

ACTIVITY 2.5

Re-read the section headed The US and the Cold War.

- Do the ideas of brinkmanship and the New Look explain the whole of Eisenhower's foreign policy?
- What were the aims of Eisenhower's foreign policy?
- To what extent did Eisenhower meet his foreign policy aims?

When the major Middle Eastern crisis of Eisenhower's time arose, he was distracted by the Hungarian uprising and his own upcoming bid for re-election. The Egyptian leader, General Gamal Abdel Nasser, had declared himself neutral in the Cold War (thus beginning the 'non-aligned movement') and seized the British and French asset of the Suez Canal, a relic of their days as colonial powers and a major strategic link between Europe and Southeast Asia. Once again, what could Eisenhower do? He did not want to encourage countries to nationalise inter-oceanic canals – not while the Americans retained control of the canal in Panama. The Suez Canal, though, was vital to Britain and France, to the extent that Anthony Eden, the British Prime Minister, had been prepared to have Nasser assassinated even before he had actually seized it.

Dulles tried to persuade Nasser to moderate his decision, and then tried to persuade Britain and France not to take any action, while reassuring them that they were still American allies. His efforts failed. When Britain, France and Israel (which hoped to seize the West Bank) simply invaded Egypt while Dulles was in London trying to broker a solution, there were protests at the United Nations, led by the USSR. Eisenhower, who had advised against the invasion, was furious. It was clear that Eden, in particular, expected American support. As Vice President Nixon put it, how was the United States supposed to complain about the USSR invading Hungary to resist the actions of the government there if it did the same in Egypt? Again, nothing happened. Neither the USA nor the USSR was prepared to go to war in Europe or the Middle East. Eisenhower's administration had proven less supportive of Israel than Truman's had been and the Atlantic Alliance had been shaken. Relations with France, always the most awkward of American allies, did not really recover. Instead, France turned to West Germany, seeking European alliances.

Eisenhower had been worried that the Soviets might take advantage of the situation to attack Britain and France in the Middle East, perhaps with nuclear weapons. On 6 November 1956, the day of his re-election, he forced Eden into a ceasefire in return for helping to organise an emergency loan from the International Monetary Fund. Eisenhower had preserved peace but only after miscalculating how much Suez had mattered to his allies. Among the consequences of the Suez Crisis were the Eisenhower Doctrine of America, which provided economic and military aid to the Middle East, the Treaty of Rome, which led to the creation of the European Economic Community, and the rapid deconstruction of the empires of the UK and France. All of these had ramifications that resonated across the rest of the 20th century and beyond.

African Americans in North and South

The 1940s and early 1950s had been significant in the African-American experience for two reasons. First, second-generation members of northern African-American communities who had been trained for the military in southern training camps experienced the reality of life in the South. Neither segregation nor lynching was unknown in the North but in the South they were worse. The attitudes of southern whites helped to consolidate black identity. Second, the progress made under the Truman administration had been limited. The Supreme Court had made some important rulings but they were ignored. The federal government had begun to

attack **segregation**, for example in the military, but this had not translated into any further benefits. Eisenhower's time in office saw a major change in American law, and the emergence of an important civil rights leader in Martin Luther King, but little actual change. The rising tide of prosperity in the 1950s was affecting African Americans too. This gave energy to the protest and meant that racial discrimination, rather than general poverty, became the most important issue for African-American communities.

The emergence of the Civil Rights Movement

The Civil Rights Movement existed before Eisenhower's time. In the 1940s, leaders including Asa Philip Randolph had secured concessions from President Roosevelt. The Supreme Court had made a series of rulings that found in favour of civil rights and active protests, such as sit-ins on buses, had begun. The nine Justices in the Supreme Court were mostly liberals. Eight had been appointed by Roosevelt and Truman and the ninth, Chief Justice Earl Warren, was a liberal Republican appointed by Eisenhower in 1953. Warren believed that the Court could and should use its power to protect individual liberties. The question of individual liberties that would clearly be coming to the Court soon was about segregation in schools.

The United States court system is complex and different courts in different areas often come up with different decisions. One role of the Supreme Court is to deal with those decisions, sometimes by determining that the actions or laws of a state or the federal government are banned under the US **Constitution**. In the 1940s and 1950s civil rights activists had carefully planned a rush of segregation cases, designed to give the Supreme Court the chance to make a final decision. Once the Court's decision is made, it is subject to the principle of *stare decisis* ('let the decision stand') and cannot be reversed, except by constitutional amendment or by a further decision of the Supreme Court. The Court had never reversed one of its own decisions.

Brown v Board

The case known as *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, was the test case chosen by the Court. The case itself was of great importance to ten-year-old Linda Brown, who three years earlier had not been allowed to go to the school closest to her home. The school she was sent to, which was not as good and further away, was justified as 'separate but equal'. The District (lower) Court that had upheld Topeka's decision to segregate had specifically cited the case of *Plessy v Ferguson*, an 1896 Supreme Court case permitting segregation in railroad cars. By 1954, the case was about the whole legal basis for segregation. Specifically, could a state decide to provide 'separate but equal' facilities without violating the equal rights clause of the Fourteenth Amendment? The segregation of the South – in the use of buses, restaurants, water fountains – depended on the ruling.

Plessy said that it could. *Brown* said it could not. Chief Justice Warren, realising that the Court had a majority in favour of Linda Brown, ensured that the decision that came down was unanimous. All nine Justices voted to overturn *Plessy*, violating the principle of *stare decisis* by declaring that a decision of the Supreme Court had been incorrect. This is still the only time that this has happened.

ACTIVITY 2.6

1. Write a three-sentence précis of Klarman's Backlash Thesis.
2. Explain why it is called the 'Backlash Thesis'.

The Supreme Court had taken the most important step it could, throwing out segregation in education and ordering schools to integrate. By implication, the Supreme Court would throw out segregation in any other situation in which it occurred. In theory, segregation would melt away overnight – or at least by the next year. Warren's language in his ruling was explicit: 'To separate [Negro students] ... solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone ... Any language in *Plessy v Ferguson* contrary to these findings is rejected ... We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.'

Why did the Court make this ruling at this time? The fact that the justices were liberal is not in itself sufficient explanation, since New Deal Democrats were not all liberal when it came to race issues. Warren's language suggested that psychology had become important – the idea that a 'feeling of inferiority' was unacceptable was distinctly modern. There was also a reaction, after the Holocaust, against 'scientific' racism (the idea that there was a real scientific basis for the supremacy of one race above another). Finally, in the Cold War context, the obvious lack of freedom and liberty for so many inhabitants of the 'land of the free' was becoming an embarrassment.

Linda Brown went on to be a civil-rights campaigner in her own right. She was still fighting segregation in schools in Topeka in the 1990s.

Direct action protest

Segregation did not melt away; many state authorities simply ignored the Supreme Court's ruling. Civil-rights protestors began direct acts of protest, especially in the **Deep South**, where segregation was rife. In Montgomery, Alabama, in March 1955, a young woman called Claudette Colvin refused to give up her seat on the bus. It was her legal case that ultimately saw segregation on Montgomery's buses overturned. It was the quite deliberate and pre-planned actions of another woman, Rosa Parks, doing the same thing nine months later that became most famous. Rosa Parks also refused to give up her seat, in order to be arrested. Her arrest generated a boycott of Montgomery's buses, deliberately intending to hurt the bus companies – black dollars and white dollars, it turned out, were all green. The Montgomery bus boycott had two direct effects. It catapulted to national prominence one of the leaders of the local movement, the Revd Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, who formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) with other leaders. It also inspired further protests by demonstrating the economic and moral vulnerability of segregation, the inability of even moderate segregationists to compromise, the resolute courage of many southern blacks, the political importance and emotional power of African-American religion, and the viability of nonviolent direct action.

Another good example of direct action came in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960. A series of sit-ins attracted 50 000 participants, of whom 3600 were jailed, mainly for disturbing the peace. The city demonstrated the capricious nature of segregation laws: blacks could buy toothpaste and underwear at Woolworth's but not a cup of coffee. The sit-ins led to the founding of the Student Nonviolent

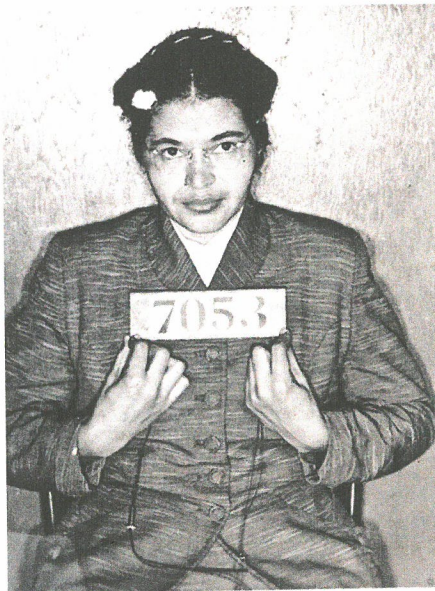


Figure 2.9: Rosa Parks, whose arrest in December 1955 generated a lot of publicity.

Speak like a historian

Michael J. Klarman

Michael J. Klarman has made an influential argument about the Civil Rights Movement, known as the Backlash Thesis:

'In this view, *Brown* was indirectly responsible for the transformative civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s by setting in motion the following pattern of events. *Brown* crystallized southern resistance to racial change, which – from at least the time of Harry S. Truman's civil rights proposals in 1948 – had been scattered and episodic. The unification of southern racial intransigence, which became known as massive resistance, propelled politics in virtually every southern state several notches to the right on racial issues; *Brown* temporarily destroyed southern racial moderation. In this extremist political environment, men who were unwaveringly committed to preservation of the racial status quo were catapulted into public office. These massive resistance politicians were both personally and politically predisposed to use whatever measures were necessary to maintain Jim Crow, including the brutal suppression of civil rights demonstrations. There followed nationally televised scenes of southern law enforcement officers using police dogs, high-pressure fire hoses, tear gas, and truncheons against peaceful, prayerful black demonstrators (often children), which converted millions of previously indifferent northern whites into enthusiastic proponents of civil rights legislation.'

Coordinating Committee (SNCC), made up of black college students throughout the South and inspired by the long-time activist Ella Baker. Many leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP, one of the oldest civil rights groups) and the SCLC were wary of the SNCC's confrontational style but King endorsed them.

Shortly after the end of Eisenhower's presidency, arrest would be the entire point of Freedom Rides, which were never all-black affairs, and part of the point of sit-ins and bus boycotts. This required organisation, but organisation often happened at a very low level – Freedom Rides came from university campuses, for example. Leaders might then emerge – for example, Martin Luther King, not one of the original leaders of the Movement, emerged from the Montgomery Bus Boycotts as a national figure. Much of the organisation occurred at the grassroots, in a piecemeal fashion. Sit-ins and boycotts spread around the country, with added publicity from the relatively new medium of television. They were at their most effective when they had a direct economic impact on businesses. When black people stopped riding the buses in Alabama, bus companies felt the pressure and many reversed their policies. In Greensboro, white store owners quickly realised that they would lose business if the protests continued. Sit-ins worked.

Thematic link: democracy

The SCLC campaign for voting rights

The first president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which was founded in 1957, was Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, who had come to prominence during the Montgomery bus boycott. Instructions were issued in his name about what speakers and participants in the SCLC should do when encouraging others to join their campaign. King made it clear that the SCLC was focused on delivering voting reform. He believed that if African Americans in the South voted in large numbers other social and economic opportunities would fall into place. The right to vote would bring increased wages, less police brutality, and justice, and improve the democratic accountability of elected officials in the South.

King's stated aim, in a memo of early 1958, was to double the number of African Americans voting in the South. He intended this to occur through voter registration and by persuading those already registered to turn out to vote, as well as struggling for the right to vote where it did not exist. This was to be done in conjunction with the legal work of the NAACP. The SCLC's campaign did indeed result in African Americans being given the right to vote in the South, after a long struggle.

The policies and attitudes of the main political parties

The Republican response to African-American pressure for civil rights was mixed. Eisenhower, as president, was broadly supportive. His Executive Order 10479 in 1953 ensured that there would be equal opportunities in employment on government contracts, while Executive Order 10590 in 1955 worked towards eliminating discrimination among federal employees. Eisenhower was willing to work towards civil rights but he was not willing to fight for law or practices to change in areas that were out of the remit of the federal government. Conservative Republicans were sometimes enthusiastic about civil rights for political reasons. Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio had tried to drum up support for civil rights in 1946 as part of an attempt to re-engage the Republican Party with the African-American vote, which it had begun to lose as a result of the New Deal. In 1957, Nixon toyed with the idea of trying to push a Voting Rights Act through Congress in order to fragment the Democratic Party. He had already worked with Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson in order to pass the first Civil Rights Act, which supported the *Brown* decision.

The Democratic Party was sorely tested by the Civil Rights Movement. The New Deal Coalition had depended on southern whites; now they prepared to leave the Party. In 1956, led by Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia, 101 mostly Democratic members of Congress signed a Southern Manifesto pledging 'massive resistance'. The *Brown* decision, they said, was a 'clear abuse of judicial power'. Half a million southerners joined **White Citizens' Councils** – new and short-lived institutions that were dedicated to blocking school integration and other civil rights measures. The **Ku Klux Klan** swelled to numbers not seen since the 1920s. By now the 'Klan' represented several disorganised racist movements, all linking themselves back to the well-known white-hooded secret societies of the 1860s and 1920s. They took actions such as placing burning crosses at black churches; by the 1960s members of organisations claiming affiliation with the Ku Klux Klan would be firebombing the churches themselves. Although Byrd and the influential Democratic senator

Lyndon B. Johnson were resolute in their support of civil rights, it seemed that this support might not be worth all that much.

The responses of the state and federal authorities

States found a variety of ways to wriggle out of compliance with *Brown*. West Virginia said that it would wait one more year. Mississippi abolished all its public schools. In 1957, the NAACP enrolled nine students at a school in the Arkansas state capital Little Rock, prompting Governor Orval Faubus to use the National Guard to enforce the segregation of the school. The mob then took over, taunting black students, shouting 'Go back to the jungle'. As vicious scenes were replayed on TV over the following fortnight, Eisenhower decided to send in 1000 federal troops and placed the state and National Guard under federal control. This was the first federal intervention in the South since 1877. The black students entered the school but met such strident protests and threats of violence that school officials removed them. As in other areas in the South, school officials in Little Rock decided to close the school for a time rather than carry out the desegregation order. Eisenhower, however, had placed the weight of the president's power as commander-in-chief squarely behind the Supreme Court's decision to end segregation. It may have been that he cared more about the Supreme Court than about civil rights – but that was not the point.

Eisenhower was accused by opponents of civil rights of using Hitlerite tactics by calling the army out against ordinary Americans. Eisenhower rebutted this, pointing out that his was a free government. Naturally, the opponents of civil rights were adamant that the freedom of individual states to decide on their own social orders was being infringed upon. The whole affair had worrying echoes of the conflict over slavery 100 years earlier, which had led to the American Civil War (1861–65). A large number of Americans – some 30% – disapproved of Eisenhower's actions.

ACTIVITY 2.7

Create a diagram to show the progress African Americans made towards civil rights during Eisenhower's presidency. Indicate any areas where their progress was dependent on events in Truman's presidency.



Practice essay questions

1. How far do you agree with the view that Eisenhower's foreign policy increased, rather than decreased, the possibility of nuclear confrontation with the USSR?
2. 'The greatest effect of the growing American economy of the 1950s was on American culture.' Assess the validity of this view.
3. 'Eisenhower's success owed very little to the rest of the Republican Party.' Do you agree with this?
4. 'Eisenhower's domestic policies were largely a response to the Cold War.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.



Taking it further

How much progress did Americans make in the 1950s towards living the American Dream?