
Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial Commission

Dwight D. Eisenhower and Civil Rights

“I believe as long as we allow conditions to exist that make for second-class citizens, we are making of ourselves less than first-class citizens.”

--Dwight D.
Eisenhower, Remarks at
the United Negro
College Fund luncheon,
May 19, 1953

Eisenhower was a product of his time and its attitudes regarding race. He was also aware of the discrimination and segregation that African Americans faced daily, and he viewed this racism as a most unfortunate and damaging aspect of our democratic society. In evaluating Eisenhower's responses to civil rights questions, his actions speak louder than words. Many of his actions are consistent with his belief that *federal* institutions must be at the forefront of upholding the ideal of racial equality. As a result, he was able to achieve more toward making equal treatment a civil right for minority Americans than any of his presidential predecessors since Reconstruction.

Eisenhower favored a patient, constitutionalist approach that would avoid a violent disruption of Southern society. However, by the mid-1950s he realized that he would have no control over the pace of integration, and he responded with actions and proposed legislative initiatives to provide racial equality. He was not successful in getting sweeping reforms passed by Congress, but he did build a sturdy foundation upon which more comprehensive changes were made in the years following his presidency. Consider the following:

- **Eisenhower appointed California Governor Earl Warren as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.** Warren molded a unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, striking down public school segregation. Eisenhower also appointed outstanding jurists such as Potter Stewart, William Brennan, John Marshall Harlan II, and Charles Evans Whittaker to the Warren court.
- **Eisenhower was consistently careful to appoint to the southern districts federal judges who were solidly committed to equal rights,** fighting southern senators to get them confirmed. When enforcement of future civil rights laws came before the district courts in the 1960s, they were upheld by progressive judges – Frank Johnson, Jr., and Elbert Parr Tuttle, for instance – appointed by Eisenhower years earlier. Eisenhower's judicial appointments constitute a significant contribution to civil rights.

- **Eisenhower achieved Congressional passage of the first civil rights legislation in the 82 years following Reconstruction.** The Senate at first refused to pass the bill, which included both *voting rights* and *a provision authorizing the Attorney General to protect all civil rights*. Eventually, Congress approved the Civil Rights Act of 1957 without overall civil rights protection. This was a much weaker law than what Eisenhower had advocated. In 1960, Eisenhower was successful in getting Congress to pass additional voting rights legislation. These laws were the precedents for the civil rights legislation of the 1960s.
- **Eisenhower implemented the integration of the U.S. military forces.** Although President Truman issued Executive Order 9981 (1948) to desegregate the military services, his administration had limited success in realizing it. As a life-long soldier, Dwight Eisenhower knew intimately the reality of racial intolerance in the military. As president, he commanded compliance from subordinates and was able to overcome the deeply rooted racial institutions in the military establishment. By October 30, 1954, the last racially segregated unit in the armed forces had been abolished, and all federally controlled schools for military dependent children had been desegregated.
- **Eisenhower sent elements of the 101st Airborne Division to carry out the mandate of the U.S. Supreme Court,** when Orval Faubus of Arkansas openly defied a federal court order to integrate Little Rock Central High, an all-white high school. This act, the first time since Reconstruction that federal troops were deployed to a former Confederate state, was condemned by many at the time, but it established that southern states could not use force to defeat the Constitution.
- **Eisenhower was the first president to elevate an African-American to an executive level position in the White House.** In July 1955, President Eisenhower appointed E. Frederic Morrow, a graduate of Bowdoin College and the Rutgers University Law School, as Administrative Officer for Special Projects.
- **Eisenhower worked to achieve full integration in the nation's capital from his first day in office until the end of his administration.** The President approached this task from several different angles. He appointed pro-desegregation district government officials and directed the Justice Department to argue in favor of desegregation in the Supreme Court. One of the results of judicial actions he instigated was the Supreme Court's *Thompson* decision which desegregated Washington restaurants. He personally cajoled, persuaded, and pressured local government administrators, motion picture moguls, and business men in meetings at the White House. By the time Eisenhower left Washington, the Capital of the

United States was transformed from an entirely segregated to an almost fully integrated city.

- **Eisenhower established the first comprehensive regulations prohibiting racial discrimination in the federal workforce.** He established presidential committees that set standards and pressured governments agencies and businesses with government contracts to end racial discrimination in employment.
- **Eisenhower was the first president since Reconstruction to meet personally in the White House with black civil rights leaders. He discussed** national policy on civil rights with Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and Lester B. Granger.

Two printer friendly eyewitness accounts about Eisenhower and Civil Rights:

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[Click here](#) for a short story on Eisenhower desegregating the nation's capital city.



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