

Resource Sheet #7

Teacher Answers for the Data Sheet: Civil Rights and Cold Warriors

Truman

- a. How did he handle the situation?

Truman issued an executive order banning discrimination in the federal government and desegregating the military. He also pushed (unsuccessfully) for the creation of a permanent FEPC as well as for the repeal of the poll tax and the passage of a federal anti-lynching law. Truman risked his own re-election with this platform in 1948, which witnessed the formation of the “Dixiecrats”—southern democrats, who ran Strom Thurmond as their presidential candidate, in part to voice their discontent towards Truman, a democratic president.

- b. How did he capitalize internationally?

It took several years for military desegregation to be implemented across the board. Necessity dictated change more than the willingness of generals to comply with executive order—the urgency of the Korean War made desegregation the best logistical option. Truman was able to counter Soviet propaganda with accounts of integrated units fighting to preserve freedom & democracy.

Eisenhower

- a. How did he handle the situation?

President Eisenhower did not feel that the country was ready for complete desegregation and was reluctant to support civil rights, but did take executive action by using federal troops to uphold the Brown decision during the Little Rock crisis. He did push the Civil Rights Act of 1957 through Congress, but it had little power to make great change. Eisenhower later resented the way in which the Brown decision had distanced both himself and the federal government from the South.

- b. How did he capitalize internationally?

Eisenhower was quick to exploit the small gains made by the movement through the use of the State Department. It set up the USIS which distributed pamphlets and radio shows across Europe, praising the gains made for African-Americans in the U.S. It also sent African-American jazz musicians on good-will tours across Europe, Africa, and Asia to further the image of black equality in America. “Ike” even sent Chief Justice Earl Warren on a speaking tour of Africa to take advantage of the positive press the Brown decision received in the Third World.

Kennedy (up to June 1963)

- a. How did he handle the situation?

At first, President Kennedy suggested that African diplomats fly to Washington, rather than travel by car, where they could be met with hostility en route to the nation’s capital

in “Jim Crow” Maryland. After issuing formal apologies to several diplomats, Kennedy employed the State Department to put pressure on the Maryland General Assembly to pass a law desegregating public facilities (restaurants & hotels in particular), along Route 40—the highway that African diplomats used to travel from the United Nations, in New York City, to Washington D.C. The department also led efforts to battle discrimination in housing, in practice (not by law—de jure segregation was already banned in DC in the 1950s) in Washington. It wouldn’t be until June 1963 that Kennedy finally supported a national civil rights bill, following the violence white southerners perpetrated upon Martin Luther King’s March on Birmingham in segregated Alabama.

- b. How did he capitalize internationally?

Kennedy took measures to “smooth things over” with African nations that American racial practices offended and affected, realizing the importance of these Third World diplomats in America’s struggle with the Soviets over influence in the Cold War world. While the State Department, in fact, could boast of these achievements to battle Soviet propaganda, the Chinese and Russian press were quick to uncover the true intentions of the limited reforms: African-American citizens surrounding the Maryland-DC area only benefited from these changes because of the bad publicity generated by the discrimination of African diplomats. Kennedy, more concerned with foreign policy, pledged his support in the United Nations of African nations in their struggle to resist threats to their sovereignty from European powers.