

Dwight D. Eisenhower and Civil Rights: Reflections on a Portrait in Caution

by Robert F. Burk

IN 1954, in criticizing a group of senators for insufficient backbone on a controversial legislative matter, President Dwight Eisenhower wrote, "They do not seem to realize when there arrives that moment at which soft speaking should be abandoned and a fight to the end undertaken. Any man who hopes to exercise leadership must be ready to meet this requirement face to face when it arises; unless he is ready to fight when necessary, people will finally begin to ignore him."¹ Ironically, in the view both of many contemporary observers and later historians, such an unflattering portrait accurately describes Eisenhower's own record on the greatest domestic moral challenge of his time—the civil rights revolution. It is impossible in the short span of an article to provide a detailed account of the Eisenhower record on civil rights, but it is worth trying (drawing upon an avocation dear to Eisenhower's own heart—portrait painting) to depict in broad strokes the essential influences upon his approach to racial issues. Like his oil canvasses, the Eisenhower civil rights persona was the product of various layered, blended "pigments"; an amalgam of deeply rooted and subconscious racial assumptions and fears, personal and partisan ambitions, ideological convictions, and geopolitical imperatives. Each element contributed to the whole, but none stood completely alone or provided in isolation a fully rounded "portrait" of his approach to racial matters.

The most intensely personal of the "layers" of the Eisenhower portrait in civil rights was that of the "inner" Ike—the subconscious, ingrained racial habits, assumptions, fears, and prejudices that were instilled in him from boyhood and were reinforced or modified throughout his adult life. They affected not only his willingness to adopt particular stances on civil rights issues, but his very willingness to address such concerns at all, or even to accept the social presence of individuals of

other color. In Eisenhower's case, the product of a small-town, midwestern boyhood and a military career was not the overt racism of the die-hard segregationist—not the contempt bred of familiarity, the burden of "heritage," or the fear of interracial competition. Instead it was the understated, quiet prejudices and stereotypes of the unknowing, the unchallenged, and the insensitive. The young Eisenhower, like his friends, unthinkingly played such games as "black man" or "crack the whip." To his credit, on one occasion as a teenager he defended the right of a black bystander to participate in a local baseball game on the grounds that he was a good player, but such instinctive decency receded over time before more powerful forms of peer pressure and social convention.²

Raised in an almost all-white environment and educated at a West Point without black cadets or teachers, Eisenhower's subsequent service in segregated U.S. Army camps effectively prevented development and testing of the idea of blacks as social equals and complete comrades. Instead, non-whites assumed a distant, and subordinate, presence, or no presence at all. During his tours of duty in the South, Panama, and the Philippines, Eisenhower never expressed dissatisfaction at the existence of racial caste systems, and the unchallenged acquiescence was not challenged by his fellow officers, many of whom were either Southern-born or trained. The few direct encounters he had with blacks in the military, as when he served as a drill instructor for Illinois National Guardsmen, reinforced the feeling that "They just couldn't do anything." As Allied Supreme Commander in Europe, Eisenhower, in the recollection of aide Kay Summersby, never discussed racial discrimination, but others recalled the general's obvious amusement at viewing a propaganda film displaying black soldiers with rifles, a sight he professed never to have seen. With his main exposure to non-whites as an adult being in their role as servants, he noted during the North African campaign that he was staffed by a "group of darkies that take gorgeous care of

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1. Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *The Eisenhower Diaries* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1981), 270.

2. Peter Lyon, *Eisenhower: Portrait of the Hero* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1974), 556.

me." As late as 1951, according to author John Gunther, all of his military servants were black GI's.³

As a comparatively passive receptor of a culture of prejudice, rather than a builder or public defender of it, Eisenhower was not committed to it so personally that he could not override it on occasion for the sake of more pressing objectives. When short of additional riflemen to fill depleted ranks during the Battle of the Bulge, for example, he proved temporarily willing to order blacks from the supply services into the front lines alongside whites. Once the emergency had passed, however, upon the urgings of aide Walter Bedell Smith he reworded the order so as to require segregated platoons and white officers. In its own way, however, even the Ardennes experience, while it challenged some of the general's stereotypes, reinforced others by underlining the main "positive" virtues of blacks as loyalty and faithful service, not those of leadership ability. Years later, when speaking before a Harlem audience as a

presidential candidate, he would single out for special praise "the loyalty and the value to us of that great ten percent of our population that is Negro in race."⁴

If there was a modification of Eisenhower's deepest racial attitudes because of World War II, it was slight. He did order the desegregation of overseas Red Cross clubs, but in congressional testimony in 1948 he continued to oppose desegregation below platoon level, preferring a "separate but equal" promotion system for black non-commissioned officers. As President, years later, a sensitive Eisenhower asked his lone black staff aide in the White House, E. Frederic Morrow, to view such past actions in a spirit of charity. Eisenhower never could overcome, however, his inability to visualize blacks as full social equals in integrated settings, and he remained consistently nervous and uncomfortable in their presence. He remarked to speechwriter Arthur Larson that he did not take black demands for political and economic equality of opportunity to mean "social mingling" or "that a Negro should court my daughter." Although he cited Dr. Ralph Bunche, along with Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver, as role

3. E. Frederic Morrow Oral History, 1977, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library [hereafter cited as DDEL], 20; Lyon, *Portrait of the Hero*, 556; Kay Summersby, *Eisenhower Was My Boss* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1948), 291; John Gunther, *Eisenhower: The Man and the Symbol* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), 6.

4. Allan Taylor, *What Eisenhower Thinks* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1952), 87-88.



E. Frederic Morrow, shown here with the President in 1956, was a White House staff aide.

models for black America, as Columbia University president Eisenhower had been so fearful of offending white guests that he nearly had refused to invite Bunche to an honorary dinner. Even the presence of the words "discrimination" or "racial" in speech drafts, according to Larson, filled Eisenhower with unease, and he consistently sought their deletion.⁵

Rather than overt bigotry, what Eisenhower carried with him into the presidency was a personality comfortable with the status quo in race relations and uncomfortable with confronting the questionable morality of it, or of his own private prejudices. He was more comfortable with passing on the latest "nigger jokes" from his friends at the Bobby Jones golf course at Augusta than in pondering why such behavior caused his more racially sensitive secretary, Ann Whitman, to wince with embarrassment. Eisenhower was more comfortable refusing to extend an invitation for a White House meeting on race relations to black civil rights leaders (he held but one such meeting, in June 1958) than to proffer it or to speak out himself on such matters. Following church bombings in Montgomery, Alabama, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., in February 1957 telegraphed the President, urging him to give a speech somewhere in the South stressing the need for law and order. When the telegram reached Eisenhower, he already had arrived at Thomasville, Georgia—not to give a speech, but to enjoy a vacation. It was more comfortable to do so, to shoot wild turkey on Treasury Secretary George Humphrey's farm and be driven around in wicker carriages by "the old colored retainers," than to bother replying to King's telegram.⁶

A second layer of the Eisenhower portrait in civil rights consisted of the "partisan" Ike. This Eisenhower referred not only to the man who headed the Republican party and sought to advance its popular and electoral position, but also to the politician who tried to do the same for himself. Eisenhower's presidency did mark an era in which the GOP sought to redefine itself, not just in civil rights, but in foreign policy and other issues as well, in a manner more advantageous to do battle at the national level with the majority Democrats. But what definition should that be? The "Dewey wing" of the party, consisting of Northeastern Republican moderates and internationalists, believed that the party's future on civil rights meant not writing off Northern black votes to the opponent. The party's emerging conservative wing favored what amounted to an early variation of a "Southern strategy" aimed at courting away disillusioned white Southern Democrats. Eisenhower found himself pulled in both

directions, for while it had been the Dewey faction, primarily in order to block Robert Taft's foreign policy isolationism, that had spearheaded and staffed his successful nomination bid in 1952, on a more basic attitudinal level Eisenhower had more in common on civil rights with the conservatives. If the 1952 general election campaign was any indication, it suggested that while maintaining an overall centrist position within the GOP, Eisenhower likely would wean himself away gradually from the control of the Dewey faction, and, more by drift than dramatic occurrence, navigate the GOP towards a conservative identity on civil rights. The objective would be to win over more and more whites discomfited by the pressures for racial change, while hoping, through occasional, low-risk symbolic gestures, to maintain the support of at least a substantial minority of black voters.

Eisenhower displayed a calculating, self-interested side, usually well-concealed from the public, in his willing adoption of such a racial political strategy. Careful to avoid controversial or provocative gestures, early in the 1952 campaign he responded to a Texas letter warning him for political expediency not to support a Fair Employment Practices Commission by stating, "The presentation you make . . . is, of course, generally parallel with my own thinking." A blunter example of the candidate's electoral calculus was provided at a Detroit rally when, uneasy at the enthusiasm of a tribute from a black supporter, he turned to a colleague and whispered, "That will sure win us a lot of votes in Houston!" Subtle indication that Eisenhower believed he had more to gain from white voters, and therefore should take greater precaution not to offend the same, was provided when black aide Morrow cautioned him not to use the phrase "you people" in addressing black audiences. Morrow found himself reprimanded through intermediaries for being an "alarmist."

The 1952 campaign itinerary pointedly included an early swing through the South, where Eisenhower gained the endorsements of Democratic governors Allen Shivers of Texas, James Byrnes of South Carolina, and Robert Kennon of Louisiana. While in Columbia, South Carolina, he joined Byrnes and other supporters in standing and clapping to the playing of "Dixie." Except for pledging to complete the desegregation of the military and to extend desegregation in the District of Columbia, neither of which Eisenhower assumed would involve confrontations with Southern state leaders, he left black voters with occasional platitudes and vague partisan assaults upon the inadequate performance of the national Democratic party.⁷

5. Morrow Oral History, DDEL, 17; Arthur Larson, *Eisenhower: The President Nobody Knew* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 127; Lyon, *Portrait of the Hero*, 409.

6. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President* vol. 2 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 327, 385-87, 408.

7. Lyon, *Portrait of the Hero*, 441-42; Emmet John Hughes, *The Ordeal of Power: A Political Memoir of the Eisenhower Years* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), 201; *New York Times*, October 16, 1952, p. 1; Herbert S. Parmet, *Eisenhower and the American Crusades* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1972), 108; William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1970), 222-24.

Once in office, invariably it was the representatives of the Northeastern GOP faction around Eisenhower who were the sole insiders to press, albeit politely, for civil rights. Even then, the motivations were usually more partisan than personal or moral. The Justice Department, headed by former Dewey and Eisenhower campaign manager Herbert Brownell, urged actions that could be performed with minimal fanfare and therefore minimal risk to the President. The President's informal adviser on minorities, Maxwell Rabb, illustrated particularly well the extent, and the limitations, of even this GOP faction's commitment to racial progress. Rabb—Jewish, a lawyer, and a former aide to Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr.—was referred to by other White House staffers as the resident “liberal,” and Morrow on one occasion praised him as the only one who took racial problems seriously. But Rabb saw his own role primarily as a racial political troubleshooter; one who would contain political problems, formulate administration responses to minority complaints, and promote the GOP with black voters, primarily located in the North. Rabb and others attempted regularly to employ and manipulate Harlem congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., as a pro-administration defender on racial matters. Rabb created a forum for black personnel complaints within the administration which served as a kind of “early warning system” for potential problems, but even the existence of meetings of the group, dubbed the “Emancipation Committee,” was kept from public knowledge.⁸

One way in which the President's goal of minimizing black electoral losses without alienating Southern whites was promoted was by sprinkling black appointees into a handful of innocuous executive positions. The “highest ranking” of these was Morrow, a former public relations executive at CBS and a New Jersey native appointed to the White House staff in 1955 after a stint in the Commerce Department. Upon receiving his assignment, however, Morrow found difficulty finding a White House clerical employee who would accept the “onus” of a “colored boss,” and staff women followed the humiliating practice of entering and leaving Morrow's office in pairs so as to allay any rumors of sexual misconduct with a black superior. Despite Morrow's value to the President and his party as a symbol of GOP enlightenment (he gave hundreds of speeches extolling the administration before black audiences, sat in the reviewing stand at Eisenhower's reelection inaugural parade in 1957, and was featured as a speaker at the 1960 GOP convention), even “sympathetic” Eisenhower aides such as Rabb directed their impatience at Morrow for insufficient black electoral “gratitude” for all of the administration's kind gestures. Indication that such impatience came from the top was illustrated during Eisenhower's lone June 23, 1958, meeting with civil rights

leaders, in which the President wondered aloud that if his five years' labor on civil rights had produced black bitterness rather than appreciation, then was it wise to push forward? The clear impression left by Eisenhower to his listeners was that in dealing on civil rights, he, not they, was the aggrieved party.⁹

If Eisenhower and the men around him—even those more attuned to the electoral value of blacks—demonstrated little patience with black political “ingratitude,” they seemed to overflow with understanding toward the political defenders of segregation in the South. When word leaked in the summer of 1953 of the preparation of a Justice Department *amicus* brief in the group of Supreme Court school integration cases known as *Brown* (a brief which, as it turned out, did not formally advocate the dismantling of the “separate but equal” doctrine, but whose drafters were prepared to support such a view in oral argument if asked by the justices), Eisenhower and Attorney General Brownell took great pains to reassure nervous Southern politicians. Having had his sympathy reinforced by a staff memorandum on “Party Organization in the Southern States,” Eisenhower assured Governors Byrnes and Shivers that “I believe that Federal law imposed upon our states in such a way as to bring about a conflict of the police power of the states and of the nation, would set back the cause of progress in race relations for a long, long time.” After the President had urged Brownell to limit the *Brown* brief to a “resume of fact and historical record” on the applicability of the Fourteenth Amendment to school segregation, the attorney general indicated that even if the high court overturned public school segregation, he would personally impress upon Governor Byrnes that “under our doctrine it [desegregation] would be a period of years and he wouldn't have to ‘declare war’ so to speak.” In an unusual attempt to influence the Supreme Court's determination in *Brown*, Eisenhower, at a White House stag dinner in early 1954, demonstrated his sympathy for the white Southern position by pointedly praising South Carolina's attorney in the litigation, John W. Davis, and even questioning the wisdom of bringing black boys into classrooms with white girls.¹⁰

Privately Eisenhower fretted over the impact of the Supreme Court's ruling in May 1954 which overturned “separate but equal.” Alternately, he welcomed the high court's ruling of a year later placing the burden of implementing school desegregation upon the courts and refusing to impose a national timetable for implementation.

9. Ibid., 11, 13, 18, 27-28, 31, 37, 47, 79-82, 102-3; Memorandum, Rocco Siciliano, June 24, 1954, Diary Series, Box 33, DDEL.

10. Allan Shivers to Eisenhower, July 16, 1953, Official Field, Box 731, DDEL; Eisenhower Diary, July 24, 1953, “Memorandum for the Record,” August 19, 1953, Telephone call, November 15, 1953, Whitman File, Diary Series, Boxes 2, 3, DDEL; William Bragg Ewald, Jr., *Eisenhower the President: Crucial Days, 1951-1960* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981), 81-83.

8. E. Frederic Morrow, *Black Man in the White House* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1963), 29-31, 223.

While President Eisenhower met with prominent members of the black community, such as Claude A. Barnett (left) director of Associated Negro Press, Inc., it was not until the President's second term that he met with civil rights leaders.



Below: Photographed at that first meeting in June 1958 were Lester Granger; Martin Luther King, Jr.; E. Frederic Morrow; President Eisenhower; A. Philip Randolph; Attorney General William Rogers; Rocco Siciliano; and Roy Wilkins.



Fears of the Southern political reaction to, and his own doubts about, the *Brown* decision led him to refuse to endorse it publicly. When college officials suspended black enrollee Autherine Lucy from classes at the University of Alabama, Eisenhower's tepid reply was "I would certainly hope that we could avoid any interference with anybody else as long as that state, from its Governor on down, will do its best to straighten it out." Alabama's GOP leader Claude O. Vardaman informed the President that his statement "was well received by everyone, including the Governor himself." When state authorities did nothing to prevent the obstruction of black student entry at Hoxie, Arkansas, in 1955 and Texarkana and Mansfield, Texas, and Clinton, Tennessee, in 1956, Eisenhower refused to intervene, despite arguments from aide Bryce Harlow that a *Congressional Quarterly* article had identified sixty-one non-Southern districts where shifts by black voters would elect GOP candidates.¹¹

Ironically, despite Eisenhower's hesitancy, the GOP in 1956 gained ground among black voters, aided by the *Brown* decision, prosperity, and the selective use of the theme "a vote for any Democrat is a vote for Eastland" in Northern districts with substantial minority populations. When Eisenhower did finally employ federal force to support implementation of a court integration order at Little Rock the following fall, what made the uncomfortable decision slightly easier were the facts that Republican gains in Arkansas were unlikely and the partisan short-term damage for the GOP among Southerners would be less widespread in 1957 than it would have been a year earlier during a presidential reelection campaign. Even so, Southern criticism of the federal troop intervention stung Eisenhower sharply, leaving him bitter but, revealingly, not at the South but at the Supreme Court. Steadfastly refusing to endorse the high court's decisions on school desegregation following the Little Rock crisis, he privately declared to Arthur Larson, "I personally think the [*Brown*] decision was wrong." To Emmet John Hughes he expressed his unhappiness at the box he had been placed in on a personal level by the Supreme Court. "You take the attitude of a fellow like Jimmy Byrnes," he remarked. "We used to be pretty good friends, and now I've not heard from him even once in the last eighteen months—all because of bitterness on this thing."¹²

The most significant contribution of the "partisan Eisenhower" to civil rights progress, albeit an unintended one, was the impact of some of his judicial

appointments to the federal courts. Most famous, of course, was his selection of Earl Warren of California as chief justice in 1953. Among the President's other significant nominees to lower federal courts in the South were Judges John Minor Wisdom of Louisiana, Elbert P. Tuttle of Georgia, John Robert Brown of Texas, and Frank Johnson of Alabama. In all of these instances, however, Eisenhower was not guided by a conscious desire to promote integration or racial advance, although the *absence* of a specific issue "litmus test" probably provided greater ideological leeway among his appointees. Instead of the candidates' positions on specific court issues, the common denominator of these appointments was partisanship—especially the desire to reward those who had labored for Eisenhower's own nomination and election in 1952. Warren's support had been crucial to Eisenhower's triumph over Taft at the 1952 Republican convention. Wisdom had been chairman of the Southern Conference for Eisenhower the same year, while Tuttle had been the organization's vice-chairman. Brown had served as a GOP leader in Houston, and Johnson had headed Veterans for Eisenhower in his home state.¹³

The partisan Eisenhower, however, most often attempted to finesse racial issues for personal and partisan electoral gain, employing election-year campaign symbolism to retain and occasionally increase Northern black support, while not doing enough of substance to cripple efforts directed at the greater goal of a strong GOP appeal to white Southerners. Evidence that by the end of his presidency, Eisenhower had not yet completely developed a partisan formula to reconcile the conflicting demands of rival Northern black and Southern white constituencies was provided by the President's dejected postmortem on the November presidential election defeat of Vice-President Richard M. Nixon. Reflecting his usual initial instincts, the President first blamed Nixon's running mate, Henry Cabot Lodge, for promising a Negro cabinet appointment. Lodge had "stuck his nose into" a potentially substantive matter such as "the makeup of the cabinet" which "cost us thousands of votes in the South, maybe South Carolina and Texas." Upon reflection, however, he appeared to reverse himself, blaming Nixon himself for an inadequate show of symbolic racial concern in failing to make "a couple of phone calls," as the Kennedys had done, in behalf of the jailed Martin Luther King, Jr.¹⁴ Too much substance or too little symbolism—Nixon's failure apparently had to stem from one or the other.

11. Transcript of presidential press conference, February 8, 1956, and Claude O. Vardaman to Eisenhower, February 11, 1956, Official File, Box 732, DDEL; Bryce Harlow to Maxwell Rabb, May 3, 1956, Harlow Records, Box 8, DDEL.

12. Robert F. Burk, *The Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 174-86; Hughes, *Ordeal of Power*, 201; Larson, *Eisenhower: The President Nobody Knew*, 124.

13. Burk, *Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights*, 140-41, 199-200.

14. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President*, 604; Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), 25.

The "ideological" Eisenhower provided yet another layer of color to the President's civil rights canvas. Throughout his political life, Eisenhower groped for a guiding philosophy of government which would allow both for maximum individual freedom from "statism" and "paternalism" and the encouragement of cooperation between private individuals and groups, private and public institutions, and local and national government bodies. The Eisenhower dread of "paternalism" seems to have been as deeply rooted as his ambivalence toward his own stern, severe father, and his championing of leadership by gentle example and the facilitation of cooperation as strong as his worship of his mother for embodying the same qualities. Not surprisingly, in Eisenhower's political philosophy the federal government's ideal mission was not to "coerce," or even to foment "creative tension," but to encourage local and private solutions to social problems—in short, to get private individuals and groups to "do the right thing" by themselves.

Because such a "conflict resolution" approach to leadership would, when successful, most likely produce compromise outcomes, it is not surprising that Eisenhower tended to elevate the "middle way" as an article of profound political wisdom. As he wrote, "The generality I advance is merely this: excluding the field of moral values, anything that affects or is proposed for masses of humans is wrong if the position it seeks is at either end of possible argument." Such a philosophy, Eisenhower less often admitted, also reduced the likelihood of damaging his own electoral prospects or those of his party through provocative advocacy of controversial, "coercive" policies. Taken as a whole, Eisenhower's devotion to individual freedom, voluntary cooperation, and limited federal power echoed the philosophy of the last Republican to precede him in the White House—Herbert Hoover. The resemblance in philosophies was not wholly coincidental, for the GOP elder statesman advised Eisenhower in 1952, "Some people will want you to lead them back at full speed to the 'good old days.' At the other extreme, some will want you to initiate welfare programs regardless of their effect on federal fiscal affairs and on the nation's economy. To go back is impossible, but many will not believe this, and will demand miracles of you. To allow present trends to go on is unwise; they will lead to disaster. All you can do is try to turn away gradually from the path leading to paternalism, until it takes a central course, and then stick with it."¹⁵

Eisenhower's aversion to federal solutions and to governmental paternalism, combined with his usual refusal to see racial problems as a moral challenge exempt from the consensus-seeking approaches of the

"middle way," meant that he was unlikely to see the federal government's power as a tool to prod additional civil rights progress. Instead, he viewed the application of federal enforcement power in the civil rights area through the prism of his historical understanding of the Reconstruction experience. In his judgment, one shared by most white Americans of his time if not the historians of today, the use of federal troops and coercive legislation in the 1860s and 1870s had been an excessive, tragic, and bloody failure which had only prolonged sectional hate. His Republican administration would not become, he was determined, a new "Radical Republican" tyrant in the South. The burden of racial progress would not be assumed by the federal executive, but by private citizens of both races, and failing that, by the courts. The methods of resolution, he declared in the State of the Union Address of 1953, should be "the power of fact, fully publicized; of persuasion, honestly pressed; and of conscience, justly aroused," not the police powers of the state.¹⁶

Such statements would appear to have suggested a large public role for the President in public persuasion—in the use of his office as a "bully pulpit." But given the partisan risks even of civil rights pronouncement, and Eisenhower's personal unease at addressing racial subjects, he preferred to leave even the processes of public facilitation and gentle persuasion to others. Rather than personally become embroiled in the public debate over the *Brown* decision, for example, he privately urged evangelist Billy Graham to enlist fellow ministers in behalf of racial "moderation." Observing to Graham that "peacemakers are blessed" and "success through conciliation will be more lasting and stronger than could be obtained through force and conflict," the President suggested that Southerners adopt such good-faith gestures as the token election of a few blacks to local offices, admission of a handful of black students to graduate programs, and greater flexibility in bus segregation rules as ways to encourage similar "moderation" by federal judges. Assuring Graham that he would "remain a moderate," Eisenhower condemned "foolish extremists" (by which he meant both rabid segregationists and the NAACP) "on both sides of the question who will never be won over to a sensible course of action."¹⁷

Eisenhower did, with great reluctance, go against his own strictures regarding federal coercion when he ordered federal troops to Little Rock Central High School in September 1957. But it is revealing of his convictions that he did so only after prolonged personal negotiations with Arkansas governor Orval Faubus resulted in a

16. *Ibid.*, 235.

17. Whitman Diary, March 21, 1956, Whitman File, Diary Series, Box 8, DDEL; Eisenhower to Billy Graham, March 22, 30, 1956, Graham to Eisenhower, March 27, 1956, Whitman File, Name Series, Box 16, DDEL.

15. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Mandate for Change, 1953-1956* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1963), 54, 441.

betrayal by state authorities of what Eisenhower had believed was a face-saving way for them to uphold the federal court order. The action also was ordered only after more willing advocates of intervention, such as Attorney General Brownell, had convinced the President that because of continuing anti-black rioting around the school, the issue had become no longer one of racial integration, or even of upholding a federal court order, but of violent insurrection which required military "peace-keeping" forces. Within weeks, Eisenhower was urging the army to reduce the troop contingent at Little Rock. More significantly, after the controversial actions in Little Rock, Eisenhower never again employed his police powers to inject federal troops to uphold a federal school integration order, even when confronted with massive resistance in Virginia in the late 1950s and segregationist defiance in New Orleans in 1960.¹⁸

What the political "scars" to Eisenhower caused by the integration controversy and his Little Rock response to it produced, instead, was a renewed enthusiasm for other devices designed to encourage local solutions, and for other forms of facilitation and jawboning that did not involve his office. As reflected in administration proposals that culminated in the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, Eisenhower saw the gradual movement towards greater Southern black political empowerment through voting rights as a way to prod additional bi-racial cooperation and greater moderation in the utterances and actions of white Southern officeholders. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, created by his administration's legislation, was intended in a complementary manner to publicize moderate solutions to racial problems, decry excesses, and provide a forum to facilitate moderate progress without resort to federal-state confrontation, coercion, or violence. Having once said, "I can't imagine any set of circumstances that would ever induce me to send Federal troops . . . into any area to enforce the orders of a Federal court," only to be forced into a contradiction of his philosophy two months later at Little Rock, Eisenhower subsequently pursued new avenues in order to insure that he never would be forced to act similarly again.¹⁹

Unfortunately, Eisenhower again discovered to his dismay that for voting rights laws to work in the intended manner, entrenched Southern political interests had to be willing to comply with them voluntarily, or else be coerced into doing so. Faced with Southern official obstruction of black voting rights as well as of integration, even the "fact-finding" Civil Rights Commission found it

needed "coercive" legal action by the Justice Department just to force states to provide access to registration statistics if it intended, through published reports, to "jaw-bone" for voluntary progress. Filing of actual federal lawsuits against discriminatory Southern electoral districts and their officials, in order to be successful, required greater Justice Department and FBI investigative resources, and risked reigniting white political fallout over "coercive" federal intervention in the region's racial problems.²⁰ By the end of his administration, then, Eisenhower had learned that even voting rights was a "two-edged sword"; but one that he still preferred kept dull so as to avoid self-inflicted political wounds, or contradictions to his faith in voluntarism.

The most visible "Ike" to America and the world, the surface manifestation most often displayed to international friend and foe alike throughout his career, was Eisenhower the geopolitical strategist. Eisenhower had spent a lifetime as a soldier and multinational statesman in preparation for the presidential duty he deemed most vital—that of commander in chief of the national defense and leader of the "Free World" in its Cold War struggle against international communism and the Soviet military threat. He recognized that World War II not only had created a precarious bipolar balance of power between rival East-West ideological blocs, but had unleashed the forces of nationalism throughout the developing, non-white, world. The emerging nations of the Third World, he believed, would become either friend or foe, but could not maintain a stable neutrality. Eisenhower also knew that a Cold War involved not only the ability to face armed confrontation, but also the readiness to utilize the subtler tools of diplomacy, espionage, economic aid and trade, and propaganda. His reading of Clausewitz had tutored him that warfare itself, after all, was but the attainment of national diplomatic objectives by the use of force.

Given the potential power to "tip" the geopolitical balance held by the emerging nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the global strategist Eisenhower recognized the vulnerabilities to the United States' "competitive position" presented by a racist national image. For years the Soviet Union had excoriated American racial practices at the United Nations and other international forums, and had scored damaging propaganda points. It had been in part to counter such blots to the national image that Eisenhower's predecessor, Harry S. Truman, had been willing to take domestic political risks and champion a civil rights agenda, including the desegregation of the armed forces. Despite his own prior reluctance on the subject, Eisenhower recognized the necessity of pressing forward with the removal of

18. Burk, *Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights*, 179-85, 188-99.

19. Ibid., 204-27; transcript, presidential press conference, July 17, 1957, in Robert L. Branyan and Lawrence H. Larsen, eds., *The Eisenhower Administration, 1953-1961: A Documentary History*, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1971), 2:1119.

20. Burk, *Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights*, 228-50.

When Eisenhower took office, the questions of civil rights and integration were already discussions in American life; the administration's domestic policies could not ignore the magnitude of their importance.

Topeka Daily Capital, January 26, 1953: A continuing concern among civil rights advocates was legislation. As a congressional beginning, Hubert Humphrey proposed a bill establishing a presidential civil rights commission.

Civil Rights 'Starter' Set

Humphrey Reveals Proposed Bill

WASHINGTON. —(UP)— Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey, a leading racial rights advocate, is making a major bid for a compromise with Southern Democrats in hopes of getting a "starter" civil rights bill thru Congress this year, it was disclosed Sunday.

"I am so distressed over the long stalemate that I am perfectly willing to be the compromiser," the Minnesota Democrat told a reporter.

"I am willing to offer the olive branch and get this thing moving. It's better to go a foot than to fail to go a mile."

His specific compromise proposal is a bill to set up a presidential civil right commission to survey the duties and activities of federal agencies in fields of employment, education, health, housing and so on. It would have power to make recommendations to the President, Congress and state and

Immediate Integration Ordered in Little Rock

But Governor Keeps Militia On the Scene

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.—(UP)—Federal Judge Ronald N. Davies Tuesday night ordered immediate integration of Central High School here, disregarding a cordon of National Guard troops thrown around the school Monday night by Gov. Orval E. Faubus.

The judge's order was handed down in a brief four-minute hearing asked for by the Little Rock School Board to clarify the explosive situation.

Judge Davies said he planned to take the governor "at his word" to use the troops at the high school to "preserve the peace" and "protect the citizens of the community."



SCHOOL OPENS IN LITTLE ROCK—White students of Little Rock Central High School file in for the first day of classes Tuesday while National Guardsmen patrol the grounds. No Negro students showed up for the scheduled integration after Gov. Orval Faubus ordered out the Guard.

Left: Topeka Daily Capital, September 4, 1957: The nation watched as classes opened at Little Rock Central High. Arkansas governor Orval E. Faubus called out the National Guard when a federal court ordered immediate integration.

Bottom: Topeka Daily Capital, May 18, 1954: With the landmark decision of Brown v. Topeka Board of Education, public school segregation was struck down. In Topeka, the response was that the ruling would have "little effect" since that city's schools had been moving towards integration since September 1953; the story noted that Salina and Atchison too had begun integration in their schools.

South Quick to Protest Court's School Ruling

Georgia's Governor to Fight for Segregation



VICTORS IN BATTLE—Lawyers who led the fight before the U. S. Supreme Court for abolition of segregation in public schools congratulate one another as they leave the court Monday. They are, left to right, George E. C. Hayes, Washington; Thurgood Marshall, New York, and James M. Nabrit.

WASHINGTON.—(UP)—Several Southern members of Congress said Monday the Supreme Court's school segregation decision actually will set back Negro education in the South.

Southern senators expressed disappointment at the court's declaration that school segregation is unconstitutional. But they were restrained in their comments.

Northern, Eastern and Western members of Congress generally applauded the decision. Many said it is a good decision in the fight against Russia's attempt to depict the United States as a "hypocrite."

Gov. Herman Tammage in Atlanta asserted the court's opinion reduces the Constitution to "a mere scrap of paper" and pledged the full powers of his office to preserve Georgia's segregation laws "without violence."

The Georgia governor, who is in the final year of his term, led off an embittered reaction to the South's traditional separation of the races.

The ruling, he said, "blatantly ignored all law and precedent and usurped from the Congress and the people the power to amend the Constitution and from the Congress the power to make the laws of the land."

Tammage called a special state education commission to study the situation.

Little Effect On Topeka

The Supreme Court of the United States Monday declared unconstitutional an 1879 Kansas law allowing for segregation of Negroes and white elementary students in first class cities, but it appeared that the historic ruling will have no effect on Topeka schools where a movement to end segregation has been underway since September 1953. Similar movements are afoot in Salina and Atchison.

The Supreme Court ruling

racial barriers in such internationally visible official institutions. During the 1952 campaign, among the few specific pledges by the candidate on civil rights were those to complete military desegregation and to push for similar progress in the capital of Western democracy, Washington, D.C. Upon taking office, any doubts Eisenhower may have entertained on the necessity of these stands were countered by the report of a special committee he had appointed to study means of combatting Communist propaganda. Chaired by former *Time-Life* executive C. D. Jackson, who became the administration's "expert" on propaganda warfare, the committee produced a report that highlighted the importance of removing the most visible official vestiges of racism for the courtship of Third World nations, declaring, "It puts us on their side in their drive for national identity."²¹

In the case of the desegregation of military units, Eisenhower was also in the envious situation of merely completing the execution of a policy decision already made by his predecessor, thereby lessening the domestic political risk to himself. Nonetheless, his instinctive sympathies toward the "practical difficulties" of commanders in carrying out desegregation led to accusations that he was "dragging his feet." Nor was the President especially eager to challenge the segregation of dependents of military personnel in post schools or in off-base accommodations. Segregation practices at U.S. Navy shipyards in Norfolk and Charleston were reversed upon the order of Secretary of the Navy Robert Anderson, but ugly incidents of racism against black servicemen, both on and off base and in both the United States and at foreign postings, continued to give the Eisenhower Administration public relations headaches.²²

Ironically, even once the formal mandates requiring the segregation of personnel and dependents within military units, in base housing, and in public education had been lifted, genuine integration of the services did not follow. Formal desegregation was followed by "white flight" from reenlistment in the lower ranks, and, combined with a surge in black enlistments, it produced an expanding racial "underclass" within the armed forces. High black reenlistments and white reluctance to transfer in led to similarly disturbing patterns in the Navy's Stewards' Branch. Swelling black enlistments at lower ranks, combined with the growing educational and technological sophistication of military service and lingering official doubts about black officer capabilities, led military officials to attempt new kinds of barriers to black advancement based on "mental group" testing and categorization. Reflecting that attitude, Lt. Gen. Charles L.

Bolte of U.S. Army-Europe asserted, "I cannot permit the assignment of large numbers of unqualified personnel, regardless of race, to prejudice the operational readiness of our units in an effort to attain 100 percent racial integration, however desirable that goal may be."²³

For its part, the navy, faced by 1959 with a testing program that excluded ninety percent of blacks from significant career advancement, issued a report that offered a window not only to its own future dilemmas but the larger ones before the nation. Recognizing the risk that such results created of accusations of discrimination "should the recruitment of Negroes continue to be curtailed through the medium of qualitative recruiting," it concluded, "The only alternative which would permit maintaining present Caucasian/Negro strength ratios [rather than seeing the black percentage slip even lower] would be to actively recruit Negroes in the higher mental groups. This solution would not be without pitfalls, as quotas would have to be established which might result in more accusations of discrimination."²⁴

The President's determination to cleanse the racial image of the nation's capital city in the view of outside observers encountered similar, unforeseen difficulties. In the 1952 campaign, Eisenhower described District of Columbia segregation and overt discrimination as "a humiliation to this nation" and "the kind of loss we can ill afford in today's world." To his credit, following a Supreme Court decision of June 1953 upholding an 1872 law barring racial exclusion from public restaurants, the President lobbied businessmen behind the scenes to voluntarily desegregate city theatres and movie houses. In November, the D.C. Board of Commissioners announced the official end of segregated facilities and personnel in departments within its jurisdiction. Following the issuance of the *Brown* school desegregation decision (which had included a Washington, D.C., case), Eisenhower urged District officials to make the capital a model of peaceful school desegregation as well.²⁵

Implementing even a token degree of desegregation in city departments, facilities, and schools did not, unfortunately, occur without incident. And, as in the armed forces, uncontrolled factors (in this case, such elements as white flight to the suburbs and expressway construction) produced greater *de facto* segregation and inequality of opportunity, rather than less. By 1958, seven of every ten city schools were at least 90 percent of one race. As late as 1960, nearly 14 percent of District schools

21. Lee Nichols, *Breakthrough on the Color Front* (New York: Random House, 1954), 167, 177-78.

22. Burk, *Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights*, 23-42.

23. Ibid., 37-38; "Integration of Negro and White Troops," Morris J. MacGregor and Bernard C. Nalty, eds., *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents, Vol. XII—Integration* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1977), 270.

24. Bureau of Naval Personnel, "Memorandum on Discrimination of the Negro, 24 Jan. 1959," in MacGregor and Nalty, *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces*, 132-40.

25. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, 234; Burk, *Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights*, 49-55.

remained totally segregated, and only 23 percent of the city's school system claimed better than a 9-1 mixture. Blatant discrimination continued in the housing market and in private employment. With the city's black unemployment rate double the white level, and city median family income at but \$5,993 compared to \$7,577 for the entire metropolitan area, the monthly number of persons receiving general public assistance soared in four years from less than six hundred to over fifteen hundred and the aid to dependent children requests jumped from less than nine thousand to nearly nineteen thousand over the same span.²⁶ The President might have succeeded in removing the official blessing from certain forms of discrimination, and thereby scoring some propaganda victories against the Soviets, but he had not won the war against the more deeply rooted causes of urban decay and minority disadvantage. That war, after all, was one that he really had not tried to fight.

Taken as a whole, then, the Eisenhower portrait in civil rights consisted of a man uncomfortable with racial issues or with circumstances that might force personal examination of deeply cloistered prejudices; a President who preferred the political management of racial issues to the advocacy of risky and possibly painful solutions; an executive who preferred private voluntary resolution of domestic conflict to presidential pronouncement or

coercion; and at the same time, the leader of the "free world" who was determined through selective, symbolic acts to render his country less vulnerable to Soviet racial propaganda and to promote American strategic interests. E. Frederic Morrow, who as the administration's highest ranking black official possessed a unique position from which to view the composite Eisenhower civil rights persona, assessed him as a "great, gentle, and noble man" who nonetheless held a "Southern" background and viewpoint on civil rights. "He was fair and honest in most things," Morrow added, "but he couldn't take that single bold step of courageous pronouncement that would have moved the blacks another mile toward freedom. . . . In my many talks with him in this area, I found him neither intellectually nor emotionally disposed to combat segregation in general."²⁷

But if the Eisenhower portrait in civil rights was not a portrait of bold leadership, it was one which embodied not only the hopes, fears, calculations, principles, and contradictions of a man, but those of a nation as well. It provided us then, as it still does today, a mirror in which to see not just Eisenhower but also ourselves, warts and all, and to seek a keener understanding of why we "liked Ike" then, and why we still do. He may not have always been "better" than us, but in many ways, for well and ill, he *was* us. [KH]

26. Martha Derthick, *City Politics in Washington, D.C.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 20, 28, 123, 146, 221.

27. E. Frederic Morrow, *Way Down South Up North* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1973), 121-22.