

## RIGHT THING, WRONG REASON

### **Cold War Civil Rights**

Race and the Image of  
American Democracy

By *Mary L. Dudziak*

Princeton University Press, \$29.95, 352 pp.

### **John Summers**

**T**he soil of racial justice was rich with promise in the decades after World War II. In a relatively short period, perennial contradictions in American public policy gave way to a new, progressive thesis among federal officials. In 1948, Harry Truman desegregated the American military. Six years later, the Supreme Court overturned public school segregation, a landmark ruling followed in the 1960s by key congressional action on voting rights.

What explains the "Second Reconstruction," as historians call this epoch of race-based reform? No such rich and interesting question can bend to a single explanation, and scholars have looked over the problem from many angles.

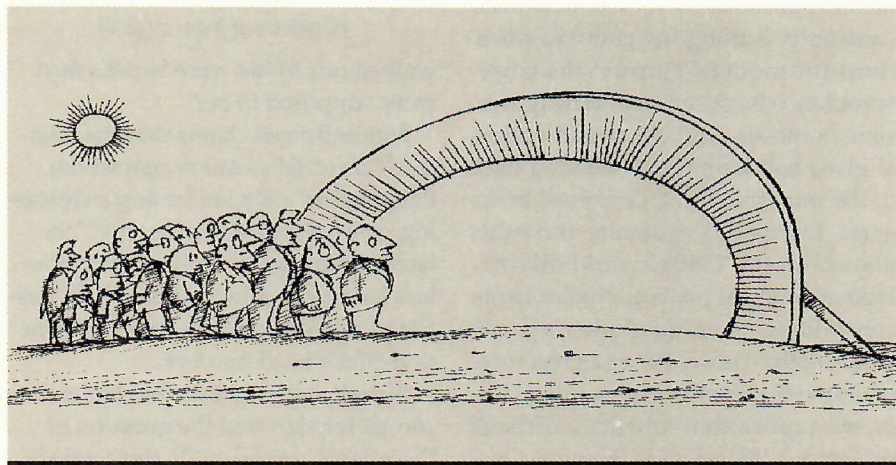
Now comes Mary L. Dudziak to focus us on cold-war diplomacy, which she insists proved decisive for the advance of civil-rights reform. Her argument, expressed in clear, workmanlike prose, is

based largely on the records of the Department of State. These, we are told, disclose several interesting propositions.

First, the cold war had barely begun when Soviet and American officials each realized a cosmopolitan understanding of international public opinion. All domestic political news could potentially become foreign news. Second, insofar as the cold war would in fact become a war of ideas, the United States was vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy, not least because it had recently concluded a war now understood as a blow to fascist racialism. America claimed for its institutions superior legitimacy and for its people a clear moral preeminence. Yet it could not summon the political will to end the everyday brutality of racial strife.

Dudziak presents the case of India, where Ambassador Chester Bowles reported in 1951 that treatment of American blacks had become "the number one question" put to foreign policy. That the topic commanded such attention owed in part to the general success of Soviet propaganda, inside and outside the United States, and in part to the domestic thunder from below. Before a politically volatile world, the civil-rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s made Southern blacks seem like inhabitants of an internal colony.

According to Dudziak's examination of the political thought of federal poli-



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cymakers, the tonic for this condition was not only passing meaningful civil-rights reform, but also controlling the "narrative" by which the domestic struggle for reform unfolded in the media. Liberal policymakers repeatedly voiced concern that racism undermined the "national interest." Reaching its apotheosis in the early 1960s, when the popular press of former African colonies expressed concern about the fate of American blacks, this "cold-war argument" informed reaction to every major moment in the civil-rights era.

Yet if "cold-war discourse" accommodated itself to the moral force of civil rights, then civil rights had to accommodate itself to the cramped ideological premises of the cold war. Liberal anticommunism, in the thrall of a bifurcated, nationalistic worldview, could endorse only limited and formal progress.

The nation's world/historical commitments persuaded its officials to view "American race relations through the lens of a black/white paradigm," and to discourage grassroots efforts to create

an international anticolonial movement. Reformers deemed insufficiently appreciative of domestic racial progress—men and women such as W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, and Josephine Baker—found their passports confiscated when they did not suffer harassment by American embassies. In other words, racial struggle within the nation constituted a newly acceptable subject for discussion in the international arena, so long as the "narrative" was rendered in a manner that ultimately smiled favorably upon the image of the nation. Try to link class and race as complementary categories of oppression, and you would court the kind of danger that comes with allegations of treason. The partial and formal character of federal action on civil rights owed to these political stipulations; and Dudziak is most illuminating when she treats the problem of rights from that angle.

Thus does *Cold War Civil Rights* propose one of those delicious Tocquevilian ironies—"the cold war was simultaneously an agent of repression and an agent of change." In pursuit of this irony, Dudziak presents a compelling analysis of what happened and why it happened. Nonetheless, her book, like many academic monographs, seems rather timid before its findings. Why has modern American state power proved so vulnerable to "the mirror of international criticism"? And what do the particular images reflected in it reveal about the character of the state itself?

Had Dudziak invited theories of empire to guide her research, the charm of her conclusions would diminish. But their explanatory power would gain accordingly. Among the many justifications for modern empire, the correspondence between overseas aggression, domestic unification, and national glory had long recommended itself to the imperial mind. Conquest in Algeria, insisted Tocqueville and other liberals in the 1840s, would dissolve France's internal political predicaments, consolidate its national identity, and "raise on the coast of Africa a great monument to the glory of our country." Domestic unification—always a difficult project for liberal governments—and

national aggression would become mutually conditioning phenomena of political psychology.

The United States had to wait until Europe descended into ruins before assuming its turn at world dominance. What appeared to nineteenth-century liberals as "national glory" became to twentieth-century American liberals the "image of democracy." And what once fell to "empire" now fell, in a characteristically elastic American euphemism, to "national security." In this way, the puzzle of how (limited) moral progress on race could court sympathy from within an otherwise brutalizing "cold-war discourse" becomes at once more pedestrian and more important than Dudziak allows. During the struggle for civil rights, liberal policymakers developed a new version of the doctrine Tocqueville had proposed more than a hundred years before. In redressing domestic injustice, the new version increasingly would rely on international "credibility" rather than domestic moral consensus.

To permit this broader foundation for civil-rights reform to recede from view, as Dudziak does, is to neglect a lesson that continues to haunt American reformers. The quest for justice can never win the true sanction of American ideals if it rests on illegitimate foundations. □

**John Summers**, a Ph.D. candidate in American history at the University of Rochester, teaches in the social studies program at Harvard University.

## CORRESPONDENCE

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walked out. What were Israel's next steps supposed to be?

Father Burrell claims that the *intifada* is "directed as much against the Palestinians' own leadership as releasing pent-up frustration against" the Israelis. But stones, bullets, and mortars have been aimed at Israelis. Palestinian suicide bombers have not gone to Arafat's headquarters.

Burrell also suggests that Israel has completely ignored the question of Palestinian refugees. On the contrary,