the masses—their "duller brethren," as he put it—to higher ground. No nation, Du Bois claimed, had ever become civi-
Yet, how could he disregard such harsh reality? Du Bois simply needed to believe in a viable alternative to capitalism. It was primarily the theory of communism—the abstraction—that he believed in, and in doing so he found himself forced to ignore negative aspects in the only country seemingly making economic and social strides without capitalism. The Russians were, in fact, making progress, although much of it proved to be a sham. *Sputnik I*—the Russian satellite launched in 1957—delighted Du Bois because “it taught the United States the superiority of Communist thought and calculation.” In retrospect, communist superiority was hardly the case, although fear of it did frighten the United States into renewed effort in the space program. Du Bois truly believed that Russia was not the villain portrayed in the Western press. His own experiences demonstrated to him that communist societies were open, and he naively believed his warm reception in Russia and China was representative of how communist states really operated. “Few police are in evidence,” he wrote of Moscow in the late 1950s. If it ever occurred to him that his treatment was related to his anti-Americanism, he never acknowledged it.

Fundamentally, Du Bois considered America’s obsessive focus on Russia beside the point. The real issue of inequality was being obscured by the rhetoric of the Cold War. “It is not Russia that threatens the United States so much as Mississippi,” he wrote in 1947. A few years later he articulated this theme more broadly:

If tomorrow Russia disappeared from the face of the earth, the basic problem facing the modern world would remain: and that is, why is it, with the earth’s abundance and our mastery of natural forces, and miraculous technique; with our commerce belting the earth, and goods and services pouring from our stores, factories, ships and warehouses—why is it that nevertheless, most human beings are starving to death, dying of preventable diseases and too ignorant to know what is the matter, while a small minority are so rich that they cannot spend their income?

The real issue was not Russia but the inherent problem of wealth, distribution, and indifference in a capitalist-dominated world. By actively promoting programs of economic reform on a massive scale, Soviet communism appeared to have loftier aims than democratic capitalism.

Du Bois was also convinced that democracy was simply not working in America. Most blacks were denied the ballot and most whites did not bother to vote; McCarthyism had done irreparable damage to free speech; the economic and social innovations of the New Deal had been largely reversed; and Cold War militarism threatened the world. He was embittered and discouraged by his harassment by the State Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). He had been denied permission to travel abroad for much of the 1950s and was arrested in 1951 for distributing the “Stockholm Appeal,” an international petition to abolish the atomic bomb. Although this appeal collected 2.5 million signatures in the United States, and similar antinuclear appeals were circulated by the Red Cross and the Quakers, the State Department considered it a Soviet propaganda ploy. Du Bois retorted that, “Today in this country it is becoming
standard reaction to call anything 'communist' and therefore subversive and unpatriotic, which anybody for any reason dislikes." The case against Du Bois for failing to register as an “agent of a foreign principal” was thrown out of court. Yet, even with his innocence established, Du Bois was ignored or consciously avoided: “all that dammed-up wisdom and experience had no outlet into the mainstream or American life.” The effect was to alienate him further from America and to reinforce his commitment to a more hopeful alternative.

Finally, did Du Bois’s adoption of communism either help or hinder the Civil Rights movement in America? According to Taylor Branch, in Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963 (1988), the FBI reacted indifferently to Du Bois’ joining the CP-USA because they no longer viewed him as important. Martin Luther King Jr. was wary because he realized his program could be destroyed by association with the fractured Communist Party, but King never forgot that they had preached and practiced racial equality, and he clearly had Du Bois in mind in late 1961 when he warned: “There can be no doubt that if the problem of racial discrimination is not solved in the not too distant future, some Negroes, out of frustration, discontent, and despair, will turn to some other ideology.” A few years later King could be more open about Du Bois’s legacy. In a speech delivered at Carnegie Hall on 23 February 1968, the one hundredth anniversary of Du Bois’s birth, King said:

We cannot talk of Dr. Du Bois without recognizing that he was a radical all of his life. Some people would like to ignore the fact that he was a Communist in his later years . . . it is time to cease muting the fact that Dr. Du Bois was a genius and chose to be a Communist. Our irrational, obsessive anti-communism has led us into too many quagmires to be retained as if it were a mode of scientific thinking.

Neither senility nor thoughtless anger, Du Bois’s choice of communism was a courageous stand for social and economic justice made in the face of McCarthyism—a contrary view that is remarkable for its incisive assessment of racism in America, its understanding of the fundamental role of economics in race relations, and its boldness in suggesting an alternative vision during a period of controlled opinion. What led Du Bois to communism was the logic of his entire life. “I believe that all men, black and brown and white, are brothers,” he wrote in 1920, “varying through Time and Opportunity, in form and gift and feature, but differing in no essential particular, and alike in soul and the possibility of infinite development.” This belief was the credo from which he never retreated. But when it became obvious to him that democratic capitalism was not going to fulfill his dream of racial equality, he turned his attention to the only major alternative. He may have been a poor prophet—communism obviously did not triumph—yet, his assessment of what needed to be fixed provided much of the foundation of the Civil Rights movement. King is revered partly because he took another path—working nonviolently within the democratic system. Our appreciation for the accomplishments of Du Bois should be no less because he chose the other political system.

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