

A Local and National Story: The Civil Rights Movement in Postwar Washington, DC

by Wendell E. Pritchett



Integrated class at Anacostia High School in Washington, DC, 1957. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

The history of the Civil Rights Movement is the story of numerous grassroots campaigns loosely coordinated and assisted by a small number of national organizations. Every local struggle had its own actors, issues, and nuances, and all of them contributed to the broader struggle against Jim Crow. No battle exemplifies the interaction of the local and national better than the campaign for equal rights in the nation's capital, Washington, DC.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, civil rights activists in Washington waged a battle against racial discrimination in the city that had always been viewed as a symbol of our democracy. Their story reveals the deep connections between social scientists, activists, an emerging web of new and old civil rights organizations, and the nation's liberal elite at the mid-twentieth century. The story also contributes to our understanding of the development of liberal theories of race relations and shows the important role of symbolism in the attack on Jim Crow.

Segregation was a powerful institution in postwar DC, just as it was in the rest of the South, but the city's race-relations history was complex and constantly changing. The city boasted a large and influential free black population during the antebellum era. After the Civil War, the relatively benign rule of the federal government made DC a mecca for America's black elite. The men and women who belonged to this elite group created numerous significant institutions to promote their interests, including Howard University. In the early twentieth century, however, DC blacks, like those across the nation, witnessed the erection of many barriers to economic and social progress. During the Taft and Wilson administrations, Jim Crow regulations increasingly restricted the movements and opportunities of the capital's black citizens, and DC's black population became the focal point of actions taken by segregationists in Congress.

African Americans fought these efforts in a variety of ways and with increasing effort. During the 1930s, DC was a leader in the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” movement, and blacks aggressively protested discrimination in employment. While progress was inconsistent, the New Deal provided an increase in employment opportunities in the federal government to both working-class people and blacks, securing symbolic victories against Jim Crow. During World War II, employment shortages brought significant economic gains to African Americans and spurred them to demand greater political rights.

After World War II, activists stepped up their attacks on Jim Crow in DC. They were aided by the increasing attention of social scientists to the problem of race relations, an effort that received a major boost with the 1944 publication of Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma*. Myrdal’s primary conclusion—an assertion supported by other social scientists in the years that followed—was that racism was the result of ignorance and that education combined with professionally led efforts at integration would result in the decline of prejudice. Over the decade following the war, this philosophy, which was coined the “contact theory,” became a central tenet of an approach to race relations that would come to be known as “racial liberalism.”

One organization that played a crucial role in the rise of racial liberalism was the American Council on Race Relations. Founded in 1944 with the support of philanthropists Edwin Embree (of the Rosenwald Fund) and Marshall Field, and with the participation of key civil rights leaders including Walter White, Mary McCleod Bethune, and Lester Granger, the organization aimed “to bring about full democracy in race relations,” through the “discovery of fundamental knowledge” about racial problems. University of Chicago sociologist Louis Wirth and African American economist (and future cabinet secretary) Robert C. Weaver led the organization as it sought to promote the scholarly study of racial issues, to develop materials for use by government and private organizations, and to assist local communities in organizing programs of racial cooperation.

One of the council’s first projects focused on segregation in Washington, DC. Because of “the symbolic significance of the Nation’s Capital as the repository of the American Creed,” Embree argued that challenging segregation in Washington could establish a precedent for fighting the institution across the country. In 1946, Embree and Weaver (a DC native) organized the National Committee on Segregation in the Nation’s Capital, gathering support from over one hundred of the nation’s leaders. Over the next two years, Weaver oversaw the preparation of a major study of the capital’s race relations, which he intended to use to promote legal and social reform in the city.

These efforts were aided by the work of President Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights. The committee’s 1947 report, “To Secure These Rights,” reserved special opprobrium for DC. Calling the District a “graphic illustration of a failure of democracy,” the committee recommended several congressional actions to rectify the situation, including eliminating segregation in public schools, prohibiting segregation in public facilities, and outlawing restrictive housing covenants. The report, a landmark in the history of civil rights, brought increased attention to the scourge of discrimination in DC and around the nation.

A year later, Embree, Wirth, and Weaver released the committee’s 91-page report. Entitled “Segregation in Washington,” it began by focusing on the global implications of discrimination in the District. “Few Americans,” it argued, “appreciate what a shock Washington can be to visitors from abroad.” As evidence, the report reproduced a letter from a Danish visitor, who noted that “Washington today, despite its great outward beauty, is not a good ‘salesman’ for your kind of democracy.”

The report then examined several aspects of segregation in the city, describing the almost complete exclusion of blacks by eating establishments in the downtown area and the restrictions imposed on black customers in commercial operations. It also described the vise-like grip that housing discrimination placed on black residents. Excluded from newly developed areas in the outlying sections

of DC, blacks were forced to find accommodations in the declining and overcrowded interior. In addition, the report detailed the continuing restrictions on employment despite the explosion of civil service jobs. Although new agencies like the Office of Price Administration proved that integrated offices could function efficiently, many federal agencies—the worst example was the State Department—still practiced a rigid discrimination that limited blacks to the lowest-ranking positions.

The final section of the report focused on education and recreation in DC. “Every September,” the report stated, “the Superintendent of Schools makes two speeches. They are identical in content, but one is made to Negro teachers and the other to white teachers.” This separation was enforced throughout all parts of the public school system. Moreover, separate did not mean equal in the District’s schools, as Negro schools received far less funding and had less qualified teachers and older facilities than their white counterparts. Segregation also applied to after-school programs, run by the recreation department, where the system was so rigidly imposed that the city even named two annual champions (one white, one black) in marbles tournaments.

The report concluded with a call to action: “For more than half a century, DC had been building ghettos of mind, body and spirit. They are ghettos that cramp the soul of the nation. In the Nation’s Capital, we must mean what we say, and give people of all races and colors an equal chance to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

The report received significant national and local attention, appearing on the front page of the *Washington Post*, which described it as “stinging.” The *Pittsburgh Courier*, the only African American paper with a DC office, titled its article on the report “The Disgrace of the District of Columbia.” The *Atlantic Monthly* stated that the report was “even more ugly reading than the report of the President’s Committee,” and the *Nation* called it “a most honest and thorough statement.”

The report and the increasing attention it brought to discrimination in DC resulted in significant and immediate reforms. Just days after the report’s release, the Civilian Aeronautics Administration declared that it would bar any discrimination at facilities of the National Airport (now Ronald Reagan Airport). J.A. Krug, the Secretary of the Interior Department, which was negotiating to turn over operation of several District facilities to the local recreation department, declared that his department would not complete the transfer until the recreation department eliminated its requirement of racial segregation in its facilities.

The most interesting outcome of the report was an effort to resuscitate the District’s nineteenth-century “lost” discrimination laws. During their research, committee members discovered that in 1872 and 1873, the Council of the District of Columbia had passed laws giving blacks equal rights in all places of public accommodation, including restaurants and hotels. These laws had never been repealed, but had been surreptitiously removed from the DC code sometime in the early 1900s. To push the local government to acknowledge the validity of the laws, a group of District activists formed the Coordinating Committee for the Enforcement of DC Anti-Discrimination Laws (CCEAD). Led by Mary Church Terrell, an 88-year-old African American, who was virtually an institution in the District and was the scion of one of its most famous families, the group directed a three-prong attack on public segregation, which consisted of lobbying the DC government, initiating legal action to secure the enforcement of the statutes, and protesting at those commercial facilities that refused to integrate.

After some pressure, the commissioners who ran the city agreed to enforce the laws, partly as a matter of civil rights, but in large part because they viewed the effort as an important precedent for the home-rule independence they had lobbied Congress to grant the local government. Activists initiated a test case in which Terrell, along with two other African Americans and one white person, attempted to get service at Thompson’s Restaurant, a downtown business. When they were refused, they immediately filed charges in the DC corporation counsel’s office. In July 1950, a DC district judge dismissed the

charges, declaring the antidiscrimination laws “repealed by implication.” Later that year, a local appellate court reversed the decision and the restaurant asked the United States Court of Appeals to intervene.

The national attention that the case received increased its importance to the Truman administration, which in 1948 had staked a significant amount of political capital on its support for civil rights. In federal court, US Solicitor General Philip Perlman filed an amicus brief that argued that the statutes were valid and declared that “the problem of racial discrimination in the nation’s Capital is a matter of serious concern to the people of the entire country,” because it “assumed exaggerated importance in conveying a misleading impression of American life.” Twenty-two national groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union, the CIO, and Americans for Democratic Action, also joined to file a brief arguing for the laws’ application.

While the courts were considering the matter, CCEAD organized protests at several downtown stores to push them to integrate. During 1950 and 1951, activists secured the signatures of 4,000 DC residents, who pledged not to patronize Woolworth’s, Hecht’s, Kresge’s, Murphy’s, and other major department stores that refused to serve blacks at their lunch counters. Within the year, each of these establishments capitulated to the pressure and agreed to provide full services to African American customers.

Activists also won in court, after a long battle. In 1952, a divided federal bench declared the antidiscrimination laws invalid. Ignoring the content of the laws, the five judges in the majority focused on the question of the government’s authority to pass and enforce them. However, in an eight-to-zero decision, the US Supreme Court reversed, declaring that the laws had been authorized by the District’s home-rule powers when adopted and that they remained valid. The decision was a major victory for local activists, providing a rallying point to attack segregated institutions across the city, and serving as a harbinger of other civil rights battles that would take place in the near future.

The efforts of national and local civil rights activists to draw attention to the practice of segregation in the District of Columbia provided a powerful framework for mounting an attack on school segregation. By the early 1950s, segregation in the District was a national disgrace, and one that could not be met with arguments of states’ rights. The efforts of local and national activists reveal the multifaceted approach of civil rights lawyers, activists, and liberal institutions to promote civil rights in the postwar years. By highlighting the corrosive effect of segregation on the nation’s capital, a vital symbol of democracy, activists were able to change the terms of debate and, therefore, the law. Their efforts shaped the understanding of the Supreme Court justices, who in 1954 issued the landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

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INTERNET RESOURCES

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Rights: http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/desegregation/large/index.php?action=chronology

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