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# COLD WAR CIVIL RIGHTS

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## INTRODUCTION

All races and religions, that's America to me.

LEWIS ALLAN AND EARL ROBINSON,

"THE HOUSE I LIVE IN" (1942)<sup>1</sup>

Jimmy Wilson's name has not been remembered in the annals of Cold War history, but in 1958, this African American handyman was at the center of international attention. After he was sentenced to death in Alabama for stealing less than two dollars in change, Wilson's case was thought to epitomize the harsh consequences of American racism. It brought to the surface international anxiety about the state of American race relations. Because the United States was the presumptive leader of the free world, racism in the nation was a matter of international concern. How could American democracy be a beacon during the Cold War, and a model for those struggling against Soviet oppression, if the United States itself practiced brutal discrimination against minorities within its own borders?

Jimmy Wilson's unexpected entry into this international dilemma began on July 27, 1957. The facts of the unhappy events setting off his travails are unclear. Wilson had worked for Estelle Barker, an elderly white woman, in Marion, Alabama. He later told a Toronto reporter that he had simply wanted to borrow money from her against his future earnings, as he had in the past. As Wilson told the

story, Barker let him into her home one evening, they had an argument, she threw some money on her bed and he took it and left. The coins would not be enough to cover the cost of his cab home. Barker told the police that his motives were more sinister. After taking the money she had dumped on her bed, she said he forced her onto the bed and unsuccessfully attempted to rape her.<sup>2</sup>

Wilson was prosecuted only for robbery, for the theft of \$1.95. Over the objections of Wilson's attorney, Barker testified at trial about the alleged sexual assault. Wilson was quickly convicted by an all-white jury. Robbery carried a maximum penalty of death, and the presiding judge sentenced Wilson to die in the electric chair. When the Alabama Supreme Court upheld Wilson's sentence, news of the case spread across the nation. Because other nations followed race in the United States with great interest, the Wilson case was soon international news.<sup>3</sup>

Headlines around the world decried this death sentence for the theft of less than two dollars. The *Voice of Ethiopia* thought "it is inconceivable that in this enlightened age, in a country that prides itself on its code of justice, that, for the paltry sum of \$1.95, a man should forfeit his life." An editorial in the Ghanaian *Ashanti Pioneer* urged that the underlying law be repealed. According to the paper, it was "the High, inescapable duty of every right thinking human being who believes in democracy as understood and practised on this side of the Iron Curtain to venture to bring it home to the people of Alabama." The Jimmy Wilson story was widely publicized in West Africa, prompting American businessmen to call the U.S. embassy in Monrovia to express their concern that Wilson's execution would undermine "American effort to maintain sympathetic understanding [of our] principles and government" in that part of the world.<sup>4</sup>

Petitions and letters of protest poured in. Hulda Omreit of Bodo, Norway, describing herself as "a simple Norwegian housewife," wrote a letter to the U.S. government. She wished "to express her sympathy for the Negro, Jimmy Wilson, and plead for clemency for him. It makes no difference whether he is black or white; we are all brothers under the skin." Six members of the Israeli Parliament sent a letter of protest. The Trades Union Congress of Ghana urged

American authorities “to save not only the life of Wilson but also the good name of the United States of America from ridicule and contempt.” The Congress thought Wilson’s sentence “constitutes such a savage blow against the Negro Race that it finds no parallel in the Criminal Code of any modern State.” The Jones Town Youth Club of Jamaica was just one of the groups that held a protest in front of the U.S. consulate in Kingston. In one extreme reaction, the U.S. embassy in The Hague received calls threatening that the U.S. ambassador “would not survive” if Wilson were executed. After a story about the case appeared in *Time* magazine, someone in Perth, Australia, hung a black figure in effigy from the flagpole of the U.S. consulate. Above it was a sign reading “Guilty of theft of fourteen shillings.”<sup>5</sup>

John Morsell, a spokesman for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), thought that it would be “a sad blot on the nation” if Wilson were executed. The NAACP was worried about the international repercussions. According to Morsell, “We think the communists will take this and go to town with it.” Sure enough, the communist newspaper in Rome, *L’Unita*, called Wilson’s death sentence “a new unprecedented crime by American segregationists,” while front-page stories in Prague appeared under headlines proclaiming “This is America.” Even those friendly to the United States were outraged, however. A group of Canadian judges was disturbed about the sentence and passed a resolution conveying its “deep concern” to Alabama Governor James Folsom. The judges warned that “[i]f Alabama electrocutes Jimmy Wilson it will shock the conscience of the world.” From St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, Canon John Collins urged every Christian in Britain to protest the execution. The secretary of the British Labour Party thought it was unfortunate that “those who wish to criticize western liberty and democracy” had been given “such suitable ammunition for their propaganda.”<sup>6</sup>

Before long, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was involved in the case. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) had urged Dulles to intervene, calling the Wilson case “a matter of prime concern to the foreign relations of the United States.” CORE warned that “if this execution is carried out, certainly the enemies of the

United States will give it world-wide publicity and thus convey a distorted picture of relations between the races in our country.” A flood of despatches about the case from U.S. embassies around the world would make Dulles’s participation inevitable.<sup>7</sup>

Secretary Dulles sent a telegram to Governor Folsom, informing him of the great international interest in the Jimmy Wilson case. Folsom did not need to be told that the world had taken an interest in Jimmy Wilson. He had received an average of a thousand letters a day about the case, many from abroad. The governor had “never seen anything like” it and was “utterly amazed” by the outpouring of international attention. He called a press conference to announce that he was “‘snowed under’ with mail from Toronto demanding clemency” for Wilson. Folsom told Dulles that he stood ready to “aid in interpreting the facts of the case to the peoples of the world.” After the Alabama Supreme Court upheld Wilson’s conviction and sentence, Governor Folsom acted with unusual haste to grant Wilson clemency. The reason he acted so quickly was to end what he called the “international hullabaloo.”<sup>8</sup>

Jimmy Wilson’s case is one example of the international impact of American race discrimination during the Cold War. Domestic civil rights crises would quickly become international crises. As presidents and secretaries of state from 1946 to the mid-1960s worried about the impact of race discrimination on U.S. prestige abroad, civil rights reform came to be seen as crucial to U.S. foreign relations.

During the Cold War years, when international perceptions of American democracy were thought to affect the nation’s ability to maintain its leadership role, and particularly to ensure that democracy would be appealing to newly independent nations in Asia and Africa, the diplomatic impact of race in America was especially stark. The underlying question of whether the nation lived up to its own ideals had, of course, been raised before, and activists in earlier years had looked overseas for a sympathetic audience for their critique of American racism. Frederick Douglass sought support for the abolitionist movement in Great Britain, arguing that slavery was a crime against “the human family,” and so “it belongs to the whole human

family to seek its suppression.” In 1893, Ida B. Wells traveled to England to generate support for the campaign against lynching. “The pulpit and the press of our own country remains silent on these continued outrages,” she explained. She hoped that support from Great Britain would in turn “arouse the public sentiment of Americans.”<sup>9</sup>

During World War I, NAACP President Morefield Story argued that since African Americans were risking their lives to make the world safe for democracy, the nation must “make America safe for Americans.” W. E. B. DuBois took these ideas overseas when world leaders convened for the Paris Peace Conference. He hoped that international cooperation in a new League of Nations would provide a forum for the vindication of racial problems at home. “[W]hat we cannot accomplish before the choked conscience of America, we have an infinitely better chance to accomplish before the organized Public Opinion of the World.”<sup>10</sup>

While World War I influenced civil rights activists’ critique of American racism, it did not lead to extensive social change. The moment for broader change came after World War II, a war against a racist regime carried on by a nation with segregated military forces. During the war years the idea that a conflict inhered in American ideology and practice first gained wide currency.<sup>11</sup>

World War II marked a transition point in American foreign relations, American politics, and American culture. At home, the meaning ascribed to the war would help to shape what would follow. At least on an ideological level, the notion that the nation as a whole had a stake in racial equality was widespread. As Wendell L. Willkie put it, “Our very proclamations of what we are fighting for have rendered our own inequities self-evident. When we talk of freedom and opportunity for all nations the mocking paradoxes in our own society become so clear they can no longer be ignored.”<sup>12</sup>

The war years became an occasion for a serious examination of what was called the “Negro problem” in America. The most detailed treatment of this issue came from Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal and his team of researchers. In 1944, Myrdal published *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. According to Myrdal,



[I]n this War, the principle of democracy had to be applied more explicitly to race. . . . Fascism and racism are based on a racial superiority dogma. . . and they came to power by means of racial persecution and oppression. In fighting fascism and racism, America had to stand before the whole world in favor of racial tolerance and cooperation and of racial equality.<sup>13</sup>

The contradictions between racism and the ideology of democracy were, for Myrdal, a quintessentially *American* dilemma. Myrdal thought that all Americans shared an “American creed,” a belief in “ideals of the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all men, and of certain inalienable rights to freedom, justice and a fair opportunity.” Racism conflicted with this creed. The conflict between racist thoughts and egalitarian beliefs created tension and anxiety, leading Myrdal to emphasize that this American dilemma inured “*in the heart of the American.*”<sup>14</sup>

The American dilemma was a moral dilemma, and yet its implications stretched far beyond guilty consciences. According to Myrdal, there was a strategic reason for social change. During the war years, the American dilemma had “acquired tremendous international implications.” The “color angle to this War,” meant that “[t]he situation is actually such that any and all concessions to Negro rights in this phase of the history of the world will repay the nation many times, while any and all injustices inflicted upon them will be extremely costly.” American might would not be determined by military strength alone. “America, for its international prestige, power, and future security, needs to demonstrate to the world that American Negroes can be satisfactorily integrated into its democracy.”<sup>15</sup>

Myrdal’s concerns about the impact of American racism on the war effort were played out in Axis propaganda. Pearl Buck reported that “Japan. . . is declaring in the Philippines, in China, in India, Malaya, and even Russia that there is no basis for hope that colored peoples can expect any justice” from the U.S. government. To prove their point, the Japanese pointed to racism in the United States. According to Buck,

Every lynching, every race riot gives joy to Japan. The discriminations of the American army and navy and the air

forces against colored soldiers and sailors, the exclusion of colored labor in our defense industries and trade unions, all our social discriminations, are of the greatest aid today to our enemy in Asia, Japan. “Look at America,” Japan is saying to millions of listening ears. “Will white Americans give you equality?”<sup>16</sup>

In spite of these concerns, African Americans serving in the military in World War II were segregated and most often relegated to service units, not combat. A. Philip Randolph and many others mobilized against such wartime race discrimination. Civil rights groups capitalized on the nation’s new focus on equality, and World War II spurred civil rights activism. The NAACP developed, for the first time, a mass membership base. As Brenda Gayle Plummer has written, during the war “[t]he NAACP internationaliz[ed] the race issue.” A 1943 NAACP report suggested that race had become “a global instead of a national or sectional issue.” The war had broadened people’s thinking “with the realization that the United States cannot win this war unless there is a drastic readjustment of racial attitudes.”<sup>17</sup>

The thinking that World War II was a war against racial and religious intolerance, and that the United States stood to gain from promoting equality at home was so widespread that Frank Sinatra even sang about it. The lesson of his short film *The House I Live In* was that racial and religious intolerance were “Nazi” characteristics. To be “American” was to practice equality, at least toward one’s wartime allies. This Oscar-winning film ended with Sinatra singing, “all races and religions, that’s America to me.”<sup>18</sup>

As World War II drew to a close, the nation faced an uncertain future. Victory over fascism, a returned focus on the home front, the specter of a nuclear age—these joys and anxieties captured the nation. Yet more would be at stake in the postwar years. The purpose of the war would leave its victors with new obligations. And if the war was, at least in part, a battle against racism, then racial segregation and disenfranchisement seemed to belie the great sacrifices the war had wrought.<sup>19</sup>

This idea was captured by a military chaplain with U.S. Marine Corps troops at the Battle of Iwo Jima during the final months of the war. When the battle was over, Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn stood over newly dug graves on the island and delivered a eulogy. “Here lie men who loved America,” he said.

Here lie officers and men, Negroes and whites, rich and poor, together. Here no man prefers another because of his faith, or despises him because of his color. . . . Among these men there is no discrimination, no prejudice, no hatred. Theirs is the highest and purest democracy.

The equality these soldiers had found in death was, for Gittelsohn, at the heart of the war’s meaning.

Whoever of us lifts his hand in hate against a brother, or thinks himself superior to those who happen to be in the minority, makes of this ceremony, and of the bloody sacrifice it commemorates, an empty, hollow mockery. Thus, then, do we, the living, now dedicate ourselves, to the right of Protestants, Catholics and Jews, of white men and Negroes alike, to enjoy the democracy for which all of them have paid the price.<sup>20</sup>

There was an irony in the equality Gittelsohn found among the fallen soldiers, a point not mentioned in the chaplain’s eulogy. The military forces that fought on Iwo Jima were racially segregated. Yet the limitations on the military’s practice of equality did not dampen Gittelsohn’s passionate argument that out of the carnage of the war came a commitment and an obligation to give democracy meaning across the divisions of race, religion and class.

Too much blood has gone into this soil for us to let it lie barren. Too much pain and heartache have fertilized the earth on which we stand. We here solemnly swear: it shall not be in vain. Out of this will come, we promise, the birth of a new freedom for the sons of men everywhere.<sup>21</sup>

The commitment to democracy had been sealed in blood. And this “democracy” was more than a political system. It was an ideal-

ogy, a set of beliefs about the nature and moral power of the nation. What remained to be determined was the way this ideological commitment to egalitarian democracy would be put into practice in the years after the war.

Following World War II, reconversion came to domestic life as well as the workplace. A renewed embrace of domesticity fueled a baby boom and a focus on consumption. Would the desire to return to normalcy mean a renewed embrace of racial norms of segregation, disenfranchisement, and subordination?<sup>22</sup> Paradoxically, international pressures would soon simultaneously constrain and enhance civil rights reform.

The inward turn of postwar American culture would have its limits, as the nation's political leaders soon warned that a new international threat loomed on the horizon. By 1947, the Cold War came to dominate the American political scene. As the Truman administration cast Cold War international politics in apocalyptic terms, "McCarthyism" took hold in domestic politics. If communism was such a serious threat world-wide, the existence of communists within the United States seemed particularly frightening. As the nation closed ranks, critics of American society often found themselves labeled as "subversive." Civil rights groups had to walk a fine line, making it clear that their reform efforts were meant to fill out the contours of American democracy, and not to challenge or undermine it. Organizations outside a narrowing sphere of civil rights politics found it difficult to survive the Cold War years.<sup>23</sup> Under the strictures of Cold War politics, a broad, international critique of racial oppression was out of place. As Penny Von Eschen has written, the narrowed scope of acceptable protest during the early years of the Cold War would not accommodate criticism of colonialism. Western European colonial powers, after all, were America's Cold War allies. For that reason, outspoken critics of colonialism found themselves increasingly under siege.<sup>24</sup>

Civil rights activists who sought to use international pressure to encourage reform in the United States also found themselves under increasing scrutiny. The strategic value of civil rights reform had given civil rights activists an important opportunity. Drawing upon

international interest in race in America, following the war civil rights groups would turn to the United Nations. This new international forum, dedicated to human rights, might pressure the U.S. government to protect the rights of African Americans. However, to criticize the nation before an international audience and to air the nation's dirty laundry overseas was to reinforce the negative impact of American racism on the nation's standing as a world leader. It was seen, therefore, as a great breach of loyalty. As a result, just as the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the government's loyalty security program silenced progressive voices within the United States, through passport restrictions and international negotiations the long arm of U.S. government red-baiting silenced critics of U.S. racism overseas.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of the repression of the Cold War era, civil rights reform was *in part* a product of the Cold War. In the years following World War II, racial discrimination in the United States received increasing attention from other countries. Newspapers throughout the world carried stories about discrimination against nonwhite visiting foreign dignitaries, as well as against American blacks. At a time when the United States hoped to reshape the postwar world in its own image, the international attention given to racial segregation was troublesome and embarrassing. The focus of American foreign policy was to promote democracy and to "contain" communism, but the international focus on U.S. racial problems meant that the image of American democracy was tarnished. The apparent contradictions between American political ideology and American practice led to particular foreign relations problems with countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The Soviet Union capitalized on this weakness, using the race issue prominently in anti-American propaganda. U.S. government officials realized that their ability to promote democracy among peoples of color around the world was seriously hampered by continuing racial injustice at home. In this context, efforts to promote civil rights within the United States were consistent with and important to the more central U.S. mission of fighting world communism. The need to address international criticism gave the federal government an incentive to promote social change at home.

Yet the Cold War would frame and thereby limit the nation's civil rights commitment. The primacy of anticommunism in postwar American politics and culture left a very narrow space for criticism of the status quo. By silencing certain voices and by promoting a particular vision of racial justice, the Cold War led to a narrowing of acceptable civil rights discourse. The narrow boundaries of Cold War-era civil rights politics kept discussions of broad-based social change, or a linking of race and class, off the agenda. In addition, to the extent that the nation's commitment to social justice was motivated by a need to respond to foreign critics, civil rights reforms that made the nation look good might be sufficient. The narrow terms of Cold War civil rights discourse and the nature of the federal government's commitment help explain the limits of social change during this period.

In addressing civil rights reform from 1946 through the mid-1960s, the federal government engaged in a sustained effort to tell a particular story about race and American democracy: a story of progress, a story of the triumph of good over evil, a story of U.S. moral superiority. The lesson of this story was always that American democracy was a form of government that made the achievement of social justice possible, and that democratic change, however slow and gradual, was superior to dictatorial imposition. The story of race in America, used to compare democracy and communism, became an important Cold War narrative.

American race relations would not always stay neatly within this frame. Racial violence continued to mar the image of the United States in the 1950s, even as the *Voice of America* heralded the Supreme Court's ruling that school segregation violated the Constitution. During the 1960s the civil rights movement and massive resistance in the South forced the federal government to devote more attention both to racial justice in the nation and to the impact of the movement on U.S. prestige abroad.

Out of this dynamic comes a rather complex story. Domestic racism and civil rights protest led to international criticism of the U.S. government. International criticism led the federal government to respond, through placating foreign critics by reframing the narrative

of race in America, and through promoting some level of social change. While civil rights reform in different eras has been motivated by a variety of factors, one element during the early Cold War years was the need for reform in order to make credible the government's argument about race and democracy.

To explore this story, this study will take up civil rights history from a different standpoint than histories of civil rights activists and organizations and histories of domestic civil rights politics. The events that drive this narrative are the events that captivated the world. This focus on particular events and often on prominent leaders should not be seen as an effort to privilege a top-down focus as "the" story of civil rights history. The international perspective is not a substitute for the rich body of civil rights scholarship but another dimension that sheds additional light on those important and well-told stories. Looking abroad and then at home at the impact of civil rights on U.S. foreign affairs, we might more fully see the great impact of civil rights activists. It was only through the efforts of the movement that the nation and the world were moved to embrace the civil rights reform that emerged from this period of American history.<sup>26</sup>

The full story of civil rights reform in U.S. history cuts across racial groups. The U.S. policymakers in this study, however, saw American race relations through the lens of a black/white paradigm. To them, race in America was quintessentially about "the Negro problem." Foreign observers as well remarked that the status of "the Negro" was the paradigm for exploring race in America. Contemporary writers argue that the black/white paradigm renders other racial groups invisible. This limitation of vision affected the actors in this story, both U.S. policymakers and the international audience to which they were reacting. As a result, this history works within that narrowed conception of American race relations—not because race in America is a black/white issue, but because this study seeks to capture the way race politics were understood at a time when "the Negro problem" was at the center of the discourse on race in America.<sup>27</sup>

It will be the task of this volume to explore the impact of Cold War foreign affairs on U.S. civil rights reform. It brings together

Cold War history and civil rights history, helping us to see that federal government action on civil rights was an aspect of Cold War policymaking. Narratives of twentieth-century America have tended to treat civil rights and foreign relations as two separate categories, unrelated to each other. If developments in the history of international relations had a bearing on domestic policy, it might be as part of the background, but not as a player on the same stage. For that reason, attention to foreign relations may seem out of place in a study of civil rights reform. Yet as the United States emerged from World War II as a world power, looked to for leadership amid ensuing Cold War fears of a new global conflagration, domestic politics and culture were profoundly affected by events overseas. They were affected as well by the way local and national actors thought domestic events would impact the Cold War balance of power. The Cold War created a constraining environment for domestic politics. It also gave rise to new opportunities for those who could exploit Cold War anxieties, while yet remaining within the bounds of acceptable “Americanism.”<sup>28</sup>

Chapter 1 explores the international reaction to postwar racial violence and race discrimination. Lynching and racial segregation provoked international outrage, and by 1949 race in America was a principal Soviet propaganda theme. These developments led the Truman administration to realize that race discrimination harmed U.S. foreign relations.

One way to respond to international criticism was to manage the way the story of American race relations was told overseas. Chapter 2 details U.S. government efforts to turn the story of race in America into a story of the superiority of democracy over communism as a system of government. The production of propaganda on U.S. race relations was one strategy. In addition, the government took steps to silence alternative voices, such as Paul Robeson’s, when they challenged the official narrative of race and American democracy.

Ultimately the most effective response to foreign critics was to achieve some level of social change at home. Chapter 3 discusses Truman administration civil rights efforts, including its sustained reliance on national security arguments in briefs in the Supreme Court cases that would overturn the constitutional basis for Jim



Crow. In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the U.S. Supreme Court held that school segregation, a particular target of foreign criticism, violated the U.S. Constitution. *Brown* powerfully reinforced the story of race and democracy that had already been told in U.S. propaganda: American democracy enabled social change and was based on principles of justice and equality.

*Brown* would not bring this story to closure, of course. Chapter 4 takes up the major challenge to the image of America abroad during Eisenhower's presidency. Massive resistance to school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas, threatened to undermine the narrative of race and democracy carefully told in U.S. propaganda. As Little Rock became a massive worldwide news story, and as his leadership was questioned at home and abroad, Eisenhower was forced to act. Although the crisis in Little Rock would be resolved, in later years Little Rock remained the paradigmatic symbol of race in America and served as the reference point as Presidents Kennedy and Johnson faced civil rights crises of their own.

President Kennedy hoped to put off addressing civil rights so that civil rights initiatives would not interfere with his other domestic proposals and especially with his foreign affairs agenda. As chapter 5 illustrates, however, events in the early 1960s conspired to frustrate Kennedy's efforts to control the place of civil rights on his overall agenda. Ambassadors from newly independent African nations came to the United States and encountered Jim Crow. Each incident of discrimination reinforced the importance of race to U.S. relations with Africa. Sustained civil rights movement actions, and the brutality of resistance to peaceful civil rights protest, came to a head in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. As Bull Connor's violent treatment of protesters became a subject of discussion among African heads of state, the diplomatic consequences of discrimination and the importance of more extensive social change were underscored.

President Kennedy's support for a civil rights bill in 1963 was celebrated internationally. His assassination led many nations to question whether federal support for civil rights reform would continue. Foreign leaders looked to President Johnson to maintain continuity—not only in U.S. foreign affairs but also in U.S. civil rights policy. Chapter 6 details the role of civil rights in international per-

ceptions of Johnson's presidency. During the Johnson years the role of foreign relations in U.S. civil rights politics changed significantly. The passage of important civil rights legislation convinced many foreign observers that the U.S. government was behind social change. The narrative of race and democracy seemed to have more salience. Yet just as new questions surfaced about urban racial unrest, the focus of international interest in U.S. policy shifted. As American involvement in Vietnam escalated, the Vietnam War eclipsed domestic racism as a defining feature of the American image abroad.

*Cold War Civil Rights* traces the emergence, the development, and the decline of Cold War foreign affairs as a factor in influencing civil rights policy by setting a U.S. history topic within the context of Cold War world history. The Cold War was a critical juncture in the twentieth century, the "American Century." For this century, characterized by the emergence of the United States as a global power, it makes sense to ask whether the expansion of U.S. influence and power in the world reflected on American politics and culture at home. Following the transnational path of the story of race in America, we see that the borders of U.S. history are not easily maintained. An event that is local is at the same time international. "Foreign" developments help drive domestic politics and policy. American history plays out in a transnational frame. The international context structures relationships between "domestic" actors. It influences the timing, nature, and extent of social change. This suggests that an international perspective does not simply "fill in" the story of American history, but changes its terms.<sup>29</sup>

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