

International Pressure and the U.S. Government's Response to Little Rock

AZZA SALAMA LAYTON

SEGREGATION RECEIVED MORE INTERNATIONAL CRITICISM than any other area of U.S. race relations in the post-World War II period. The Truman and Eisenhower administrations' racial reforms were a response not only to an increasingly effective civil rights movement in the U.S. South but also to international politics. Segregation hindered appeals to potential allies in competition with the Soviet bloc. So in its famous 1947 report President Truman's committee on civil rights concluded:

Our position in the postwar world is so vital to the future that our smallest actions have far-reaching effects [T]he treatment which our Negroes receive is taken as a reflection of our attitudes toward all dark-skinned peoples We cannot escape the fact that our civil rights record has been an issue in world politics *The United States is not so strong, the final triumph of the democratic ideal is not so inevitable that we can ignore what the world thinks of us or our record.*¹

Truman's secretary of state, Dean Acheson, cared little about black rights *per se*, but he was acutely conscious of the same connection.

¹*To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1947), 146–148. Mary L. Dudziak explores the link between civil rights policy and foreign policy in the Truman years in “Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative,” *Stanford Law Review* 41 (November 1988): 61–120.

Azza Salama Layton teaches political science at DePaul University. She is author of *International Politics and Civil Rights Policies in the United States, 1941-1960* (2000). This article originally appeared in the autumn 1997 issue of this journal.

“School segregation has been singled out for hostile foreign comment in the United Nations and elsewhere,” he warned the attorney general in 1952.² The State Department used particularly strong language in its *amicus* brief for the *Brown* case, argued in December 1952.

During the past six years, the damage to our foreign relations attributable to [race discrimination] has become progressively greater. The United States is under constant attack in the foreign press, over the foreign radio, and in such international bodies as the United Nations [T]he undeniable existence of racial discrimination gives unfriendly governments the most effective kind of ammunition for their propaganda warfare [T]he view is expressed that the United States is hypocritical in claiming to be the champion of democracy while permitting practices of racial discrimination here in this country Other peoples cannot understand how [school segregation] can exist in a country which professes to be a staunch supporter of freedom, justice, and democracy [R]acial discrimination remains a source of embarrassment to this government in the day-to-day conduct of its foreign relations [I]t jeopardizes the effective maintenance of our moral leadership of the free and democratic nations of the world.³

The president’s statements also bear the imprint of international pressure. As historian Richard Dalfiume notes, “just about every speech . . . [Harry Truman] made on the civil rights issue . . . always brings up this point: The rest of the world is watching us. We must put our own house in order.” The Truman administration’s efforts to desegregate the armed forces and commit the Democratic party to black rights in 1948 must in part be understood as serving Cold War motives.⁴

The Eisenhower administration moved reluctantly in its first term. But in the second term, the 1955 murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, widely publicized discriminatory sentences by southern state courts, the 1955–1956 Montgomery bus boycott, and, most dramatically, southern de-

²Secretary of State Dean Acheson to Attorney General James P. McGranery, December 2, 1952, Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD [hereinafter RG 59].

³Brief for the United States as *Amicus Curiae*, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 374 US 483 (1954), 6.

⁴Donald R. McCoy, Richard T. Ruetten, and J. R. Fuchs, ed., *Conference of Scholars on the Truman Administration and Civil Rights, April 5–6, 1968* (Independence, MO: Harry S. Truman Library Institute for National and International Affairs, 1968), 21.

fiance of federal school desegregation orders all generated negative international publicity.⁵ At the Bandung Conference of 1955, representatives from Africa and Asia denounced western racism. During the Hungarian crisis of 1956, when the U.S. delegation to the United Nations pushed for sanctions against the Soviet Union, several foreign governments responded that the American government violated the civil and human rights of its own colored citizens.⁶ A similar response greeted U.S. efforts during the Berlin crisis of 1948–1949. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles even suggested at one point that the U.S. government's refusal to take a firm stand against South Africa's apartheid policy grew out of a fear of being charged with hypocrisy.⁷

While the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown* decision helped improve America's image abroad, defiance of the decision attracted world-wide attention and resulted in a new round of criticism. State legislatures all over the South, often under pressure from local White Citizens' Councils, passed laws evading or thwarting implementation of the decision. This massive resistance movement culminated in the showdown at Little Rock in 1957–1958.

The Little Rock battle attracted more international attention than any previous civil rights battle, and international pressure led the Eisenhower administration, particularly the State Department, to conclude, as the Truman administration had done before, that civil rights at home had crucial international significance for the United States as a world power. Largely for that reason, the Eisenhower administration, aided by the leaders of both

⁵Of all the unjust court rulings against African Americans, the Jimmy Wilson case received the most overseas publicity. In 1958, an Alabama court sentenced Wilson to death for stealing \$1.95 from a white woman. Appeals on his behalf came from the six continents. Leaders such as Prime Minister Nkrumah of Ghana contacted Eisenhower. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told Alabama governor James Folsom that U.S. diplomatic missions around the world had reported widespread anger over the Wilson sentence. The governor, who said he received 1,000 letters daily, mostly from abroad, on the issue, commuted Wilson's sentence. There are several folders in the State Department records on the Jimmy Wilson case. See, for example, Dulles to Folsom, telegram, September 4, 1958 and Folsom to Dulles, September 5, 1958, RG 59.

⁶In the wake of Eisenhower's intervention in Little Rock, Sen. Herman Talmadge, a Georgia Democrat, played on the fears of anti-communists: "We still mourn the destruction of the sovereignty of Hungary by Russian tanks and troops in the streets of Budapest. We are now threatened with the spectacle of the President of the United States using tanks and troops in the streets of Little Rock to destroy the sovereignty of the state of Arkansas;" *U.S. News and World Report*, October 4, 1957.

⁷John Foster Dulles told Paul Robeson in 1946 that the reason the United States could not take a stronger stand against South Africa is that he did not "feel that the United States, in view of its own record, was justified in adopting a holier-than-thou attitude;" Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 154.

parties in Congress, began to take steps toward what would become known as the civil rights revolution of the 1960s.

The Autherine Lucy case of 1956 was an important prelude to Little Rock. Following the *Brown* decision, Lucy had registered to attend the University of Alabama, which provoked violent outbursts and marked the first clash between federal and state law enforcement agencies over the issue of school segregation. It was also the first school segregation case to become an international event. According to an opinion survey conducted by the United States Information Agency (USIA) in western Europe, "the Autherine Lucy case qualifies as not less than an international *cause célèbre* with from a quarter to a third in Western Europe alluding more or less specifically to the incident as a basis of recent unfavorable impressions of the treatment of Negroes in the U.S." The USIA report concluded that the positive effect of the *Brown* decision was wearing off, and America's prestige was suffering because of Autherine Lucy and similar incidents. The State Department emphasized that "the opinions of the more influential elite were no less adverse than the opinions of the rest of the population in every country surveyed."⁸ A USIA official confirmed that attempts to publicize positive racial stories were being overshadowed by the public exposure of racial discrimination, lamenting "if it were not for our racial problems, we would be way ahead of the game by now. As it is, it seems we are just able to hold our own."⁹

Following the Autherine Lucy affair, international outrage over school segregation in the United States subsided for a while. But in September 1957, Little Rock brought a full-scale international outburst over racial conditions in the U.S.

President Eisenhower was at first reluctant to enforce desegregation. He had opposed desegregation of the armed forces in 1948, made his respect for states' rights clear, and refused to endorse the *Brown* decision.¹⁰ In 1956, he declared that achieving equality should be handled at the local

⁸"Opinion about U.S. Treatment of Negroes," report 38, July 24, 1956, Office of Research, Public Opinion Barometer Reports, 1955–1956, Records of the United States Information Agency, Record Group 306, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD [hereinafter RG 306].

⁹*New York Times*, April 29, 1956.

¹⁰In his memoir, Chief Justice Earl Warren recalled a talk with Eisenhower: "The President . . . took me by the arm and, as we walked along, speaking of the Southern states in the segregation cases, he said, 'These are not bad people. All they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit in school alongside some big overgrown Negroes.' Shortly thereafter, the *Brown* case was decided, and with it went our cordial relations;" Earl Warren, *Memoirs of Earl Warren* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 291.

and state levels, because racial issues were “matters of the heart not of legislation.” After Arkansas governor Orval Faubus defied the court desegregation order and sent National Guard troops to bar black students from Central High School, Eisenhower waited twenty days before sending federal troops to enforce the order.¹¹

The timing of this federal-state showdown was unfortunate. On August 29, 1957, Congress had passed the first civil rights legislation since Reconstruction.¹² President Eisenhower signed the bill on September 9. But the positive effect of the 1957 Civil Rights Act was lost on international audiences as the world watched mobs defy the federal troops and attack black students.

Most criticism came from Europe and Africa, but Asia, the Middle East, South America, Canada, and Australia contributed their share.¹³ Indonesian citizens sent an open letter, published in the newspaper *Suluh Indonesia*, to the American ambassador and American citizens in Indonesia expressing “disgust” over Little Rock. The letter asked how Americans hoped to convince the Asian people of their belief in democracy “as long as there is still ill-treatment of Negroes such as happened again in Little Rock.” It said that photographs of Little Rock speak louder than the U.S. government’s words and suggested that white southerners should go to Asia to learn something about tolerance. The U.S. embassy confirmed to the State Department that the writers of the letter were not communists.¹⁴

Many Libyans bitterly criticized the United States for calling itself the “mother of liberty and democracy while permitting sixteen million African Americans to be smashed under the soles of the white and live a life of humiliation.” A newspaper editorial in Tripoli asked Americans why Libyans should believe U.S. propaganda when they know the “tragedies” that are taking place.¹⁵

Many Brazilians denounced “so-called” American democracy. The American consul general in São Paulo told the State Department that Little Rock made the favorable side of Negro progress hard to present and that

¹¹A day after the crisis broke out, Eisenhower stated that he did not intend to propose federal intervention in southern school disputes.

¹²The act empowered the federal government to seek court injunctions against obstruction or deprivation of voting rights, among other things.

¹³Little Rock occupied front-page space “usually reserved for major domestic news.” Dispatch 151, American Embassy, Canberra, Australia, to Department of State, October 1, 1957, RG 59.

¹⁴Dispatch 188, American Embassy, Djakarta, Indonesia; USIA to Department of State, October 7, 1957, RG 59.

¹⁵Dispatch 141, American Embassy, Tripoli, Libya, to Department of State, October 22, 1957, RG 59.

statements by Louis Armstrong and Eartha Kitt about Negro progress were not helpful.¹⁶ Argentines sent open letters to President Eisenhower and various U.S. student bodies. Some asked Eisenhower how he expected to convince Russia and the rest of the world of the advantages of democracy when he could not persuade his own subordinate, Governor Faubus, to obey the law.¹⁷

Critics in these and other countries, according to the State Department, included elite groups, university students, labor unions, professional syndicates, as well as average citizens (whose sentiments were revealed mostly through public opinion surveys). The volume and intensity of international criticism and the expressed concerns of U.S. officials over the implications of Little Rock were, according to a USIA report, "tremendous."

The Little Rock crisis captured the attention of "the very large majority of the population in major world capitals, invoking worldwide reaction," according to the USIA. Not only was international opinion about the treatment of African Americans in the United States "highly adverse, but more often than not the predominant feeling [was] that Negro-white relations have been worsening rather than improving over the past few years." The strongly prevailing feeling in cities across the world was that the current developments lowered the U.S.'s standing and prestige in the world. The USIA estimated that the "losses" to the U.S. were "of such a magnitude as to outweigh the effects of any recent factors which have contributed to increases in U.S. standing."¹⁸

The U.S. diplomatic mission in Denmark was "embarrassed over Danish reaction to Little Rock," stating that the Danish people were "appalled" by the violence. The American embassy in Copenhagen asked the State Department for help in responding to the public protest.¹⁹ The Swedish media were filled with derogatory news coverage of Little Rock. The liberal *Svenska Morgonbladet* strongly condemned "the United States, which went to war to fight Nazism and its racial persecu-

¹⁶Dispatch 111, American Consulate, São Paulo, Brazil, to Department of State, September 23, 1957, RG 59. In Ecuador, leading papers carried editorials of condemnation. Dispatch 256, American Embassy, Quito, Ecuador, to Department of State, October 19, 1957, RG 59.

¹⁷Letter to Eisenhower from Buenos Aires, September 16, 1957, RG 59; Federation of Free Students of Argentina to the students of the United States, October 19, 1957, RG 59.

¹⁸"Public Reactions to Little Rock in Major World Capitals," Special Report Series SR-8, October 29, 1957, RG 306.

¹⁹Telegram 31 from Copenhagen, Denmark, to secretary of state, September 5, 1957, RG 59.

tions.” The semi-official *Morgon tidningen* expressed concern over the damage to U.S. prestige abroad.²⁰

Swiss editorial and news coverage of Little Rock exceeded any previous publicity given to the United States, the U.S. embassy in Bern reported with alarm, saying the crisis was “inflicting grave damage on the moral position of the western world at a precise time when the U.N. General Assembly [is] debating the Hungarian tragedy.” Embassy officials concluded that Little Rock would “adversely affect American position and prestige in the mind of the average Swiss” and that the general reaction was “one of sober dismay over display of such violence.” The Swiss believed that Little Rock resulted in “incalculable harm” to the western position throughout the non-European world.²¹

According to the American consul general in Amsterdam, even the reserved Dutch, who usually did not publicize their feelings, spoke fervently about a state governor’s forcibly denying Negro children the right to a good education. Dutch citizens viewed events in Little Rock “as un[be]coming of a nation which continually affirms to the world its devotion to principles of liberty, equality, and equal opportunity for all citizens.” The Dutch also worried “lest what is happening in Arkansas weaken America, in her contest with Soviet communism over the uncommitted areas of Asia, Africa and the Middle East—areas where there is a real sensitivity to color discrimination. They believe that a weakening of America’s moral leadership in the world indirectly hurts America’s allies.” The consul general quoted the Communist organ *De waarheid* as saying, “Washington wishes to impose its will on the World but in Arkansas Eisenhower is powerless.”²² U.S. officials in Amsterdam quoted government officials and members of the press saying there was very little difference between “Hitlerian methods and the activities of American racists,” adding that this widespread opinion “hurts America in the eyes of the world.”²³

²⁰Dispatch 255, American Embassy, Stockholm, Sweden, to Department of State, September 10, 1956, RG 59.

²¹Telegram from Bern, Switzerland, to secretary of state, September 12, 1957, RG 59.

²²Dispatch 45, U.S. Consulate General, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, to secretary of state, September 12, 1956, RG 59. *De waarheid* continued, “Neither President Eisenhower nor Adlai Stevenson are [*sic*] endeavoring to halt American colonialism—the 7th Fleet’s operations against Syria and the actions of the Arkansas militia against the Negro are but different sides of the same policy.”

²³*Ibid.* A Dutch news editorial titled “Just the Same as the Actions of the Little Bastards of the Hitler Jugend . . . Shame on America” asked whether there was “no one in the USA who can tell these boys full of hate that some 150 years ago their ancestors fetched Negroes as slaves from Africa, making big money on those cargoes of human flesh. These people do great harm to American friendship. What dirty minds.”

The *Irish Times* accused the southern states of “put[ting] a new heart into [the] Negro-baiting KKK” and giving communist propagandists “considerable material for innumerable sermons to colored people everywhere.”²⁴

The news media in Luxembourg suggested that Little Rock did more harm to “America’s moral voice, especially among colored people of the world, than is befitting [of] the leader of the free world” and that Little Rock was “a happy find for the Communists as a means of overshadowing the condemnation of the Hungarian massacre and the new anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union.” One Luxembourg paper mocked Governor Faubus for comparing the occupation of Little Rock by federal troops to the German occupation of Paris and the Soviet attack on Budapest.²⁵ The official organ of the Luxembourg government declared that Little Rock had made a very bad international impression; the United States had been using dollars and weapons to stop the Russian offensive in the Middle East and elsewhere among colored peoples, and “Little Rock was like a cold shower.”²⁶

In Belgium, events in Little Rock drew greater interest than any other American domestic issue. Newspapers sharply questioned the sincerity of the high moral attitude adopted by the United States in international affairs. According to the American embassy in Brussels, the Belgian media seemed more concerned about the effects of the Arkansas events on American prestige in Asia and Africa than about their effects on Belgium.²⁷

The British often expressed cynicism about Americans’ lecturing them about having “an empire in India” and “a colony in Africa” while they had Little Rock. A British correspondent told American journalist Mike Wallace that “respectable people in Britain are saying they do not want to hear of Rev. Billy Graham coming to preach another crusade. He’d better stay home and Christianize the Americans. We have been preached at enough.”²⁸

Many Europeans sent letters and petitions directly to U.S. officials. Student bodies in Austria sent open letters to Faubus comparing his actions and attitude with those of “Hitler . . . whose regime persecuted men only because of their race.” The letters stated that black soldiers fought against

²⁴Dispatch 115, American Embassy, Dublin, Ireland, to Department of State, September 23, 1957, RG 59.

²⁵Dispatch 64, American Embassy, Luxembourg, to Department of State, September 24, 1957, RG 59.

²⁶Dispatch 69, American Embassy, Luxembourg, to Department of State, September 30, 1957, RG 59.

²⁷Dispatch 401, American Embassy, Brussels, to Department of State, October 8, 1957, RG 59.

²⁸*New York Post*, May 8, 1958.

fascism in World War II, yet the governor was denying their rights and that "events in Arkansas have most seriously shaken the belief of the world in the freedom mission of the US."²⁹ The International Federation of the Union of Education, "in the name of seven and a half million teachers," expressed its indignation to President Eisenhower over the events at Little Rock and demanded "respect for the rights of Negro children and the banning of all educational segregation."³⁰

Reaction to Little Rock was restrained in some European countries. In Germany, for example, people's awareness of their own vulnerability on the question of persecuting racial minorities seemed to restrain them, comparatively speaking, from blaming Americans and reporting on Arkansas with indignation. In addition, German political parties were competing for U.S. support, which seemed in those days to increase electoral popularity. Nevertheless, some German editorials stressed that the United States must guard its "world-wide reputation as benefactor and guardian of democracy" and avoid providing "grist for Soviet propaganda."³¹

In Africa, the Little Rock crisis provided an avenue for attacking American foreign policy and for criticizing the U.S., which was seeking leadership in Africa and the world on behalf of the "liberty of the individual."³² With the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union for an African sphere of influence at its height, Little Rock provided opportunities for political maneuvering for many African nations.

Political parties in Uganda, seeking to attract voters and to increase political clout, used Little Rock to compete for "the title of sole Uganda

²⁹Dispatch 462, American Embassy, Vienna, to State Department, November 5, 1958, RG 59.

³⁰Telegram 23 from American Embassy, Paris, to Department of State, September 26, 1957, RG 59.

³¹Telegram from Bonn, West Germany, to USIA, October 5, 1957, RG 59.

³²Dispatch 86, American Consulate, Dar es Salaam, to Department of State, September 28, 1957, RG 59. In African countries, coverage of Little Rock was somewhat limited. In Ghana, for instance, USIA and embassy officials reported "the media are not so good and have limited circulation; at the same time Ghanaians are preoccupied with domestic matters;" Dispatch 170, American Embassy, Accra, Ghana, to Department of State, November 15, 1957, RG 59. Nevertheless, upon his return from Ghana's independence celebrations, Vice President Richard M. Nixon told President Eisenhower that American officials could not talk about equality to the people of Ghana or Africa or Asia while "we practice inequality in the United States." Nixon recommended that "in the national interest . . . we must support the necessary steps which will assure orderly progress toward the elimination of discrimination in the United States;" *Department of State Bulletin*, April 22, 1957, p. 43. During Nixon's visit to Ghana, a story circulated that Nixon had asked a man in Ghana how it felt to be free. The man replied, "I would not know. I am from Alabama;" Hugh Tinker, *Race, Conflict, and the International Order: From Empire to United Nations* (New York: St. Martin's, 1977), 84.

champions of American Negro rights.”³³ The Uganda National Congress, one of the leading nationalist parties in Africa, sent Eisenhower a letter questioning his sincerity in light of Little Rock: “Before America can tackle any international problem, she should first and foremost show a clean record at home and we believe this is a prerequisite to American success abroad.” The Congress warned that American attempts to establish influence in emerging African nations “are incompatible with the present events in your country [We] will never cooperate with any country whose racial policy is short of equality.”³⁴ The United Congress, the main nationalist competitor of the Uganda National Congress party, sent a letter to Eisenhower expressing “great shock” that the Little Rock crisis could take place in a country that Uganda perceived as a leader in human rights. Such “obstruction of justice” was damaging to the prestige of America in Africa.³⁵

The Nigerian press attacked Governor Faubus “for giving the U.S. one more black-eye in the eyes of the world.” Asian and African U.N. delegates, one editorial observed, would be in jail if they happened to be in Little Rock. The editorial asked, “what moral right have Americans to condemn apartheid in South Africa while still maintaining it by law?” The Nigerian news media concluded that the United States could not be champion “of the colonial peoples while championing inequality in its backyard.”³⁶ U.S. embassy officials in Lagos characterized the Nigerian attack as comparatively tolerant but warned that “this tolerance will [not] continue in the presence of any future racial disturbances” in the United States.³⁷

In Mozambique, Little Rock became a symbol of black-white relations in the United States at a time when America was trying “to condemn colonialism or racial segregation elsewhere in the world,” the distressed American consul there noted. Embassy personnel in Lourenço Marques warned the State Department that “there seems to be no question but that our moral standing has been very considerably damaged” and that “any pretension of

³³Dispatch 31, American Consulate, Kampala, Uganda, to Department of State, October 4, 1957, RG 59.

³⁴Dispatch 37, American Consulate, Kampala, Uganda, to Department of State, October 3, 1957, RG 59.

³⁵Dispatch 31, American Consulate, Kampala, Uganda, to Department of State, October 4, 1957, RG 59.

³⁶Dispatch 115, American Consulate, Lagos, Nigeria, to Department of State, October 14, 1957, RG 59.

³⁷Dispatch 155, American Consulate, Lagos, Nigeria, to Department of State, November 29, 1957, RG 59.

an American to advise any European government on African affairs at this point would be hypocrisy."³⁸

An instructive sidelight to the criticism of American racism in Africa was the reaction of racial minorities in Africa. In Kenya, Little Rock received more attention than developments in Ghana, Malayan independence, or the United Nations debates on Hungary. Leaders of the Asian minority in Kenya expressed sympathy for black Americans, given that they themselves "would perhaps become victims of discrimination at the hands of Africans" when Kenya gained its independence.³⁹

The reaction to the Little Rock crisis by other racist regimes exemplifies the complexity of the Cold War pressures the United States government faced. Several countries used the event as a bargaining chip. The French in West Africa, for example, used the Little Rock case to show the world that, when it came to race, France did a better job than the U.S. According to one U.S. diplomat in Africa, the French regarded Little Rock as a political opportunity to blackmail the United States. They hoped Little Rock "would make the U.S. a little more sympathetic to France's problem in Algeria, especially at the [up]coming U.N. session."⁴⁰

Although news coverage of Little Rock in South Africa was overshadowed by coverage of the Soviet satellite Sputnik, U.S. officials there said the episode was "one of the worst [U.S. officials] have had to cope with."⁴¹ Influential Afrikaners used Little Rock as proof that integration would not work and that forces against integration were gaining ground in the United States.⁴²

When President Eisenhower, with great reluctance, finally ordered federal troops to Little Rock to protect the nine black students at Central High, he explained his action to Americans by stressing the international ramifications of the crisis: "[I]t would be difficult to exaggerate the harm 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."⁴³

³⁸Dispatch 59, American Consulate, Lourenço Marques, Mozambique, to Department of State, September 30, 1957, RG 59.

³⁹Dispatch 96, American Consulate, Nairobi, Kenya, to Department of State, October 2, 1957, RG 59.

⁴⁰Dispatch 59, American Consulate, Lourenço Marques, Mozambique, to Department of State, September 30, 1957, RG 59.

⁴¹Dispatch 11, American Consulate, Port Elizabeth, South Africa, to Department of State, November 13, 1957, RG 59.

⁴²Dispatch 113, American Consulate, Johannesburg, South Africa, to Department of State, December 5, 1957, RG 59.

⁴³*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1957* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office), 694.

Eisenhower's intervention received mostly positive international response, though some accused him of procrastination, which "leaves a bitter aftertaste," as one foreign newspaper put it, and of taking a weak stand on civil rights legislation.⁴⁴ The Swedish press reminded Eisenhower that the western world would be watching with concern and that failure would undermine the position of the United States in the free world.⁴⁵ Some foreigners described federal intervention in Little Rock as a continuation of America's international role in protecting human rights, a role it had played during World War II in Europe.⁴⁶ Many viewed Eisenhower as merely completing the work begun by Abraham Lincoln.⁴⁷ African politicians in French West Africa told U.S. officials that, until Eisenhower actually sent the troops to Little Rock, African opinion was that the president "would not dare use federal troops to enforce desegregation."⁴⁸

Many diplomats and other figures in foreign countries perceived international pressure as contributing to Eisenhower's decision to intervene. One Costa Rican diplomat said Eisenhower's protection of the Little Rock Nine was "in large part determined by the convenience of international politics. The non-white peoples inhabiting the planet are many and very great. The persecution of Negroes is of no advantage to the international policies of the United States."⁴⁹

Celebrating the U.S. government's action in Little Rock, Brazilian officials praised the freedom of the U.S. press in reporting racial inci-

⁴⁴For positive responses, see Dispatch 70, American Embassy, Luxembourg, to Department of State, October 1, 1957; Dispatch 59, American Consulate, Lourenço Marques, Mozambique, to Department of State, September 30, 1957; Dispatch 401, American Embassy, Brussels, Belgium, to Department of State, October 8, 1957; Dispatch 96, American Consulate, Nairobi, Kenya, to Department of State, October 2, 1957; Dispatch 31, American Consulate, Kampala, Uganda, to Department of State, October 4, 1957; Dispatch 313, American Embassy, Bogota, Colombia, to Department of State, October 7, 1957; Department of State, Instruction 1565 to American Embassy in London, November 17, 1957. The quotation is in Dispatch 69, American Embassy, Luxembourg, to Department of State, September 30, 1957, and the accusation concerning civil rights legislation is in Dispatch 16, American Consulate, Cardiff, Wales, to Department of State, September 27, 1957. All are in RG 59.

⁴⁵Telegram 43 from Stockholm, Sweden, to Secretary of State, September 25, 1957, RG 59.

⁴⁶Telegrams 527, 532, The Hague to Secretary of State, September 26, 1957, RG 59.

⁴⁷Telegram, Quito, Ecuador, to Secretary of State, September 28, 1957, RG 59.

⁴⁸Dispatch 99, American Consulate, Dakar, French West Africa, to Department of State, October 30, 1957, RG 59.

⁴⁹Dispatch 218, American Embassy, San José, Costa Rica, to Department of State, October 4, 1957, RG 59.

dents, compared to the “concealment of crimes by Russia.”⁵⁰ A number of United Nations delegates appealed to their organization for measures that would force Americans to respect the law. An incident such as Little Rock, they said, should not happen again: “[D]emocratic people everywhere are disturbed and ashamed at the continued racist discrimination against and [the] oppression of the Negro people in the United States.”⁵¹

Like the *Brown* decision, Eisenhower’s decision to intervene at Little Rock, however belatedly, did improve America’s image abroad. Nevertheless, federal action could not stop the long-term negative impact the event had on U.S. prestige, international public opinion, and America’s geopolitical objectives. In 1958, USIA surveys revealed that “irritation at the United States is very widespread” and that Little Rock was one of the leading causes of anti-American sentiment. While international opinion of race relations in the U.S. was already generally negative, “Little Rock confirmed previously held views of racial discrimination.” Because of Little Rock, there was a dramatic decline in foreign confidence that “what America says” equaled “what America does.”⁵²

USIA officials explained away the negative reactions of some countries to the Little Rock crisis by saying, “America’s standing in the area of race relations [in those countries] was already in a very depressed state prior to the Arkansas desegregation incidents, and hence not readily susceptible to further decrease.”⁵³ But others found it difficult to dismiss the negative effect of the crisis. The president of the Union of Hebrew Congregations, Maurice Eisendrath, for example, told the *New York Post* after a five-month world tour that America’s failure to address racial discrimination, magnified by Little Rock, had alienated millions of Asians and Africans. He said “the reservoir of goodwill toward America is being dried out” and suggested that Eisenhower should impress on state governors the connection “between America’s foreign policy interests, its national security, and race policies at home.”⁵⁴

In 1959, the Civil Rights Commission issued a stern warning that “[t]he pace of progress during the 96 years since emancipation has been remarkable. But this is an age of revolutionary change. The colored peo-

⁵⁰Telegram 415, joint USIA-State, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to Secretary of State, September 26, 1957, RG 59.

⁵¹Communication 504 from U.S. United Nations Mission, New York, to Department of State, December 9, 1957, RG 59.

⁵²Office memorandum, July 18, 1958, USIA Office of Research, special reports 1953–1963, RG 306.

⁵³“Post-Little Rock Opinion on the Treatment of Negroes in the U.S.,” Program and Media Series, January 1958, RG 306.

⁵⁴*New York Post*, June 4, 1958.

ples of Asia and Africa, constituting a majority of the human race, are swiftly coming into their own The future peace of the world is at stake."⁵⁵

Racial segregation in the United States was a primary target of international criticism and pressure. In addition to the rising power of the black vote and the increased organization and militancy of the civil rights movement, the atmosphere of the Cold War and the rise of new independent nations in Africa and elsewhere pushed the federal government to become an active partner in the struggle against segregation. The success of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s is partly the result of the way civil rights activists themselves framed America's race problem in an international context. As an observer to a religious student conference a few weeks before the sit-ins of 1960 reported, "hundreds" of southern black students "listened, discussed and evidently thought a great deal as militant African nationalists 'stole the show' with predictions of a 'new order.'" And a journalist visiting black campuses in 1960 said, "even the most un-intellectual black students were envious of the African independence movement and vaguely moved by it."⁵⁶ When Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to explain the seemingly sudden "Negro revolution" of the 1950s and 1960s, he said,

The American Negro . . . realized that just thirty years ago there were only three independent nations in the whole of Africa. He knew that by 1963 more than thirty-four African nations had risen from colonial bondage. The Negro saw black statesmen voting on vital issues in the United Nations and knew that in many cities of his own land he was not permitted to take that significant walk to the ballot box. He saw black kings and potentates ruling from palaces—and he knew he had been condemned to move from small ghettos to larger ones.⁵⁷

America's friends and foes around the world used the opportunities that American segregation provided to advance their causes in their own countries and in the international arena.

The United States could not champion human rights and freedom abroad unless it was showing progress and setting an example at home.

⁵⁵*Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1959), 548.

⁵⁶Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 16.

⁵⁷Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 9-10.

The timing of successful desegregation efforts is not mere happenstance. These efforts went hand in hand with international events and radical changes in the map of Africa and the rest of what we now call the third world—changes the United States wished to influence in competition with the Soviet Union. Southern defiance of the global interests of America in the Cold War opened the U.S. to great international criticism and, consequently, to an increasingly active government.

The practical requirements of America's foreign policy helped focus national attention on racial conditions that the nation had long ignored. Only in these circumstances was the government prepared to accept the obligation to fulfill the promise of freedom and equality embodied in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Domestic pressures alone might have brought the same result but surely only after greater delay and considerably more bloodshed in American streets than actually took place in the 1950s and 1960s. The height of the Cold War did not simply coincide with the height of the civil rights revolution but had a strong causal relationship to it.

Copyright of Arkansas Historical Quarterly is the property of Arkansas Historical Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.