

Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

As the United States promoted liberty, democracy, and capitalism during the Cold War, it became increasingly evident that domestic racial problems complicated the effort to win hearts and minds abroad. The Soviet Union highlighted racial inequality in the United States as a way to increase its influence in Asia and Africa. Some African Americans recognized that civil rights battles in the United States were part of a larger struggle for freedom by people of color across the world. For these reasons, some historians have asserted that the American Civil Rights Movement is best understood in the context of the Cold War.

This tutorial gives you an opportunity to test that assertion through primary source analysis.

1. The Rise of Human Rights

In 1948, the United Nations (UN), the international organization that replaced the League of Nations after World War II, issued a Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



DID YOU KNOW

The committee that drafted the declaration was chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt.



Eleanor Roosevelt examines a draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights written in Spanish.

The Universal Declaration was an attempt to address the death and dislocation resulting from World War II. For instance, the genocide committed by Nazi Germany during the Holocaust indicated the need for an international body to investigate human rights abuses during war (and peace).

Additional Resource

Watch a short film from the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#): *The Path to Nazi Genocide*.



DID YOU KNOW

After World War II, the Allies tried many German officers and officials for crimes against humanity. In October 1946, 10 Nazi officials were executed for their role in the Holocaust.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights began by stating that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” Next, it identified, in a series of 30 articles, the rights and liberties that were to be enjoyed by all people. Among others, they included the following:

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3

Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person.

Article 4

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.



THINK ABOUT IT

1. How did the UN define human rights?
2. Why was the Universal Declaration a priority for the UN 3 years after the end of World War II?

By indicating that distinctions would not be made according to sovereignty, the declaration maintained that liberty was the right of every person simply because they were human. Furthermore, it affirmed that the UN—an international body—would monitor how nations treated their citizens.

Because of Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, both opposed the addition of an enforcement provision to the human rights declaration, fearing that the UN might hinder their foreign policy objectives. As a result, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has never included an enforcement mechanism. It was nevertheless evident that, in the aftermath of World War II, “human rights” would be a political issue that both superpowers had to confront.



DID YOU KNOW

According to the UN website, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been translated into 500 languages.

2. “An Appeal to the World”

Black civil rights activists in the United States closely followed global discussions of human rights. In 1945, **W. E. B. Du Bois** remained active in the NAACP, but he began to devote more time and energy to international

matters concerning people of color, especially **Pan-Africanism**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

W. E. B. Du Bois

Leading Black intellectual and civil rights activist, advocate of Pan-Africanism, and prominent spokesperson for the Niagara Movement, which called for immediate political, social, and economic equality for African Americans; cofounder of the NAACP and longtime editor of its journal *The Crisis*.



TERM TO KNOW

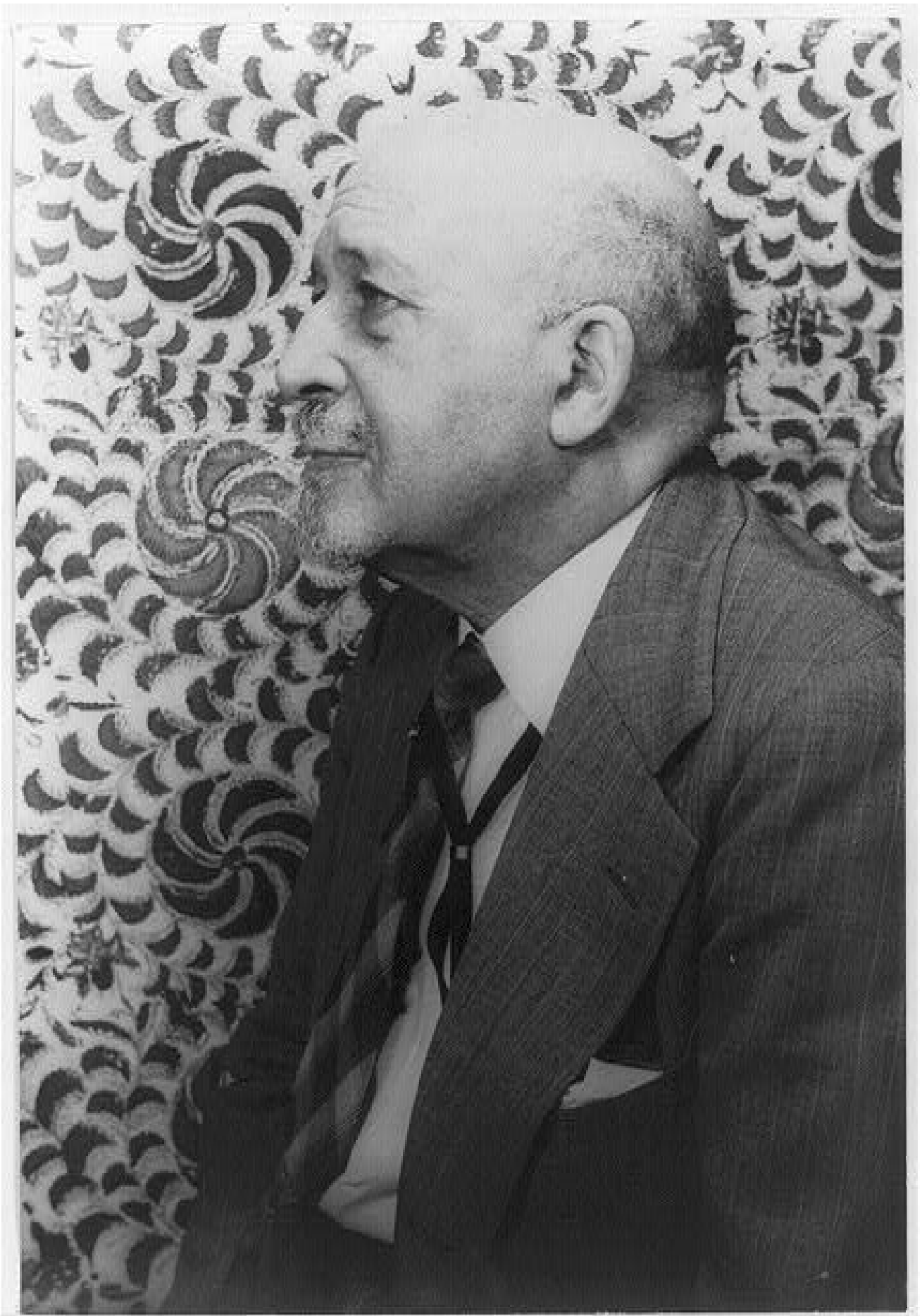
Pan-Africanism

The notion that African Americans have a distinct racial heritage and that embraces Africa as the true homeland of all people of African descent.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1945, Du Bois was part of a delegation sent by the NAACP to San Francisco to attend the formation of the UN.



A photograph of W. E. B. Du Bois taken by Carl Van Vechten in 1946.

In 1947, 1 year before the UN issued the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the NAACP submitted a petition asking the organization to investigate racism in the United States.



DID YOU KNOW

The NAACP's petition was titled "An Appeal to the World: A Statement of Denial of Human Rights to Minorities in the Case of Citizens of Negro Descent in the United States of America and an Appeal to the United Nations for Redress."

Du Bois (1947) wrote the introduction to the petition, in which he described America's history of racial inequality to the world.

"An Appeal to the World," W. E. B. Du Bois

"There are in the United States of America, fifteen millions or more of native-born citizens, something less than a tenth of the nation, who form largely a segregated caste, with restricted legal rights, and many illegal disabilities. They are descendants of the Africans brought to America during the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and reduced to slave labor . . .

A nation which boldly declared 'All men equal', proceeded to build its economy on chattel slavery; masters who declared race-mixture impossible, sold their own children into slavery and left a mulatto progeny which neither law nor science can today disentangle; churches which excused slavery as calling the heathen to God, refused to recognize the freedom of converts or admit them to equal communion . . . Poverty, ignorance, disease, and crime have been forced on these unfortunate victims of greed to an extent far beyond any social necessity; and a great nation, which today ought to be in the forefront of the march toward peace and democracy, finds itself continuously making common cause with race hate, prejudiced exploitation and oppression of the common man."

Du Bois concluded his introduction with an "appeal to the world," in which he asked the "Peoples of the World" to pay attention to the African American struggle for civil rights:

"We appeal to the world to witness that this attitude of America is far more dangerous to mankind than the Atom bomb; and far, far more clamorous for attention than disarmament or treaty. To disarm the hidebound minds of men is the only path to peace; and as long as Great Britain and the United States profess democracy with one hand and deny it to millions with the other, they convince none of their sincerity, least of all themselves . . .

Therefore, Peoples of the World, we American Negroes appeal to you; our treatment in America is not merely an internal question of the United States. It is a basic problem of humanity; of democracy; of discrimination because of race and color; and as such it demands your attention and action."



THINK ABOUT IT

1. How does Du Bois's discussion of American history through the lens of race challenge the perception of the United States as a nation of "peace and democracy"?
2. Although some members of the UN sympathized with Du Bois's "Appeal," the organization decided that it did not have the jurisdiction to investigate racism in the United States. What is the significance of Du

Bois's appeal if the UN could not act upon it?



BRAINSTORM

Compare Du Bois's "Appeal" with the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different?

3. "To Secure These Rights"

W. E. B. Du Bois's efforts to bring racism in the United States to the attention of the world and discussions regarding human rights in the UN contributed to the context in which President Truman's administration addressed race during the late 1940s.

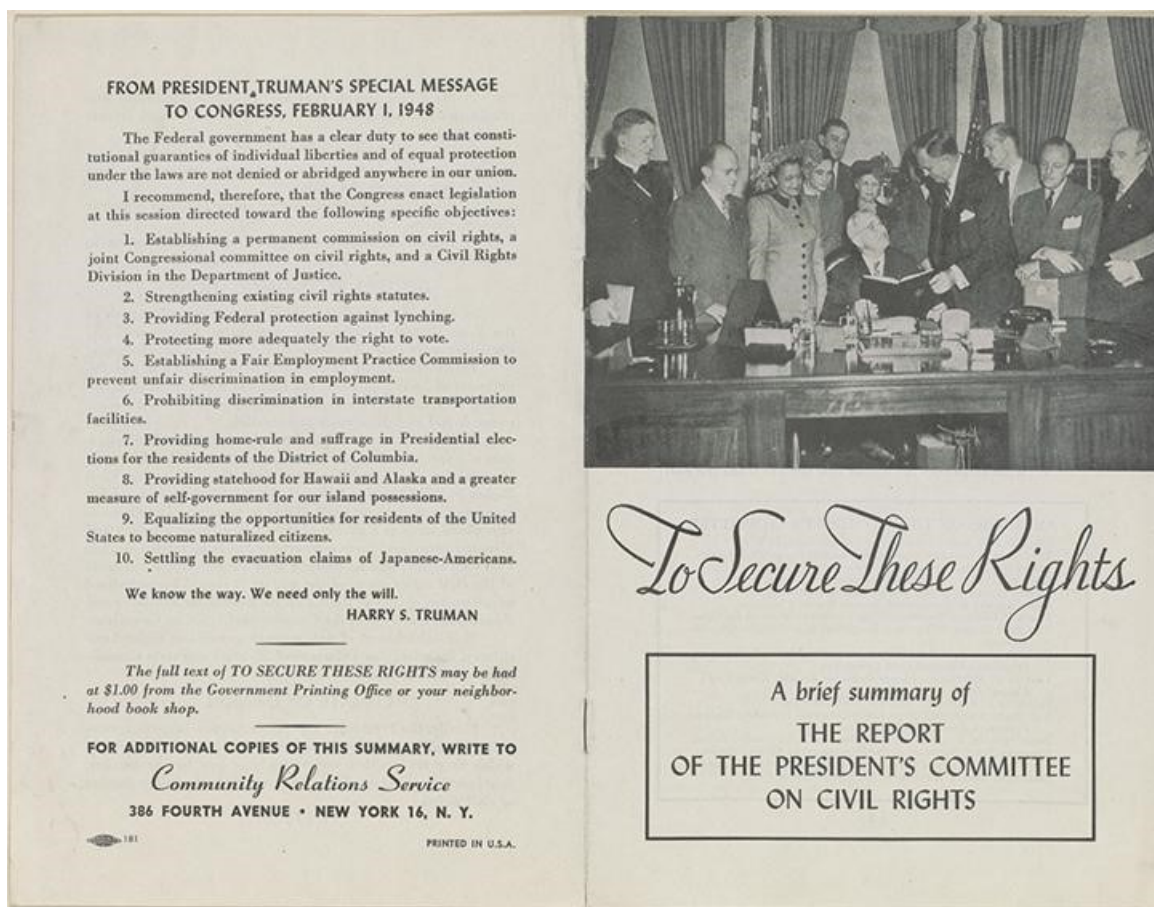
In December 1946, **Harry S. Truman** created a Presidential Committee on Civil Rights to investigate racism in the United States. Less than 1 year later, in October 1947, the Committee published its findings in a report titled "To Secure These Rights."



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Harry S. Truman

Democratic U.S. president who took office after Franklin Roosevelt's death in 1945 and remained in office until 1953; navigated the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan and the first years of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.



The report was notable for two reasons. First, it provided one of the most detailed examinations of racial inequality in the United States during the 20th century. Throughout 1947, the committee held hearings and

gathered evidence that exposed patterns of racial discrimination in employment, housing, and voting.

It also noted widespread police brutality against African Americans in urban areas. The report stated that “In various localities, scattered throughout the country, unprofessional or undisciplined police, while avoiding brutality, fail to recognize and to safeguard the civil rights of the citizenry. Insensitive to the necessary limits of police authority, untrained officers frequently overstep the bounds of their proper duties. At times this appears in unwarranted arrests, unduly prolonged detention before arraignment, and abuse of the search and seizure power.”

Second, the committee concluded that the federal government must take a lead role in ensuring equal protection under the law and eliminating discrimination. It provided three reasons for doing so. The first was “The Moral Reason”:

“To Secure These Rights”

“It is impossible to decide who suffers the greatest moral damage from our civil rights transgressions, because all of us are hurt. That is certainly true of those who are victimized. Their belief in the basic truth of the American promise is undermined The damage to those who are responsible for these violations of our moral standards may well be greater All of us must endure the cynicism about democratic values which our failures breed.”

The report also provided an “Economic Reason” for ending racial discrimination, highlighting employment and economic discrimination that African Americans and other minority groups experienced. Finally, the report presented an “International Reason” for promoting racial equality, which referenced the emerging Cold War with the Soviet Union:

“We cannot escape the fact that our civil rights record has been an issue in world politics. The world's press and radio are full of it. This Committee has seen a multitude of samples. We and our friends have been, and are, stressing our achievements. Those with competing philosophies have stressed—and are shamelessly distorting—our shortcomings. They have not only tried to create hostility toward us among specific nations, races, and religious groups. They have tried to prove our democracy an empty fraud, and our nation a consistent oppressor of underprivileged people

The international reason for acting to secure our civil rights now is not to win the approval of our totalitarian critics. We would not expect it if our record were spotless; to them our civil rights record is only a convenient weapon with which to attack us. Certainly, we would like to deprive them of that weapon. But we are more concerned with the good opinion of the peoples of the world.”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. What is the “moral damage” of “civil rights transgressions” to African Americans? To White Americans?
2. Who was the report referring to when it mentioned “those with competing philosophies” and “totalitarian critics”?
3. According to the report, what is the international reason for enforcing civil rights in the United States?
4. Who is the intended audience for the report?

4. The Cold War and Civil Rights

Some historians, including Mary L. Dudziak, have recently argued that civil rights milestones (e.g., *Brown v. Board of Education*) should be considered in the context of the Cold War. In her 2004 article, “*Brown* as a Cold War Case,” Dudziak noted that *Brown* received extensive international coverage. African American newspapers throughout the nation listed the potentially positive results that the decision might have for people of color around the world. Chief Justice Warren also recognized the impact that the Supreme Court’s decision might have on the Cold War.



DID YOU KNOW

In an August 1954 speech in Chicago, Warren said, “Our American system like all others is on trial both at home and abroad . . . [T]he extent to which we maintain the spirit of our Constitution . . . will in the long run do more to make it both secure and the object of adulation than the number of hydrogen bombs we stockpile.”

Based on this evidence, Dudziak concluded that the American Civil Rights Movement, the Cold War, and international discussions of human rights were intertwined.



BRAINSTORM

Based on what you’ve learned about the Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement in Unit 2, are you convinced that the Cold War significantly influenced the Civil Rights Movement? What evidence from this and other tutorials would you use to support your conclusion?



SUMMARY

The civil rights movement did not evolve in a vacuum. By using the “5 Cs,” particularly “context,” we can find evidence that the agitation for civil rights by African Americans coincided with the international debate regarding human rights after World War II. President Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights recognized the Cold War implications of the civil rights struggle, as did Chief Justice Earl Warren. Based on this evidence, some historians have concluded that the Civil Rights Movement is best understood in the context of the Cold War.

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ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Roosevelt](#) | License: Public Domain
- [W.E.B Du Bois \(1946\)](#) | License: Public Domain
- [To Secure These Rights](#) | License: Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

Pan-Africanism

The notion that African Americans have a distinct racial heritage and embraced the African continent as the true homeland of all people of African descent.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Harry S. Truman

Democratic U.S. president who took office after Franklin Roosevelt's death in 1945 and remained in office until 1953; navigated the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan and the first years of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

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