

UNITED STATES
AND
AFRICA RELATIONS,
1400S TO THE PRESENT

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Yale
UNIVERSITY
PRESS
New Haven & London

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT MEETS DECOLONIZATION

“Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”
—*Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”*¹

The question above, posed by a five-year-old boy at the height of the civil rights movement in 1963, highlights the disturbing problem of race, ideology, social conscience, and even psychiatry in Jim Crow America (ca. 1870–1964). A related question with no precise answer defined Frantz Fanon’s career in colonial Algeria as a medical psychiatrist in the French imperial army.² In fact, Theodore Rubin, a medical psychiatrist who studies anti-Semitism, argues that prejudiced people and race-haters suffer from an emotional disturbance, a deep-seated, nonorganic disease of the mind elevated to the level of “Symbol Sickness.” At its extreme form, Rubin notes that the condition—which emanates from “anxiety, repressed anger, low self-esteem, insecurity, etc.—as well as neurotic defenses—displacement, projection, rationalization, alienation, compartmentalization—all provide fertile grounds for this kind of illness”—motivates individuals and groups to become psychotic and murderous.³ The insight provided by Rubin corroborates ideas by philosopher Kwame Appiah, whose critical humanistic inquiry on race and racism, identity, and moral consciousness posits that people with racist inclination suffer from psychopathologies. They lack the basic heuristic and cerebral understanding of what goes on around them. Appiah concludes that such individuals deserve more pity than anger.⁴

Rubin and Appiah present an opening to examine further the argument by Mauricio Mazon, whose study of the “zoot-suit riots” of June 1943 in Los

Angeles focused on the violent relationship between U.S. service members and Mexican-American youths. The study concluded that minorities and people of color in the United States became victims of White mobs, politicians, police, the press, and military personnel who virtually suffered from symbol sickness and demonization of Blacks and Mexicans. Mazon contends that the dominant group in post-Civil War America viewed the minorities as subordinate ethnic and cultural groups under the United States' laws and practices.⁵ Since the 1930s, scholars in Germany and the United States have documented incidents of state-sponsored repression and mob violence against Jews and Blacks by the dominant groups in these countries. The rationale behind their actions has remained subject to heated debates even in recent times.⁶ As these studies reveal, religious and ethnic hatred ran so deep in both Nazi Germany and Jim Crow America that the visible minorities suffered acute dehumanization as the political elite in these countries systematically enacted laws and social practices that portrayed the victims as a symbol of everything antithetical to these societies.

The post-World War II era offers a unique opportunity for a comparative study of congruent sociopolitical and economic agitations in the United States and colonial Africa. Liberation movements in the forms of the civil rights and women's rights movements changed social dynamics in the West, and decolonization transformed the non-Western world and global politics. Other movements, such as Léopold Sédar Senghor's Négritude, struggles against the oppressive apartheid system in South Africa, and Pan-Arabism in the Arab world, helped establish cross-regional linkages. From the 1950s, the borders of the new postcolonial states virtually merged with those of the African diaspora. The primary interest, therefore, is on how the various liberation movements in the Atlantic world informed one another, interacting and converging on the same theme of freedom from oppression.

In the United States and colonial Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, specific issues of subjugation in the forms of segregation of public spaces, denial of citizenship rights, disenfranchisement, and colonial alienation increased the imperative of self-determination. The commonality of these social issues on both sides of the Atlantic engendered a historic collaboration between African American civil rights leaders and African nationalist leaders. Some of the emergent African political and educated elite, such as Keke Seme of South Africa, Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, were either living/studying in the United States between the 1930s and 1960s or returned to their African homelands to spearhead Africa's liberation from European colonialism. The shared visions of freedom for the entire Black race and their material advancement held by these leaders on both sides of the Atlantic world echoed the essence

of Pan-Africanism, which was, in the main, a call for unity among Blacks to confront and overcome the conditions of helplessness and degradation plaguing their race. It is crucial to understand the complementary and mutual influences of African independence on notions of Black Power in the United States and the ideals of the African American civil rights movement on African nationalism and decolonization.⁷ An examination of debates over women's rights in independent African nations further highlights the complex and contentious interactions between these liberation movements taking place concurrently in national, transregional, and transnational contexts.

Within the transnational framework in which these mass movements were unfolding, one can assert the obvious that the civil rights movement in the United States and the Pan-African/anticolonial agitations in Africa shared close symbiotic relations. With the shift of leadership from the African American founding fathers to the emergent African political elite at the 1945 Manchester Congress, postwar Pan-Africanism gained traction by reinforcing that spirit of unity and purpose. Thus, people of African descent, wherever they may be, could strive to reclaim security and attain political, economic, as well as psychological empowerment and freedom.⁸

The connection between Pan-Africanism and the events of the 1950s and 1960s in the Atlantic world demonstrates that long before the events, Pan-Africanism prepared the African American's mind and psyche for the civil rights struggle in the United States just as it prepared the emergent African educated elite and nationalists for the fight to end imperialism in Africa. In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" dated April 16, 1963, Martin Luther King underscored the apparent connection between Pan-Africanism and the 1960s civil rights struggle in the United States with his rejection of what he perceived as "the disease of segregation" and the slow pace of civil rights reforms in the United States. According to King, "the nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed towards the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace towards the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter."⁹ In 1964, Malcolm X also called out the "old, tricky blue-eyed liberal who is supposed to be" a friend and supporter of the struggle, but "never tells you anything about human rights."¹⁰

The rhetoric of King and Malcolm X was embedded in the global human rights discourses that implicated the hypocrisy of the liberal agenda during the civil rights movement. In 1973, Steve Biko repeated similar words of frustration in the face of the delayed pace of sociopolitical reforms in apartheid South Africa while the Africans suffered under the hateful regime. In one of his scathing articles, entitled "I Write What I Like," Biko, the leader of the Black Consciousness

movement, decried the lukewarm approach of White liberals in the country to resolve White oppression of the indigenes there: "No one is suggesting that it is not the business of liberal whites to oppose what is wrong. However, it appears to us too much of a coincidence that liberals—few as they are—should not only be determining the *modus operandi* of those blacks who oppose the system, but also be leading it, in spite of their involvement in the system."¹¹

King and Biko shared a commitment to nonviolence. Their ideological affinity demonstrated the former's dedication to and promotion of Pan-African ideals. In a study of King's contributions to Pan-Africanism, Jeremy Levitt noted that some scholars had questioned the civil rights leader's commitment to the movement.¹² Perhaps the best response to this question, one that dispels any doubt about his commitment to Pan-Africanism, remains King's powerful tribute to W. E. B. Du Bois on February 23, 1968.¹³ King wrote, "But he was an exile only to the land of his birth. He died at home in Africa among his cherished ancestors, and he was ignored by a pathetically ignorant America but not by history." King goes on to say that history cannot ignore Du Bois "because history has to reflect truth and Dr. Du Bois was a tireless explorer and a gifted discoverer of social truths. His singular greatness lay in his quest for the truth about his own people."¹⁴

King was not only a compelling personality in the Pan-Africanist movement but also a transcendent universal advocate of freedom and human rights. He saw it as necessary to speak for all peoples of the world encumbered by majority domination.¹⁵ In his "Facing the Challenge of a New Age" address, delivered in Montgomery, Alabama, in late 1956, King announced to the world that they "were starting a movement that would rise to international proportions." According to King, this was "a movement whose lofty echoes would ring in the ears of people of every nation; a movement that would stagger and astound the imagination of the oppressor, while leaving a glittering star of hope etched in the midnight skies of the oppressed." King further announced that "freedom must ring from every mountainside," a phrase he would later adopt for his "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D.C., in 1963.¹⁶

Through his broad, universal approach, King established a link between the African American struggles not just with the African bloodline but with a global kinship based on freedom for the oppressed and downtrodden. He not only encouraged Black immigration to assist in the continent's developmental aspirations but also maintained a very close relationship with African nationalist leaders of the 1950 and 1960s, including anti-apartheid leaders in South Africa.¹⁷ On his way to Oslo to receive his Nobel Peace Prize in December 1964, King stopped over in London, where he addressed incidents of racism in

South Africa and Britain: "In our struggle for freedom and justice in the United States, which has also been so long and arduous, we feel a powerful sense of identification with those in the far more deadly struggle for freedom in South Africa. We know how Africans there, and their friends of other races, strove for half a century to win their freedom by non-violent methods."¹⁸

In the speech, King honored Chief Luthuli, Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe, and others for their leadership, and King talked about how the apartheid leaders had responded to their nonviolent approach with increasing violence and repression, "culminating in the shootings of Sharpeville."¹⁹ King further noted: "Clearly, there is much in Mississippi and Alabama to remind South Africans of their own country, yet even in Mississippi we can organize to register Negro voters, we can speak to the press, we can in short organize the people in non-violent action. But in South Africa even the mildest form of non-violent resistance meets with years of imprisonment, and leaders over many years have been restricted and silenced and imprisoned."²⁰

King was not merely an exponent of Pan-Africanism and decolonization in Africa and elsewhere but personally participated in the swearing-in ceremonies of those African postcolonial leaders with whom he had special relationships: Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana on March 6, 1957, and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria on November 16, 1960.²¹ Over a private lunch with Nkrumah during Ghana's independence celebration in 1957, the newly installed president of Ghana told King that he "would never be able to accept the American ideology of freedom until America settles its own internal racial strife."²² Kevin Gaines emphasized that Nkrumah's air of confidence bolstered King's hope that "somehow the universe itself is on the side of freedom and justice. King was confident of the ability of Nkrumah and Ghanaian leadership to meet the challenge ahead."²³

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a mass protest movement against racial segregation and discrimination that came to national prominence during the mid-1950s, it is important to highlight in brief the sociopolitical milieu in which the civil rights movement in the United States emerged and how King became its most distinguished leader and symbol. For generations, Euro-Americans led by slavocrats employed a White-based constitutional doctrine to justify a deeply entrenched culture of enslavement and exploitation of Africans. In 1865, Congress enacted a short-lived experiment in racial democracy in the Reconstruction era, which ended in 1877. From this point onward, Blacks lived under a formal, constitutionalized

system of White racial authority that denied them voting rights and full citizenship rights. These conditions persisted and started to improve piecemeal from the turn of the twentieth century until the 1960s, when the struggle for civil rights and racial equality was in a full swing, and ended after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In 1838, the southern states promulgated a series of laws of racial segregation that targeted Blacks. (South Africa passed similar laws after the National Party came to power in 1948, such as the apartheid segregationist acts of the 1950s and 1960s.) By 1900, those laws, known across the nation as Jim Crow laws, became virulent. Feeble attempts to expunge the laws with the 1875 Civil Rights Act came to no effect. Instead, the Jim Crow laws expanded and persisted to a dangerous proportion after the Supreme Court ruled on October 15, 1883, that the 1875 act, which had prohibited racial discrimination in trains, hotels, and other public places, was unconstitutional.²⁴ From this point, segregation persevered because Congress wanted absolute control over corporations and people in the private spheres of the southern states. Lawmakers, who were predominantly Whites, rejected any suggestions for changes to the Jim Crow laws until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 effectively repealed them.²⁵ The new act invoked the commerce clause, outlawing discrimination in public accommodations. In 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, which secured the rights of Black people to vote in elections.²⁶

Under the Jim Crow laws, many states and cities imposed harsh legal punishments. For example, Blacks and those Whites who attempted to consort with or marry with other races faced severe legal sanctions. The most stringent enforcement of the laws was in the South, where authorities made it a crime for Blacks to ride in public transportation reserved for Whites or to use public parks, schools, cemeteries, restaurants, hospitals, and many other public spaces and facilities reserved for Whites. In Whites-only hospitals, for example, White nurses could only attend to White patients. Different areas were designated to Whites and Blacks in trains, buses, restaurants, schools, hospitals, parks, cemeteries, and other spaces. White-owned newspapers segregated "Black news" from "White news"—that is, when they found it imperative to mention Blacks in the pages of their newspapers.²⁷

Bruce M. Tyler has noted that early in the 1940s, Blacks and other people of color, such as Mexican Americans, had confronted the "American Dilemma" with proual pride movements in response to the supremacist and segregationist ideologies and mass incarceration of minorities, particularly Blacks and Japanese Americans during World War II.²⁸ In an era when oppressed groups around the world perceived capitalism as exploitative and communism as a

liberating force, the leaders of the Black civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s were identified as aiding and abetting international communism, whether real or imagined. The U.S. government branded prominent Black leaders of the movement across the country, including King, Malcolm X, and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, as radicals and enemies of the state who preached doctrines of anarchy, civil disobedience, and militant agitation aimed at destabilizing the United States of America.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a great majority of Blacks remained trapped in poverty, hopelessness, and crime. Since poverty often engenders petty crimes, a record number of Black and Hispanic men ended up in prison. The question arises as to why men of minority groups remained marginalized in the socioeconomic system. The answer to this enduring historical question is simple but difficult to accept. Social expectations are part of the problem. Historically, the "American Dream" most often implied that anyone (specifically White men who dominated society before the Black civil rights and feminist movements gained traction) could rise to the highest levels of wealth and power, and every man had not only a duty but also an obligation to do so. The American Dream, while subject to diverse interpretations, remains open to objections. Philosophers like Horace Kallen have challenged the concept.²⁹ However, as defined by Saul Padover, the American Dream connotes "a dedication to individual freedom, justice under law, equality of educational and economic opportunity, and finally, constant material improvement and well-being."³⁰

Regrettably, for American minorities in general and Blacks in particular, pursuing the Dream often proved difficult if not impossible because of their marginalization and social locations. The civil rights struggle, then, was a fight to overcome segregationist laws and the socioeconomic and political practices that limited the social mobility of disadvantaged groups who were often locked out of the American Dream. This state of society was the topic of Malcolm X's speech in 1964, when he asserted that he saw the America of his time "through the eyes of the victim. . . . I do not see any American dream; I see an American nightmare."³¹ Yet, implicit in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, Harry Truman's Fair Deal, and Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society's War on Poverty was that the American Dream was open to all Americans through government assistance.³² This was the rationale behind federal government legislation such as social welfare programs for the needy and affirmative action programs to ameliorate the conditions of the minorities.³³

Some observers of the social welfare state and affirmative action programs have charged that these forms of diversity policies were flawed. The critics variously contend that the "culture of poverty" gripped the poor and rendered

them socially immobile; that continued discrimination handicapped others; and that the so-called collapse of family values and the demise of traditional two-parent families resulted in individuals with flawed characters and work habits that made them unable or unwilling to work. Yet, others argue that government programs did not go far enough or needed adjustments to remedy these problems. Some other commentators have further argued that the postindustrial society left vast sectors of the labor force unable to adjust to the new skills required for employment.³⁴

The adverse social conditions of Africans in the colonies after the Second World War parallel those of African Americans in the United States. The war, which left Britain, France, Portugal, and other imperial powers in desperate economic situations, forced them to ignore the urgent needs of the colonies as the Europeans tried to rebuild their war-ravaged economies. For instance, Robert Gordon's study of the impact of the Second World War in colonial Namibia reveals that the war opened the eyes of the Namibians recruited to fight in the South African theater to the many practices of exploitation and subjugation in the colonies.³⁵ Besides the fact that the war provided African ex-soldiers with a rich stock of experience and arguments to counter hegemonic claims predicated on the doctrine of racial superiority, Africanists are divided on the impact of African veterans on the emergence of postwar African nationalist movements. David Killingray, for example, argues that the African veterans played a no more significant role than other social groups in the independence movement. Anthony Smith asserts that the war also "marked a turning point in the Namibian people's struggle for freedom. Thousands of auxiliaries returned battle-hardened and victorious from the frontline, their eyes opened to a new dimension of coexistence and freedom."³⁶

In Algeria soon after the war, deadly military responses to civil protests led Ahmed Ben Bella to found the militant nationalist party Organisation Spéciale (OS) in 1947. The OS led Algeria to freedom from French colonial rule in 1962. It became the National Liberation Army in 1958. On November 18, 1949, in eastern Nigeria, a civil protest against the colonial authorities by Enugu coalworkers over poor conditions of service (later blamed on Nnamdi Azikiwe) resulted in twenty-one deaths and fifty other casualties in one of the bloodiest suppressions of a labor union movement in Nigerian history.³⁷ In the British Kenya colony, the Mau Mau uprising emerged in 1952 and persisted until 1964 as a reaction to post-World War II oppressive and unfair political and economic policies by the British in East Africa. These and hundreds of similar instances across the African continent represented ways in which the colonized and oppressed masses chose to announce to the colonizer that they wanted to live in a free, equal, and democratic society.

In the United States, dire socioeconomic problems, most often associated with inner cities where the majority of poor Blacks lived, produced similarly violent agitations and brutal responses. In suburbs where Whites lived, violence was absent because most of the available opportunities for high-paying jobs were located in those areas. Apart from the fact that employment opportunities were unavailable in Black communities, public transportation to the White suburbs was problematic for the poor minorities. In practices reminiscent of the Boer-led segregationist socioeconomic and residential order in apartheid South Africa, some Whites who either despised Blacks or were afraid of crimes inspired by poverty relocated their homes farther away from the minority communities. Blacks in Los Angeles, Birmingham, Montgomery, Chicago, Louisville, and many other large U.S. cities suffered from these problems more than most other racial or ethnic groups in the entire United States of America. The practices of racism and violence went along with drug peddling and abuse and became more intractable everywhere across the United States. The old patterns of racial animosity changed to a new pattern with the emergence of a large Black population and a Black middle class in the major cities. The changing social problems brought about conservative political and strict police responses to the new counterculture as exhibited by Blacks of varying social and economic statuses. The persistence of racial isolation and discrimination and expanding ethnic consciousness were a result of a long history of political and police practices of containment and repression.

It was in the aforementioned socioeconomic and political milieu that African Americans in the South and other places embarked on a determined and bitter struggle for equality and freedom from the 1950s to end racial segregation; denial of opportunities for growth, citizenship rights, and the right to education; police brutality; and many other racist policies. Martin Luther King emerged in the mid-1950s as a community organizer, ordained minister, and civil rights activist in this historical milieu (Fig. 9.1).

Essentially, the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s was a struggle for equality, a call by African Americans to the U.S. society for due recognition as people who existed in body and mind and had the same God-given abilities as Whites, and the space to exercise their inalienable rights as humans and citizens of America. In December 1955, when the brave and courageous Black woman and NAACP official Rosa Parks declined to yield her seat on a segregated public bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and the police arrested her, the modern civil rights movement kicked off dramatically. This incident announced King's arrival to the civil rights protest theater. Although he planned to pursue a career in the academy, in 1954 King accepted an opportunity to serve as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. Therefore,



Figure 9.1. Martin Luther King, Jr. U.S. National Archives.

King was in a strategic location when the bus crisis broke out. In reaction, Montgomery's Black leaders—among them his longtime friend Ralph Abernathy, Jo Ann Robinson, and E. D. Nixon—quickly tapped King as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the new organization they founded to resist segregation in Alabama.

In his role as the primary spokesperson for the Montgomery bus boycott, which lasted over twelve months, King deployed the leadership abilities he had gained from his religious background and academic training to forge an effective protest plan that involved the enlistment of Black churches and diplomatic petitions for White support. King would later recall in his memoir *Stride Toward Freedom* that “Mrs. Parks was ideal for the role assigned to her by history.” According to King, “her character was impeccable and her dedica-

tion deep-rooted”; she was “one of the most respected people in the Negro community.”³⁸

King succinctly summed up this cardinal precept of the struggle in 1963: “We have waited more than 340 years to exercise our constitutional and God-given rights.” King pointed out that African and Asian countries were quickly advancing toward political independence, but the United States was moving at a very slow pace that failed to ameliorate the racial climate and lives of Blacks.³⁹

The urgent note struck by King validates the connection between decolonization and the civil rights movement. The successes gained by African nationalists in the late 1950s and 1960s hastened the impetus and imperative of the civil rights movement in America. This bond underpinned the decision of many young civil rights activists in the United States to take charge of the destiny of the movement by replacing the White liberals who were holding back the pace of the desired social reforms. Addressing thousands of Ghanaians at Accra's Polo Grounds on March 6, 1957, Socialist and labor leader A. Philip Randolph told the audience that Black Americans, “your brothers and sisters in color,” were “fired [up]” by Africa's independence crusade.⁴⁰

King recognized this bond when he contended, with the hindsight of the Black people's experience across time and space, that “freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.” He condemned the timetable of White liberals “who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation,” arguing that their familiar word “Wait!” has almost always meant “never.” He stressed, “It has been a tranquilizing Thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that justice too long delayed is justice denied.”⁴¹

Organized labor came under the control of White bureaucrats—many of whom seemed to have no honest sympathy for the conditions of the minority. The American Socialists were in too fragile a state to turn the situation around. Thus, Black Nationalism became the only viable course of action for leaders like Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture and one-time husband of Mariam Makeba). These and other African American figures traveled to Africa to confer with leaders of the emergent independent nations and anti-colonial movements. Black advocates in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee availed themselves of the violent rhetoric provided by Frantz Fanon in Algeria as a guide to action. By the mid-1960s, Black Nationalism had swept through the United States under the militant slogan of “Black Power.”⁴²

In a discussion on a radio show in New York on December 27, 1964, Malcolm X, one of the chief advocates of Black Power, who had just spent six months

traveling across Africa, observed that Africans were waking up to the double standards inherent in the UN's deliberations in matters that affected people of African descent: "Neither was the case of Black people in this country ever linked with what was happening to people on the African continent. And if there's any drastic departure from past procedures that have been reflected already in the present UN session, it's the tendency on the part of African representatives one after another all to link what's happening in the Congo with what's happening in Mississippi."⁴³ In other words, there was an active dialogue and exchange of ideas between civil rights leaders in the United States and African anticolonial agitators. A further examination of United States-Africa exchanges and the manners in which public opinion leaders of the new postcolonial African society inserted themselves in the American civil rights struggle is crucial.

THE AFRICAN PRESS AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Scholars who study the evolution of the Anglo-West African press have noted that its determination and outspokenness under colonial rule were unparalleled.⁴⁴ Often owned by the educated elite and nationalist leaders, it was in the 1950s that the conjoining movements for civil rights in America and sovereign rights across the world began to feed on one another. The civil rights movement gained significant support in 1954 following the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* Supreme Court decision ending segregation in public schools. This development did not escape the attention of the *West African Pilot* owned by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who was educated at Howard University and Lincoln University in the 1920s and 1930s.⁴⁵ Applauding the ruling in an article titled "Igirigiri, Searchlights: USA & Segregation," he declared that "action speaks louder than words. That is why I believe the U.S. Supreme Court ruling against segregation of white and Negro pupils in State schools to be far more effective than all the propaganda against the iron curtain."⁴⁶ It is noteworthy that the newspaper made an educated linkage of the event in America to the Cold War struggle to underscore the imperative of freedom and democracy for the oppressed.

Around the world, nations and peoples under imperial oppression saw hope in the 1954 defeat of the French army in Vietnam and the forced end of the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt in 1956 by the United States. Each movement took heart from the other. Then in the 1960s, the power of America's diplomatic influence and the demands of occupied peoples around the world exploded into popular, broad-spectrum social movements. Though Algeria was embroiled in a bloody war for independence against the French, the first year

of the 1960s was arguably "the African year." When King inserted himself in the civil rights movement in Montgomery in 1956, no country in Black Africa had gained freedom from colonial rule. In 1960 alone, some seventeen African nations achieved their independence, all of them peacefully.⁴⁷

After securing political freedom from Britain in 1957 without resorting to an armed struggle, Ghana emerged as a symbol of Africa's quest for freedom from colonialism. Both the United States and the Soviet Union sent groups to promote their interests in the new nation. For the United States, this influence took the form of the Peace Corps, the brainchild of then Sen. John F. Kennedy, who as presidential candidate in 1960 proposed "a peace corps of talented men and women" in a speech at the Cow Palace in San Francisco on November 2. The program offered for the peace and progress of developing countries was designed to use soft power both to better the world and to defeat global communism. The Communists tried to install their own groups as well but were less successful.

In Central Africa, the Congo presented the United States with two treacherous policy options. It had been evident for years that domestic politics could influence foreign policy. One only has to look at the Truman administration's intense antagonism toward China to see that in action. However, with the decolonization of Africa and American involvement to beat the Soviets to the new nations, foreign policy began to affect domestic politics in unexpected ways. Visiting the United Nations in July 1960, Patrice Emery Lumumba, the first prime minister of newly independent Congo, witnessed in person the nature of race riots in America. In many ways, decolonization of Africa forced many African Americans to reassess their own status in the home of democracy. Suddenly, the ugly bigotry and racism of the many White Americans were exposed for the entire world to see. This problem threatened more than just the ability of the United States to defeat the Soviets in Africa (as African nations were mortified to see how the most democratic society on earth treated its black citizens). Even more dangerously, it affected the domestic politics of the United States. If the president and other leaders did not begin reforms for African Americans' civil rights, the angry Black populace seemed ready to make these changes themselves through any means necessary.

With the intent to pry the conscience of the federal government to implement the promise of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of May 17, 1954, Black civil rights leaders announced a march in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. In the last speech of the day, King tasked President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Congress to uphold and enforce the Supreme Court's landmark decision ending segregation in public schools. Additionally, King called on the

government to grant voting rights to African Americans: "Give us the ballot and we will quietly and nonviolently, without rancor or bitterness, implement the Supreme Court's decision of May 17, 1954."⁴⁸ In the speech, King accused the two political parties of "betraying the cause of justice": "This dearth of positive leadership from the federal government is not confined to one particular political party. Both political parties have betrayed the cause of justice. The Democrats have betrayed it by capitulating to the prejudices and undemocratic practices of the southern Dixiecrats. The Republicans have betrayed it by capitulating to the blatant hypocrisy of right-wing, reactionary northerners."⁴⁹

During the historic March on Washington on August 28, 1963, King and the other organizers of the event drew the attention of the world to the founding ideas of the United States and the deprived status of African Americans. During the speech now considered the speech of the century, King declared that "in a sense, we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check." He reminded the audience that "when the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."⁵⁰ By locating the civil rights struggle within the discourses of the founding fathers' anticolonial war against Great Britain, the Black civil rights leaders sought to remind all Americans and international observers of the inherent paradox of the oppression of Blacks in the midst of freedom.

In Africa, particularly in Anglo-speaking African nations, the press followed prudently and oftentimes in depth the struggles of the African Americans they referred to as "their brothers and sisters," a reference to racial and cultural affinity. The empathies demonstrated by the Anglophone West African press were strong, as were the criticisms and anger channeled to the U.S political leaders and those they identified as White racists. The newspapers celebrated "whatever they perceived or chose to interpret as a victory for African Americans."⁵¹ The menacing presence of the Soviet Union in Africa, while the United States was grappling with race issues, put the Americans in a precarious position in coveting African leaders' support.

Thus, the Cold War ideological struggle provided the enabling international climate under which the free and independent press in English-speaking Africa inserted their voices in the United States' internal political trends. The goal of the African media was to support and advance the quest of the African Americans for freedom and equality. The African public understood that the African diaspora had shared a similar experience of Western slavery and imperial exploi-

tation with Africans. The African press routinely addressed what it perceived as "America's hypocrisy and double standards on race issues," and either celebrated every sign of progress made by African Americans in the struggle or condemned every twist and reversal.⁵²

The African American struggle for equal access in the field of education was one of the most emotional and compelling issues the African press monitored with serious interest. In 1954, for instance, following the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, the *West African Pilot* declared this development was "of particular significance and special interest to Africa and people of African descent throughout the world. It entails that the American concept and practice of democracy within its own territory should acknowledge the necessity of equal opportunity for all citizens no matter the racial origins."⁵³

In 1957, when Arkansas governor Orval Faubus, a segregationist, defied federal laws by preventing nine African American students from enrolling in Little Rock High School, the African press followed the episode with keen attention. In an article entitled "Race Crisis in Little Rock," the *Nigerian Daily Times* called the attention of Nigerians to the event.⁵⁴ The newspaper followed up with a September 25, 1957, report that President Eisenhower had issued a warning that he would "use the full power of the United States, including whatever force may be necessary, to prevent the obstruction of the law in the Little Rock schools' racial dispute."⁵⁵ However, what the African newspaper did not understand at this time was that President Eisenhower was dragging his feet on social reforms. This slow pace is despite Jackie Robinson's (the first African American athlete in major league baseball) appeal to the president to come up with a clear and "unequivocal statement backed up by action."⁵⁶ Rather than heed this call, the president reiterated a gradualist resolution of the crisis and was more concerned about the embarrassment the Little Rock episode caused his government. "It would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence" of the United States, President Eisenhower lamented in a nationally televised address, adding that the enemies of the country "are gloating over this incident and using it everywhere to misrepresent our nation."⁵⁷ In response to Robinson, Eisenhower wrote, "Steadily we are moving closer to the goal of fair and equal treatment of citizens without regard to race or color."⁵⁸

Following Eisenhower's appeal, a fleeting period of peace returned to Little Rock, and the school crisis ended, albeit temporarily, without recourse to federal troops. Again, the *Daily Times* in Lagos updated the Nigerian newspaper-reading public with the latest development, adding the voices of students at the center of the crisis: "Five of the Negro students who attended the school said everyone in it was friendly. The White students also said they held no ill will

against their Negro schoolmates.”⁵⁹ Then in October, the newspaper reported again that normalcy had returned to the school in an article captioned “All Quiet in Little Rock.”⁶⁰ Two days later, hell broke loose at the school following a calculated attack on Black students by their majority White fellow students. The *Daily Times* did not waste much time in updating its audience about the new development under the headline “Negro Students Attacked by Whites at Little Rock.” The writer quoted one of the attackers as saying that the aim of the assault was to make the Black students feel “so miserable.”⁶¹

During his short tenure as president, John F. Kennedy, who succeeded Eisenhower on January 20, 1961, had to respond to the African press’s unrelenting criticism of persistent racism against African Americans in the United States, as well as the problem of disenfranchisement of Africans under European colonial domination. After running a successful campaign on a liberal agenda, however, the Democratic president stated that winning the Cold War rather than pursuing a lasting resolution of the civil rights struggle would be the primary focus of his administration. This view came despite his acknowledgment that segregationist politics in the American South were a severe liability in the United States’ drive to emerge victorious in the Cold War ideological struggles. Moreover, “even the most right-wing African groups and regimes made their solidarity with African Americans known.”⁶² The new African leaders wanted the United States to show that they would be treated with respect and not with the racist disrespect meted out to the African American population.

The Africans perceived these racist policies as hypocritical in light of the United States’ coveting of the emergent African nations as allies in the Cold War struggle. In a series of editorials and news reports and publications, the Africans urged the U.S. government to restore social order in America. For instance, when President Kennedy announced in 1961 that it was the top priority of his government to land a crew of men on the moon and return them home safely before the end of the decade, the *Ashanti Pioneer*, considered by the American diplomats in Accra as “the most Western-oriented” and “responsible newspaper in Ghana,” carried an article titled “Can White Americans Answer?” in which the editor criticized the proclivity to racial discrimination in the United States.⁶³ The *Ghanaian Times*, a government-owned newspaper published in Accra, lashed out that rather than focusing on space travel, the Negro condition demanded a more urgent consideration.⁶⁴ Four days later, the *Ethiopian Herald* called on the U.S. government to put its “own house in order before condemning others,” adding that “any segregation against the Negro is simultaneously segregation against Africans.”⁶⁵

In September 1962, when James Meredith, an African American World War II Air Force veteran, enrolled at the University of Mississippi, Gov. Ross Barnett

sided with the segregationists, triggering a crisis in which federal troops were dispatched to Mississippi to protect Meredith and enforce federal laws. Following the incident, the *Nigerian Morning Post* sent a message of goodwill to President Kennedy for his handling of the incident.⁶⁶ The ensuing melee led to the loss of two lives and more than 300 injuries. The *West African Pilot* also celebrated the victory of Meredith, reporting that his decision was to use the resources at his command to liberate his people through his philanthropic organization known as the Meredith Fund Campaign for Afro-American Education. The nationalist paper linked Meredith’s and other, related stories to the admission of Harvey Gantt into Clemson College in Columbia, South Carolina.⁶⁷

On March 1, 1963, the *Nigerian Daily Express* called on President Kennedy’s government to hasten civil rights reforms. The newspaper cited Kennedy’s remarks that racial discrimination in the United States diminished America’s “world leadership by contradicting at home the message we preach abroad.”⁶⁸ In a similar tone, an editorial “Breaking the Color Line,” in the *Ghanaian Times* of April 15, 1963, pronounced that “the man who screams friendship to the black man outside his borders only to discriminate against him in his home . . . is not causing a happy picture in anybody’s mind.”⁶⁹

Indeed, segregation and the deplorable condition of African Americans were severe sources of embarrassment for U.S. democracy and the quest for global leadership. On April 12, 1963, the police in Birmingham, Alabama, arrested King for violating a law that prohibited a public demonstration. On May 9, 1963, the *Ghanaian Times* ran a commentary in which it branded Birmingham a “Race Riot City.” The report included a picture of Gloria Floyd, a young African American girl, reportedly killed and dragged through the streets of Jackson, Mississippi. The paper posed the rhetorical question, “Is this America the beautiful?”⁷⁰ Echoing a speech by King, the *Ghanaian Times* editorial noted that “Birmingham is now the focal point of the freedom struggle . . . if we can crack segregation here, it will not be long before we crack it all over the south.”

About a month later, on May 10, 1963, a cover story in the *Ghanaian Times* headlined “Luther Is Jailed for 6 Months” reported that the authorities in Alabama jailed King and his colleague Ralph Abernathy on May 9 for six months for organizing a public protest without a permit.⁷¹ The paper also emphasized the prediction of Ralph Bunche, an official of the United Nations and the first African American to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950, that the struggle for racial equality in the United States would be resolved within the decade.

When the Birmingham Board of Education voted on May 20, 1963, to expel all 1,081 students who participated in the “Children’s Crusade,” a rally organized to protest Birmingham city’s commissioner for public safety, Eugene “Bull” Connor, and his brutal police actions, the *Ghanaian Times* provided

the reading audience in Ghana a full account of the events.⁷² The paper also diligently covered any piece of action or legislation passed, which appeared as progress in the quest for racial equality. Among these was the news that some restaurants in Durham, North Carolina, had begun serving African American clientele even though many others continue to refuse to serve them. It also reported that in a civil rights case before the Supreme Court of the United States, the Court overturned the conviction of some African Americans by a local court for organizing a sit-in demonstration. Likewise, an editorial entitled "The Color Bar Problem in America" in the *Cameroonian Times* complained that the Americans "cannot pretend to assist African countries in the 'process of development' while torturing their kith and kin."⁷³ Similar but more comprehensive coverage of the Supreme Court ruling was in the Nigerian *Daily Express*. In an article headlined "U.S. Court Rules Against Racism: Conviction of Negroes by States Set Aside," the *Daily Express* reported that "the United States Supreme Court has declared unconstitutional state laws requiring racial segregation in public facilities."⁷⁴

On June 10, 1963, the *Ghanaian Times* carried a very critical story linking Tehran, Birmingham, and South Africa as axes of evil. In powerful terms, the article decried racial policies in the United States, drawing a comparison between the United States and the apartheid policy of South Africa with the restrictive rules of the shah of Iran. The writer condemned what he perceived as unfulfilled "election promises about the Negro civil liberties." The article also accused President Kennedy of being fearful of introducing a transformative civil rights bill in Congress that would change African Americans' condition for good.⁷⁵ In a June 13, 1963, report, the Nigerian *Daily Express* insinuated that President Kennedy was acting more because of pressure than out of any personal commitment to civil right reforms in the United States, but also included the report that the president was optimistic that "U.S. Negroes shall Win Racial War." A couple of days later, the *Daily Express* carried a story titled "Kennedy Pledges New Race Law as Negro Leader Slain."⁷⁶ The *West African Pilot* added its voice to the growing international condemnation of the race problem in the United States by reporting the call by the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists that the U.S. government change the attitude of White Americans, especially those "in the south."⁷⁷

While the African newspapers spoke the minds of their government and people, the emergent African leaders continued to voice their feelings at every occasion that presented the opportunity. Early in 1959, Nnamdi Azikiwe was invited to address the NAACP on the organization's jubilee. When the Nigerian nationalist took the stage, he addressed a broad spectrum of subjects related to

the civil rights struggle—including the 1954 Supreme Court decision, the spirit of the Blacks as exemplified by NAACP constitution, and the decolonization movement in Africa. Without hesitation, Azikiwe stated that "in Africa, the NAACP spirit of active resistance to the forces, which are inconsistent with democratic principles, has fired our imagination. We have relentlessly fought any attempt to foist upon us the horrible stigma of racial inferiority. We have successfully challenged cant and hypocrisy among those who pay lip service to democracy. And we have severed forever the chains of autocracy in many African countries where millions of Africans were held in political bondage."⁷⁸

This speech would serve as one of the earliest and most direct comments made by an African nationalist leader about the civil rights movement on American soil. Many other similar remarks would follow as the decolonization train in African gained traction. On March 22, 1959, Congolese nationalist Patrice Lumumba expressed the African nationalist leaders' identification of the aspirations of colonized and enslaved peoples as one. In a speech at an international seminar held at the University of Ibadan, Lumumba declared that "the aims pursued by nationalist movements in any African territory are also the same. The common goal is the liberation of Africa from the colonialist yoke. . . . We hold out a fraternal hand to the West. Let it today give proof of the principle of equality and friendship between races that its sons have always taught us as we sat at our desks in school, a principle written in capital letters in the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man. Africans must be just as free as other citizens of the human family to enjoy the fundamental liberties set forth in this declaration and the rights proclaimed in the United Nations Charter. The period of racial monopolies is now at an end."⁷⁹

Then on May 24, 1963, for example, a correspondent of the *Ghanaian Times* reported from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, that Prime Minister Milton Obote of Uganda had attacked the United States for the Alabama race riots. In a message to the president of the United States, Obote declared that "nothing is more paradoxical than that these events should take place in the United States and at a time when that country is anxious to project its image before the world screen as the architect of democracy and champion of freedom."⁸⁰

Following Obote's comment was that from President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania. Nyerere attacked the United States for persistently experiencing the embarrassment that racial bigotry brings because of ignorance and intolerance. He pointed out the negative impression the race question had created about the country in the international arena. Echoing Du Bois's comment on the United States' claim to be the leader of democracy in the world while it could not rule Alabama, Nyerere also took America to task by saying, "America which claims

to be a champion and guardian of democracy and an upholder of human dignity should have set a better example to the world."⁸¹

From May 3 to 8, 1963, the world cringed with horror at images of police brutality against schoolchildren as racial hatred boiled over again in Birmingham. In a slight reminiscence of the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 and the Soweto uprising of 1976 in South Africa, Bull Connor ordered the use of fire hoses, clubs, and rabid dogs against the demonstrating young people. After a series of meetings between Birmingham businesses and John M. Gore, the U.S. assistant attorney general for civil rights, Birmingham officials agreed to desegregate public facilities, and local businesses decided to hire more Blacks. However, the African press did not overlook the damage already done. In an article by Teshome Adera entitled "Justice Done," the *Ethiopian Herald* highlighted the increasing erosion of America's "enormous influence and prestige around the world" due to segregation.⁸² Similarly, the *Cameroonian Times*, in an article headlined "The Colour Bar Problems in America" on May 21, 1963, argued that if what happened in Birmingham had occurred in the Soviet Union, American politicians would have "spoken out their lungs."⁸³ In other words, the United States would have spearheaded a global outcry against the Soviets.

It is noteworthy that the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, was part of the plan by African American leaders to support the civil rights bill proposed by President Kennedy and to lobby for its passage. The rally was attended by an estimated 250,000 people and received extensive coverage in Nigeria and Ghana. A day before the historic event, the *West African Pilot* published a report titled "4000 U.S. Troops Alerted as Negroes Plan to 'Invade' Washington."⁸⁴ The publication coincided with the announcement of Du Bois's death in Ghana at age ninety-five. Du Bois died two years after he had renounced his U.S. citizenship in 1961 due to frustrations with poor race relations in his country and moved to Ghana, where he took up Ghanaian citizenship on the invitation of Nkrumah. If King's "I Have a Dream" speech remains today as a powerful epitaph to the civil rights struggle, Du Bois's final words to Nkrumah on his deathbed on August 27, 1963, stand as a reminder of the essence of Pan-Africanism. He reminded Blacks around the world that their shared history and destiny made it compulsory to continue working with a common purpose for the greater good of their race. "I want to thank you," said Du Bois, "for all you have done to make the ending of my life bountiful and beautiful. . . . Good-bye! And bless you."⁸⁵

As evidence reveals, the collective actions and thoughts of Africans and African Americans were instrumental in the success of the civil rights movement

and the successful defeat of European colonial rule in Africa. In their vigorous and committed coverage of the struggle, the African press understood the need to project the deeds and misdeeds of U.S. politicians with regard to race relations and human rights as they related to African Americans' condition. The Africans were further conscious of the fact that racial discrimination in America diminished respect for the United States in the international arena and thus endangered its quest for global leadership in the world order.

More important, the African educated elite and opinion leaders were quite aware that the outcome of the struggle would have severe implications for Africa and its people on both the domestic and international fronts. While the postcolonial state in Africa used its independent press to cover myriad other issues converging on the global stage, the press devoted particular interest to the U.S. civil rights struggle and covered every event with consistency and analytical insight. It was to the credit of the Africans that the press leveraged the favorable global political climate offered by the Cold War ideological struggle to push forward various African agendas, including the quest for freedom on both sides of the Atlantic. The emergent African postcolonial leaders and nationalists provide the leadership and funds with which this struggle was prosecuted to a successful end. In his heartfelt tribute to the Africans in 1965, Malcolm X thanked the African leaders for organizing to help achieve freedom for Black people everywhere. Then he added that the only groups he saw not doing much during his trip to Africa in the 1960s were the "American Negroes and the Afro-Americans" who were "just socializing and partying."⁸⁶