

The Cold War and the Struggle for Civil Rights

As a child I remember playing a fun game with pictures of animals printed on divided pieces of cardboard. Each half had either a head or a tail, and the object was to match upper and lower halves to form complete animals. Of course, matching familiar categories was not nearly as fun or satisfying as mixing the cards to create new and weird creatures—a giraffe with a rhino, a lion with a lizard, a seal with a swallow. Growing numbers of historians have been having this kind of fun in their work. They have taken traditionally isolated categories of study and combined them into mash-ups of theory and content. In the process, the lines between domestic and foreign, social and political, top-down and bottom-up have been blurred.

Nowhere has this been more evident than in the combination of Cold War and civil rights studies. Following the customary subdivisions of the craft, Cold War and civil rights histories developed, for the most part, in isolation from one another, but several books, some dating back to the 1950s, have sought to examine their substantial interconnections and interdependence. Cold War and civil rights struggles, these works reveal, shared not only a place and time, but also mutually reinforcing ideological and political contexts. Between them were curious mixes of racism, capitalism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, imperialism, altruism, socialism, humanitarianism, realism, and idealism that defined the complex American identity of the late twentieth century. The combination of these histories exposes the United States at the end of World War II as both a powerful and profoundly insecure nation in ways that independent Cold War and civil rights studies have not.

Early Accounts

While the scholarship unifying Cold War and civil rights histories blossomed in the 1980s, the crossover victims of segregation and the second Red Scare were writing about their plight as early as the 1950s. Anne Braden, a leftist civil rights activist working with the Southern Conference Education Fund, for example, published her book *The Wall Between* in 1958. The book

tells the story of how Anne and her husband Carl ran afoul of segregationist anticommunists when they helped a black couple find a house in a white neighborhood of Louisville, Kentucky in 1954. After white supremacists bombed the home that the Bradens had sold to the couple, state prosecutors shockingly charged Carl and Anne with staging the event as part of a Communist publicity stunt. Carl Braden, who during the trial admitted to an interest in socialism but no affiliation with the Communist Party, was convicted of violating state anti-sedition laws and sentenced to eight months in prison (1).

Memoirs of other activists caught in this Red-and-black Scare surfaced through the 1970s, but academics gave the connections between domestic anticommunism and the civil rights struggle only passing attention (2). The only scholar in the 1950s and early 1960s who seriously attempted to bring the domestic Red Scare and civil rights histories together was sociologist Wilson Record. His books *The Negro and the Communist Party* (1951) and *Race and Radicalism: The NAACP and the Communist Party in Conflict* (1964) were both essentially reactions to charges made by politicians and high-ranking government officials, who claimed that the emerging black direct-action protests were a Communist plot. Record showed that despite the repeated efforts of the Communist Party (CPUSA) to recruit African Americans, the group had largely failed. Communists might have helped in efforts to break patterns of racial discrimination, but, Record argues, African Americans and groups aiding their cause were far too invested in free-enterprise traditions to embrace Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. Indeed, the largest and arguably most influential group working for black civil rights in the United States in the 1950s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was openly anticommunist. In 1950, it even officially adopted a resolution that allowed its central office to expel any local branch that the national board of directors determined to be under communist control (3).



Figure 1. In 1959, at the federal courthouse in Little Rock, Arkansas, a mother and child protest the racial integration of public schools as a communist plot. While the charge was untrue, communists and socialists had been in the forefront of battles for racial equality since the 1930s. Public association of communism with atheism—the main theme of Senator Joseph McCarthy's 1950 Wheeling, West Virginia speech—explains the child's sign calling for the restoration of a "Christian" nation. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)



Figure 2. Benjamin Davis (1903–64), a Georgia native, was a Harvard law school graduate radicalized while defending Atlanta Communist Angelo Herndon on frame-up charges of sedition. Davis joined the Party, helped legally defend the Scottsboro Boys, and was elected on the Communist ticket to the Harlem City Council. Here he speaks at a Negro Freedom Rally in Madison Square Garden in 1954, shortly after serving time in federal prison for violating the anticommunist Smith Act. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

Black Marxists and Leftists

Record's books began a small but steady trickle of works on the pre-World War II convergence of racism, nativism, and anticommunism in the United States, but it was not until the 1980s that the post-World War II black and Red relationship emerged more prominently as a unified topic of study (4). Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983) introduced a significant revision of Record's thesis. Robinson and his ilk saw the civil rights movement as deeply influenced and aided by Marxism. Robinson describes a history of "racial capitalism" inherited by the United States from Europe that combined white racism, nationalism, and economic exploitation. Black Marxists, he claims, were at the forefront in confronting the inextricable links between racial and economic oppression. Gerald Horne built on this foundation in his books *Black and Red: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944–1963* (1986), and *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946–1956* (1988). In these works, Horne highlights the role of black leftists in opposing both segregation and McCarthy-era red-baiting. His protagonists are constantly harassed by the anticommunist national security state for attempting to subvert the government. But rather than portraying them as violent revolutionaries, the author emphasizes how effectively they worked within the liberal capitalist system for their causes (5).

Horne's account of Ben Davis's experiences as a black Communist working for civil rights in *Black Liberation/Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (1994) offers a case study of the importance of black Communists in early civil rights causes, and the persecution they suffered as a result. Davis was a Harvard Law School graduate hired by the Communist-led International Labor Defense to help defend Angelo Herndon in Atlanta in 1933. Herndon was an African American Communist organizer who had been arrested under a state conspiracy statute that dated back to the time of slave insurrections; he lost at trial and was sentenced to twenty years on a chain gang. The case radicalized Davis, who joined the Communist Party and continued to devote his legal career to black civil rights cases, including, most famously, the Scottsboro Boys trial which delivered death sentences to eight black boys accused of raping two white women on a train in northern Alabama. Davis eventually moved to Harlem, where he helped found the Negro National Congress—a group primarily concerned with promoting racial equality—and ran for the New York City Council. He was elected to the council in both 1943 and 1947 on a Communist Party ticket, but as the Cold War quickened, his political affiliations came under suspicion. In 1949, Davis was among a small group of people convicted under the Smith Act, which made it a federal crime to advocate the overthrow of the United States government.

At the same time Horne was publishing his Cold War/civil rights studies, a series of books were released focusing on J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Bureau of Investigation's ruthless pursuit of Martin Luther King, Jr. Based on a raft of Freedom of Information Act releases, Kenneth O'Reilly's two books, *Hoover and the Un-Americans: The FBI, HUAC, and the Red Menace* (1983) and "Racial Matters": *The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960–1972* (1989); Richard Gid Powers' *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (1986); David Garrow's *Bearing the Cross* (1986); and Michael Friendly and David Gallen's *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The FBI File* (1993) probe the depths of Hoover's obsession with King's alleged ties to the Communist Party. Hoover was among the most powerful and obsessive investigators of Communist influence among African Americans in the nation's history. Under his directorship, the FBI wasted decades wiretapping King's home and offices in an attempt to uncover the civil rights leader's collusion with Communists. The products of their effort were reports that King had maintained a friendship with at least one card carrying Communist and had hired another as an SCLC secretary. King had also been involved in several extra-marital affairs, which William Sullivan, an officer in the top tier of the FBI hierarchy in charge of investigating King and a man many thought would one day succeed Hoover as director, insisted that affairs exposed King as a "fraud, demagogue, and a scoundrel." Yet after several years working on the case, Sullivan concluded in a letter to Hoover that Communist plots in the civil rights movement were negligible at best, and FBI resources could be better spent elsewhere. After reading the letter, Hoover fired him (6).

Post-Cold War Studies

The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and the emergence of a post-Cold War, post-civil rights generation of scholars grew the number of red and black studies in the 1990s. Links between the domestic anticommunist scare and the civil rights movement figured prominently, for example, in Linda Reed's *Simple Decency and Common Sense* (1991), Manning Marable's *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (1991), Glen Jeanson's *Leander Perez: Boss of the Delta* (1995), Earl Ofari Hutchinson's *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict, 1919–1990* (1995), John Glen's *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (1996), and William Billingsly's *Communists on Campus: Race, Politics, and the Public University in Sixties North Carolina* (1999), as well as many others (7).



Figure 3. This billboard, which appeared throughout the American South in 1965, depicts a photo taken in 1957 at a training session at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. The photo appeared in a four-page newsprint "expose" published that year by the Georgia Commission on Education, which mobilized sentiment in favor of segregation. Founded in 1932 by two southern-born whites, Myles Horton (sitting two seats to King's right), and Don West, a labor organizer and Communist Party leader, the school served as a racially integrated center for labor and civil rights organizing. Rosa Parks is two seats to the right of Horton. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

Among the most acclaimed of these works was Timothy Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (1999). In this study, Tyson examines the life of Robert F. Williams, a World War II veteran turned NAACP activist who argued that armed self-defense was the right of all African Americans threatened with segregationist violence and injustice. In 1958, North Carolina's "kissing case" propelled Williams to national and international attention. The case involved the imprisonment of two young black boys caught playing a kissing game with a young white girl. Williams' publicity campaign to have the boys freed drew the support of, among others, the international Communist press. The North Carolina governor's office pounced on the association, calling William's campaign a "Communist-directed front." When the national NAACP decided to distance itself from William's efforts for fear it would be identified with communism and armed self-defense, Williams radicalized, moved to Cuba, and began broadcasting his "Radio Free Dixie" program into the United States, calling for an armed Marxist revolution of American blacks (8).

National interest in liberty and security studies grew significantly after 9/11 and with it Cold War/civil rights studies. Historians of the United States South joined the fray, examining the convergence of segregation and anticommunism as a southern phenomenon. George Lewis's *The White South and the Red Menace: Segregationist Anticommunism and Massive Resistance, 1945-1965* (2004) and my own book *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anticommunism in the South, 1948-1968* (2004), argue that southern segregationist red-baiting proved occasionally effective in harassing the civil rights

movement, despite the fact that it uncovered few communists, found no legitimate plots to overthrow the government, and failed to garner enough national concern to derail civil rights reform. The books also demonstrate that in launching myriad state and federal investigations, southerners ranged in purpose from those with genuine concerns over social and political change brought by leftist/integrationist collusion, to those blatantly exploiting exaggerated McCarthyite fears for the maintenance of white supremacy.

Among the most notorious and reckless of the southern Red-and-black-baiters was James Eastland. From Sunflower County, Mississippi, "Massa Jim"—as local blacks still called him through the 1960s—was a lawyer and plantation owner turned United States senator. By 1956 Eastland had risen to take over the chairmanship of the U.S. Senate's powerful Committee on the Judiciary, where he could block nearly every piece of civil rights legislation introduced in Congress. At the same time, the "Mississippi McCarthy" led the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (SISS), where he oversaw a relentless series of hearings on communists in the civil rights movement. Eastland literally "saw a red behind every black" (9). In 1964, when northern civil rights workers came to Mississippi to register black voters as part of the Freedom Summer campaign, Eastland called their efforts "communist inspired." So calloused were his views, that even after three Freedom Summer volunteers in Mississippi—Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman—vanished, their murders at the hands of the local Ku Klux Klan a distinct probability, Eastland insisted that their disappearance was a publicity stunt concocted by the Communist Party.

The Real Annie Lee Moss

It was March 11, 1954. The witness was Annie Lee Moss, a civilian teletype operator for the U. S. Army in Washington, D.C. The hearing was convened by the U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. And the man asking her questions was none other than Senator Joseph McCarthy. When McCarthy departed the hearing room early,



his critics took the opportunity to strike a blow against the absent senator. Under questioning from a more sympathetic senator, Stewart Symington (D-Mo.), Moss denied any connection with the Communist Party, denied knowing what “communism” meant, and noted that there were “three Annie Lee Mosses,” living in Washington, casting doubt on the government’s evidence against her. She even claimed not to recognize the name “Karl Marx.” Footage of Moss’s testimony was featured on Edward R. Murrow’s television show *See it Now*, seen by over three million viewers (and much later, in George Clooney’s *Good Night and Good Luck* [2005]). Moss came across as an object of pity—a helpless, ignorant “Negress” whose case illustrated the evils of McCarthyism. And, with an outpouring of public support, she kept her job.

But as historian Andrea Friedman has shown, Moss was consciously playing the fool. Born in 1905 in South Carolina, the daughter of tenant farmers, Moss worked as a domestic servant, laundress, and tobacco stemmer, before moving to Washington and gaining a job in a government cafeteria. There, she became an active member of the United Public Workers, a left-leaning union. Most likely, Friedman concludes, Moss did join the party in these years—one-third of the party in D.C. was African American. Moss had also been active with her local church, the YMCA, the Urban League, and served as president of the tenants’ council of her housing project. A newspaper article described her as a “spark-plug” of community activism. Given the intense pressures bearing down on her in 1954, Moss denied her own history, catered to white paternalism, and survived. She never returned to political activism. □

—Benjamin Aloe and Carl R. Weinberg

Race and Foreign Policy

Historians of American foreign relations expanded Cold War/civil rights research in other directions. Reginald Horsman’s *Race and Manifest Destiny* (1981) and Michael Hunt’s *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (1987) study America’s preoccupation with racial hierarchy in justifying both American interventionist and isolationist policies from the beginning of the republic through the Cold War. Thomas Noer’s, *Cold War and Black Liberation: The United States and White Rule in Africa 1948–1968* (1985) and Thomas Borstelmann’s *Apartment’s Reluctant Uncle: The United States and Southern Africa in the Early Cold War* (1993) both conclude that U.S. policy in Africa during the Cold War emphasized containing communism over supporting self-determination and human rights. Tennant McWilliams’s *The New South Faces the World: Foreign Affairs and the Southern Sense of Self, 1877–1950* (1988) and Joseph A. Fry’s *Dixie Looks Abroad: The South and U.S. Foreign Relations, 1789–1973* (2002) argue that southern foreign policy leaders embraced Cold War anticommunism and ethnocentric nationalism in melding regional traditions with post-World War II internationalism (10).

Brenda Plummer’s *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (1996) marked the beginning of an explosion of literature devoted more directly to Cold War/civil rights issues in American foreign relations. Plummer highlights the role of African American organizations and leaders in forcing the United States to recognize race as a global concern. She describes myriad attempts by blacks during the Cold War to force policy makers to make good on their promises to support global self-determination and unite the “anti-imperialist movement abroad and the civil rights movement at home.” Penny Von Eschen’s *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (1997) also acknowledges the importance of anti-imperialism in the African American worldview, but argues that the Cold War tempered black criticism of European colonial practices. In hopes of bolstering White House support for domestic civil rights reform, and concerned over the anti-radical mood of the second Red Scare, major African American leaders muted their criticism of American foreign policy. And in *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (2001), Thomas Borstelmann reveals that American traditions of racial oppression have run counter to the nation’s attempts to lead a multiracial world since the beginning of the republic. However, he maintains, the United States largely triumphed over segregation and communism (11).

Mary Dudziak’s *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (2000) is among the most readable of these books. Dudziak posits that reports of racial injustice coming out of the United States in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s threatened to upend the appeal of liberal capitalist democracy in the Cold War battlegrounds of Asia and Africa. Among the many stories she uses to illustrate her thesis is the tale of Malik Sow, the first ambassador to the United States from the then-newly-independent African nation of Chad. In 1961, on the road from delivering a speech to the United Nations in New York to Washington D.C., where he was scheduled to present his nation’s credentials to President John F. Kennedy, Sow stopped at a roadside diner in rural Maryland. The ambassador was immediately turned away by diner employees. They informed him that they did not serve blacks in the restaurant. The Kennedy administration, like the Truman and Eisenhower administrations before it, Dudziak concludes, came to support civil rights reform so as not to lose the emerging world to the communists (12).

Conclusion

Like the scholars studying domestic Cold War/civil rights, historians concerned with its manifestation in foreign policy have been undoubtedly affected by the passing of time and changing points of reference.

Indeed, the entire profession has changed with the end of the reorientation of national interests after 9/11, and with the appearance of a new generation of scholars less personally tied to the events of the 1950s and 1960s. The election of Barack Obama and China's rise as a significant rival to the U.S. will surely refocus Cold War/civil rights studies in new ways. Yet this scholarship is also rooted in a timeless American attempt to balance the scales of liberty and security. These works remind us that international conflicts will forever challenge American definitions of its most basic freedoms, and that the ways in which the United States defines itself has a profound effect on the world. By integrating race and class conflict, political and social phenomena, and foreign and domestic events, Cold War/civil rights history illuminates the United States' struggle for freedom and peace in the age of American power and global interdependence. It also just has a lot of fun mixing things up. □

Endnotes

1. Anne Braden, *The Wall Between* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1958).
2. See, for example, Frank Adams and Myles Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston Salem, N.C.: John F. Blair, 1975); Walter Goodman, *The Committee* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1968); Numan Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); Neil McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-64* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).
3. Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), and *Race and Radicalism: The NAACP and the Communist Party in Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964).
4. Wayne Addison Clark, "An Analysis of the Relationship between Anti-communism and Segregationist Thought in the Deep South, 1948-1964," (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1976) and Salmond, John A. "The Great Southern Commie Hunt," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 77 (Autumn, 1978) were notable exceptions that were not published as books. For pre-World War II studies, see, for example, Dan Carter's, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Atheneum, 1970); Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998); Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., *"Seeing Red": Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
5. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944-1963* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), *Communist Front?* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988), and *Black Liberation/Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (Newark, N.J.: University of Delaware Press, 1994); Herbert Haines, *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988).
6. Kenneth O'Reilly, *Hoover and the Un-Americans: The FBI, HUAC, and the Red Menace* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983) and more directly "Racial Matters: The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972" (New York: Free Press, 1989); Richard Gid Powers, *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (New York: Free Press, 1986); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross* (New York: Vintage, 1986); Michael Friendly and David Gallen, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The FBI File* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1993).
7. Linda Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991); Glen Jeanson, *Leander Perez: Boss of the Delta* (Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1995); Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict, 1919-1990* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995); John Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996); William Billingsly, *Communists on Campus: Race, Politics, and the Public University in Sixties North Carolina* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999). Red and black interconnections also figure in Richard Fried, *Nightmare in Red* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); David Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995); M.J. Heale, *McCarthy's Americans* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988) and *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1964-1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).
8. Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
9. Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).
10. Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). See also, for example, Thomas Hietala, *Manifest Design* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Paul Gordon Lauren, *Power and Prejudice: The Politics and Diplomacy of Racial Discrimination* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988); Thomas J. Noer, *Cold War and Black Liberation: the United States and White Rule in Africa, 1948-1968* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985); Thomas Borstelmann, *Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle: the United States and Southern Africa in the Early Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Tennant McWilliams, *The New South Faces the World: Foreign Affairs and the Southern Sense of Self, 1877-1950* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Joseph A. Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad: The South and U.S. Foreign Relations, 1789-1973* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).
11. Brenda Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001). See also Michel Krenn, *Black Diplomacy: African Americans and the State Department, 1945-1969* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999) and Azza Salama Layton, *International Politics and Civil Rights Policies in the United States, 1941-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
12. Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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