

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER MEMORIAL COMMISSION

It's time to build a national memorial to Dwight D. Eisenhower.



Eisenhower Stories

Ike Desegregates the Nation's Capitol

In American national politics today, Social Security is often called the “third rail.” Politicians touch it at their peril. Sixty years ago the “third rail” of national politics was racial segregation. Most presidents simply didn’t touch it. National politics reflected the nation's dominant white racism. In the case of segregation in Washington, D.C., no president prior to Ike even attempted to address this situation personally, much less do anything about it.

When Dwight D. Eisenhower became president in 1953, daily life in the nation’s capital was not much different than it was in most other southern cities. African Americans endured rigid racial segregation. Hotels, restaurants (including cafeterias and lunch counters), movie theaters, public housing, and parks were restricted to “whites only.” Employers and labor unions openly discriminated against African Americans by hiring them only to perform the most menial tasks. Even the city government practiced outright discrimination. About 10 percent of the police force was African American, but only one out of the 267 line officers was characterized at the time as “colored” and African American policemen could not ride in the same patrol cars as whites. Five of the city’s forty-five fire companies were all-African American and the others all-white.

Given this historical context it’s remarkable that Eisenhower should choose to attack this problem head-on. Given the barriers he faced, it’s even more remarkable that he changed the city forever.

Ike began the process even before he was inaugurated. He gathered his staff and made it clear that Max Rabb, who would serve as his Secretary of the Cabinet, and Herbert Brownell, his Attorney General designate, would lead the White House effort to desegregate Washington. He made it clear that publicity or outright conflict could defeat the effort, but that he intended to get results. Just a few days before his was sworn into office, he met with the chairmen of the House and Senate committees that controlled the District of Columbia’s budget in order to let them know that he would insist that all citizens of the nation’s capital would be treated equally.

At the time, the city of Washington was controlled by a three-member Board of Commissioners. There was no elected Mayor or effective City Council. The Commission members were appointed by the President for staggered terms of office and only one vacancy existed when Ike took office. After personally consulting with D. Ward Nichols,

Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, Ike appointed Samuel Spencer, a white lawyer who had no prior association with the city government. Ike made certain that Spencer was opposed to segregation. As time went on, Eisenhower was able to replace the other commissioners. He replaced them with people who supported his desegregation efforts.

During the eight years of his presidency Eisenhower chipped away at Washington's system of racial discrimination even though he suffered constant interference from Congress. In those days congressional committee chairmen were appointed solely on the basis of seniority and were typically from districts in the Deep South. None of them overlooked even petty opportunities to obstruct Ike's efforts. For instance, Representative James C. Davis of Georgia, who chaired the House District Committee, even threatened to withhold federal funds from the city if the school board published a pamphlet he felt endorsed racial integration. Rather than publicly fight such actions, Ike ignored them and continued pushing the changes he could make in spite of Congress.

This quiet campaign moved on two fronts: legal action and the power of persuasion. In 1952 there were many local laws in Washington that enforced segregation of the races. Some years earlier, District of Columbia attorneys had filed a lawsuit to resurrect a series of Reconstruction local laws that had never been repealed (some dating back to 1872) which forbade businesses to refuse service to any "respectable, well-behaved" person and required restaurants to serve "at their usual prices" such well-behaved persons. Brownell's lawyers joined with the D.C. Corporation Counsel's suit to enforce these long-forgotten laws. On June 8, 1953 The Court ruled unanimously in favor of their action and segregated restaurants in the nation's capital were outlawed. This ruling also meant that, for the first time, all units of public housing in Washington became available for rental to any "respectable well-behaved person."

Presidents Roosevelt and Truman had previously issued Executive Orders aimed at reducing racial segregation in the federal workforce and contractors doing business with the federal government, but progress was only beginning. Eisenhower issued new Executive Orders to more forcefully eliminate racial discrimination in the federal work force and required the same regulations to apply to private employers operating under federal contracts. Led by Commissioner Spencer, these stronger regulations were codified for the government of the District of Columbia and its contractors. In 1954 the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* opened school enrollment to all citizens and the D.C. school system was among the first in the nation where compliance was enforced.

Because of congressional pressure, many proposed legal actions were simply not possible. In such cases, President Eisenhower used his powers of persuasion. He called in top film makers such as Jack Warner, Samuel Goldwyn, Louis B. Mayer and others and privately convinced them that it was in their own best interests to admit African Americans to the major theaters in downtown Washington. These theaters could not survive without first-run movies and they had to comply when Hollywood demanded it. Next, the President called in the major hotel owners and applied the same reasoning. One

by one they complied. By the time Eisenhower left office, theaters and hotels in Washington were open to everyone.

There were no equal opportunity laws in those days and Congress wasn't likely to pass them even if they had been proposed. The only tool available to Eisenhower was to personally demonstrate his "deep interest and concern" to local employers and unions. It took a few years of ongoing White House negotiations and pressure to get the local electric and telephone companies to hire African Americans and to promote them to administrative and managerial jobs. But they were doing so by the time that Eisenhower left office. Persuasion was exercised wherever it could be brought to bear and victories such as the admission of African Americans to the District of Columbia's Medical Society, Nurses Association, Optometric Society, and even, after years of stonewalling, the District of Columbia Bar Association took place in response to Eisenhower's "hidden hand."

President Eisenhower was unable to completely obliterate racial discrimination in the nation's capital city. The police, fire department, and transit company were only beginning to actually integrate when Ike left office in 1961. He had, however, brought about dramatic progress. Racial segregation in the city's public accommodations had been eliminated and many private companies followed suit. Ralph Bunche, a renowned African American of the period, announced that for the first time he could accept a government post because he could now live in Washington without abandoning human dignity.

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