

The Legacy of the NAACP's 1947 UN Petition: Domestic Transformation and Global Resonance

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Abstract:

*In 1947, the NAACP sent its petition *An Appeal to the World* to the United Nations, placing the fight of African Americans for equality and rights before the international community. Although the petition did not achieve concrete results, it generated wide influence both at home and abroad. This paper examines its historical significance on three levels. First, during the early Cold War, *An Appeal to the World* exposed racial discrimination in the United States, pressing the government to issue the report *To Secure These Rights* and a series of executive orders that advanced civil rights legislation. Second, on the international stage, the petition resonated with decolonization movements, inspiring anti-colonial struggles in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and providing a reference point for human rights debates at the UN. Third, for the NAACP itself, it accumulated transnational resources and experience, laying the groundwork for legal battles such as *Brown v. Board of Education*. In this sense, *An Appeal to the World* was not only an unfinished attempt but also a key turning point in the maturation of the American civil rights movement.*

Keywords: NAACP, *An Appeal to the World*, impact, Civil Rights Movement, Human Rights

1. Introduction

In 1947, W. E. B. Du Bois presented *An Appeal to the World* to the United Nations for the NAACP. The UN did not accept it, but its influence reached far beyond this early defeat. As the Cold War began, the United States styled itself as the “leader of the free world,” yet its domestic racial discrimination drew sharp criticism from the Soviet Union and from na-

tions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. *An Appeal to the World* exposed cracks in the myth of American “democracy” and brought the Black struggle into global view as a human rights issue for the first time. At the same time, the petition was closely linked to anti-colonial struggles, offering lessons and encouragement to nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. For the NAACP, the petition failed, but it helped build experience in international organizing and legal

action, paving the way for later victories like *Brown v. Board of Education* and key civil rights laws.

The importance of *An Appeal to the World* lies in this two-fold legacy: it pushed civil rights progress at home and linked the Black freedom struggle to global movements against colonialism. This article examines three aspects in particular: its influence on U.S. race relations and legal progress, its resonance within the international anti-colonial context, and its role in shaping the NAACP's later strategies and development.

2. The Petition's Impact on Domestic Race Relations

In 1947, Du Bois's petition tore away the mask of American "democracy." The wide circulation of *An Appeal to the World* both internationally and at home ignited debates on racism, and the international pressure it generated became a catalyst for legal and social change in the United States.

At the start of the Cold War, America's "misdeeds" gave the Soviet Union a ready weapon, exposing the hypocrisy of U.S. democratic ideals. European allies, eager to protect their colonial empires, also condemned America's racial problems. For peoples in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, long exploited by imperial powers, America's image as a "beacon of democracy" rang hollow and provoked deep resentment. The memory of Hitler's racist crimes was still fresh, and the lynching of Black Americans was quickly linked with the white supremacy of Nazi Germany. As a result, the United States found itself at the center of international criticism. At the same time, McCarthyism was rising at home under the shadow of the "Red Scare." The government began to see that racial inequality was not only a domestic issue but also a national security concern: America's poor civil rights record undermined its claim to lead the "free world," and if left unresolved, could fuel domestic communism. U.S. leaders thus "recognized the need to project a convincing narrative of racial progress" in order to regain the upper hand in this battle of public opinion.[1]

In December 1947, the President's Committee on Civil Rights released its landmark report, *To Secure These Rights*. [2] Its title echoed the *Declaration of Independence*, which affirmed that governments are created to protect rights and that their authority comes from the consent of the governed. [3] The report provided a broad survey of the conditions facing African Americans in the mid-twentieth century, addressing issues such as housing, health, schooling, jobs, law enforcement, politics, voting, military duty, and foreign affairs. It identified segregation

as a nationwide crisis and outlined a plan for federal intervention, setting priorities that would shape reforms over the next twenty years. Many of its proposals were later reflected in major legislation, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. [4] The legal scholar Thurgood Marshall called it "one of the most important documents in the field to date... never before had the problems of Blacks and other minorities been placed before the public in such a way." [5] The report had an enormous reach: over one million copies were distributed; the Government Printing Office issued 25,000 copies; the publisher Simon & Schuster printed and sold 35,000; Black newspapers serialized it; the American Jewish Committee circulated 200,000 summaries; *The New York Times* ran an abridged version; NAACP branches and civic groups held discussions; youth organizations sponsored forums; and New York radio stations broadcast a two-week program on civil rights. [6] *To Secure These Rights* sparked a nationwide debate on civil rights, and legislation was soon on the horizon.

On July 26, 1948, President Harry Truman put the committee's proposals into practice by signing two executive orders. Order 9980 dealt with fair employment standards within federal institutions, [7] while Order 9981 created a committee to ensure equal opportunities in the armed forces. Together, [8] they mandated nondiscrimination in federal jobs and promised equal treatment for all members of the military, regardless of race, faith, color, or national background. Truman thus used executive authority to ban discrimination and push toward civil rights reform across different areas of society. On July 2, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, the most comprehensive legislation on civil rights since Reconstruction. It outlawed segregation in businesses such as theaters, restaurants, and hotels, established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to ban discrimination in hiring, promotion, dismissal, pay, training, and apprenticeships, and ended segregation in public facilities like swimming pools, libraries, and schools.

The UN petition struck a heavy blow to the U.S. government. Faced with harsh international scrutiny, American leaders had no choice but to address the Black problem in order to preserve their democratic image, ease ideological tensions, and win over emerging nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to the capitalist camp. It was this necessity that pushed the United States to give greater attention to Black rights, respond to the demands of the NAACP and communities of color through executive action, and spread the idea of civil rights equality.

3. The Petition's Impact on the International Community

W. E. B. Du Bois observed that the central challenge of the twentieth century was the "color line," meaning the unequal relationship between lighter and darker peoples across Asia, Africa, the Americas, and beyond.[9] The campaign against racial inequality was closely connected with the broader movements of colonized and semi-colonized nations seeking independence. This meant that the African American civil rights movement was bound to take an international path, echoing nationalist and anti-colonial movements across the world. In 1950, after winning a Supreme Court case against segregation in higher education, the NAACP stressed at its annual convention that it must support the struggles of colonized peoples: "On continents and islands across the world, our brothers bound by colonial rule are crying out for our help. As far as our resources allow, we must stand behind them." [10] The NAACP often spoke on behalf of colonized peoples at the United Nations and called on the U.S. government to support African independence.

The UN petition had two major effects on Asia, Africa, and Latin America. First, it inspired resistance to racist policies imposed by white governments. *An Appeal to the World* spread widely, and delegations from South Africa, India, Argentina, Egypt, Haiti, and Liberia all asked for copies. The petition turned the spirit of struggle into a concrete example, which was then shared among peoples fighting against discrimination and oppression. Even before 1948, South Africa had long practiced legalized racial segregation. After Daniel F. Malan's National Party assumed power, these policies were intensified. In 1949, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act was introduced, and a year later the Population Registration Act formally categorized citizens into racial groups such as white, colored, Black, Indian, and Asian. Also in 1950, the Group Areas Act mandated strict residential separation along racial lines. Later laws such as the Immorality Amendment Act and the Indemnity Act further deepened racial oppression. In response, the African National Congress (ANC) took the lead. In 1949, it issued the Programme of Action, calling for mass resistance including civil disobedience, strikes, boycotts, and other forms of nonviolent protest. In 1952, under leaders such as Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela, the ANC Youth League worked with trade unions and other organizations to launch a major resistance campaign. On March 21, 1960, the Sharpeville Massacre took place,[11] in which 69 peaceful protesters were killed. On April 1, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 134, expressing regret over the killings and urging the South African government to abandon its poli-

cies of apartheid and racial discrimination.

Second, the petition was closely linked to W. E. B. Du Bois's involvement in the Pan-African movement and his support for independence efforts in Africa and Asia. As a Black scholar, Du Bois consistently showed concern for the well-being of people of African descent, and his Pan-African ideals reflected a vision that extended beyond any single nation. He played a key role in the Pan-African Congresses. At the Fifth Pan-African Congress in October 1945, delegates called for an end to colonial rule in Africa and encouraged colonial subjects to use strikes and boycotts as tools to resist political, economic, and social exploitation by European powers.[12] During this event, Du Bois passed leadership responsibilities to the younger generation, including figures such as Kwame Nkrumah from the Gold Coast, who later became the first Prime Minister and President of Ghana. In 1957, Ghana won independence under the influence of Pan-African thought. In a letter of congratulations to Nkrumah on March 11, Du Bois expressed hope that Ghana would lead a new Pan-African movement, uniting representatives from across the continent.[13] Du Bois's ultimate vision was that all peoples of color suffering from racial discrimination in Asia, Africa, and Latin America would unite to fight together for freedom and equality. In May 1963, African leaders including Nkrumah and Nigeria's Nnamdi Azikiwe founded the Organization of African Unity, marking the partial realization of that vision.

An Appeal to the World was only a small step toward this grand ideal. Yet its spirit of struggle and the encouragement it gave to peoples in Asia, Africa, and Latin America left a profound and lasting impact.

4. The Petition's Impact on the NAACP's Later Activities

It is true that the NAACP's UN effort ended in failure. Still, the petition left important lessons. During the petition drive, the NAACP built international support and gained wide resources. These helped lay the foundation for later work.

Soon after the petition failed, the NAACP focused on ending segregation in higher education. In April 1950, *Sweatt v. Painter* was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Groups that had worked with the NAACP continued to support the case. In amici curiae briefs they explained in detail how segregation threatened U.S. diplomacy and Cold War strategy. The American Jewish Association, the Veterans' Committee, the Committee of Law Teachers Against Segregated Legal Education, and the Federal Council of Churches all assisted until the case was won.

From 1950 onward, the *Brown* case moved up to the Supreme Court. Drawing on earlier civil-rights experience, the NAACP came to understand the Court's logic well. Its legal team skillfully used Cold War arguments and helped bring about the Court's ruling that segregation in public education was unconstitutional. NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White said, Domestic racial prejudice in the United States is a fundamental cause of the distrust many Asian, African, and Latin American nations feel toward us, and it has deprived the U.S. of the allies it needed most profoundly to prevail in the Cold War. As long as we fail to grant all American citizens full economic, political, educational, and social equality, the very health—or standing—of the nation is being fatally compromised. [14] Other groups — the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Jewish Committee, the American Federation of Teachers, and the Japanese American Citizens League — again filed amicus briefs stressing how segregation hurt American democracy. By the 1960s, the NAACP's struggle had matured and won important gains. In 1969, Charles Evers, who led the NAACP's field investigations in Mississippi, was elected mayor of Fayette — the first Black mayor in that state since Reconstruction. Also in 1969, on the NAACP's 60th anniversary, delegates met in Jackson, Mississippi, for a historic convention. The convention poster read, "Here Today, Here Tomorrow," showing the NAACP's resolve to keep fighting. The NAACP continues to be one of the most important Black organizations in the United States. Since the creation of the UN Human Rights Commission, it has consistently supported America's involvement in UN human-rights work. In 2018, when the Trump administration decided to withdraw from the Human Rights Council, the NAACP warned that this move would weaken the U.S.'s role in protecting human rights globally and actively pushed for re-engagement. From this perspective, the 1947 petition may have been a setback at the time, but it also provided lasting benefits. The experience, networks, and lessons it created offered support for later efforts and contributed to future successes.

5. Conclusion

Looking back at the 1947 UN petition *An Appeal to the World*, it did not change the daily reality of African Americans, but its symbolic meaning was deeply woven into the history of the Cold War, decolonization, and global human rights. It exposed the sharp contradiction between American democracy and racial discrimination, brought the Black question under the spotlight of the international community for the first time, and pushed the U.S. government to respond through institutions and laws. At the same

time, this action echoed the national liberation movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, showing how the "color line" had become a global issue in the mid-twentieth century.

For the NAACP, the failure of the petition was not an end but a new beginning. The experience, networks, and resources it gained later flowed into the great civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. In this sense, *An Appeal to the World* was not only an unfinished political battle but also an important milestone in the internationalization of the civil rights movement. Its legacy continues today, reminding us that the fight for equality and human rights has never been only a domestic issue but a shared global struggle for justice and freedom.

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