

Dwight D. Eisenhower: The White Booker T. Washington

By Wilson J. Moses

During a small meeting of a dozen scholars arranged by Professor Stephen Tuck at The University of Oxford from April 6-9, 2006, which addressed the impact of the Second World War on the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, I experienced a minor epiphany concerning the memory of that movement both in the academic consciousness and in that of the general public. In particular, I reflected on the images and myths surrounding Dwight D. Eisenhower, Louis Armstrong, Norman Rockwell, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. I recalled that prior to 1957, Louis Armstrong was dismissed as an “Uncle Tom.” But “Satchmo” terrified his supposedly more militant critics when, during the 1957 Little Rock school crisis, he cancelled a government sponsored tour of the Soviet Union and accused General Eisenhower of lacking the guts to move decisively. Armstrong’s public image underwent two subsequent transmogrifications. By the late 1960s, a new generation of militants had arisen. Many among this group were Black nationalists and thus less inclined to value desegregation. Some of them renewed denunciations of Louis Armstrong as a “handkerchief head.” Not until the early 2000s was “Pops” rehabilitated as a champion of civil rights.

During the 1950s, Norman Rockwell was dismissed by intellectual dandies as a sentimental “illustrator,” not a true artist. To be sure, most of Rockwell’s work were unrelated to reform politics. Add to that the fact that during the 1950s the State Department and the CIA conspired to undermine social realism in American art, closing ranks with the trendy crowd to boost abstract expressionism (Pollock, De Kooning, et al.). A few eccentric souls willing to admit that Rockwell’s *The Problem We All Face*, showing Ruby Bridges being escorted by federal marshals into the William Frantz School in New Orleans in 1960, may not be devoid of merit. Of course, Rockwell’s depiction of burly White men protecting a Black child was not the iconography that leftist radicals or right-wing Black Muslims were seeking in the sixties.

With respect to Little Rock, the myth is widely disseminated that Eisenhower sent the troops purely and simply to maintain law and order. This position is *absolutely indefensible*. In a universally broadcast speech, Eisenhower pointedly invoked the human rights provisions of the United Nations Charter as a justification for sending in the troops. Of course, he regretted having to resort to military action! And who would not? The governor of Texas criticized Eisenhower’s decision to take military action as “undemocratic.” When Senator John F. Kennedy was asked about it during his debates with Nixon, his response was hardly a battle cry for more aggressive action. It is among the more striking ironies of American history that the post-World-War-II civil rights movement received its biggest push from the least democratic branches of government—the executive and the judiciary—under the leadership of a conservative former general in the Whig tradition.

Liberals and conservatives alike constantly invoke private conversations and spurious anecdotes to argue that Eisenhower was a segregationist. Frequently, they interpret the inconclusive recollection of Stephen Ambrose (based on a private, unconfirmable conversation) to assert that Ike regretted the Warren appointment and, by implication, the Brown Decisions. The direct and public evidence is as follows: (1) Eisenhower affirmed the correctness of the Brown decision in his published memoirs, *A Mandate for Change*; (2) he appointed liberal federal judges, Elbert Tuttle, John Brown, John Wisdom, Warren Jones, Simon Sobeloff, Clement Haynesworth; (3) he appointed Herbert Brownell as attorney general, and, when Brownell resigned, he appointed Brownell’s very assertive comrade-in-arms, William Rogers.

The inescapable conclusion is that the expansion of the federal government's power to enforce civil rights and the positioning of the federal government on the side of the civil rights struggle was effected with Eisenhower's knowledge and consent.

Many people dismissed the importance of the symbolism involved and claimed that the 1957 Civil Rights Act was itself merely symbolic. In fact, Lyndon Baines Johnson pulled the teeth from the administration's original version of the bill in the Senate. Under provision III of the unbutchered version of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, Attorney General Herbert Brownell sought the power to bring class action suits in cases involving the right to vote. Under provision IV, Brownell sought the power to bring "injunctions against actual or threatened interference with the right to vote." These were removed because Johnson knew he could not get it through the Senate. Both of Eisenhower's attorneys general, Herbert Brownell and William P. Rogers, vigorously championed the bill, and Eisenhower endorsed it with all four of its original provisions in his 1956 State of the Union address. Neither Kennedy nor Johnson found it convenient to advance its more vigorous provisions until much later.

With respect to the class action aspect of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, it is self-evident that the Eisenhower administration's insistence on class actions and class remedies is not only appropriate but crucial to African Americans. Justice Roger B. Taney, an official of the American Colonization Society, accurately stated in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* that Black people were conceived as a separate and subordinate "class" by the authors of the Declaration and by most signatories to the Constitution. Those conservative legalists who constantly inveigh against class-based remedies for racial discrimination, calling them inconsistent with the nation's founding principles, conveniently, and hypocritically, overlook their own cherished principle of "original intent." I am surprised that "living Constitutionalists" do not more frequently illuminate the ugly fact that the original intent of the founders was not egalitarian. Taney inadvertently demonstrated with unintended irony that equal opportunity must depend on both a living Constitution and class-based remedies.

Surfing the internet, I note much contradiction concerning Eisenhower's stance on *Brown II*. Some sites imply that he was the source of the "all deliberate speed" doctrine; others are not so certain either as to the doctrine's source or as to its meaning. Eisenhower said that he did not openly endorse the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, although he tacitly did so in his 1956 State of the Union address. In fact, his actions spoke eloquently for him. He accorded African Americans the same treatment that he accorded his closest friends, George C. Marshall, for example. When Marshall was attacked by the detested Joe McCarthy, Eisenhower avoided militant posturing and kept his personality out of the conflict, until eventually he was able to torpedo McCarthy and his un-American activities. He fought segregation in the same Machiavellian way that Booker T. Washington once had, until he became the first president since Reconstruction to sign a civil rights act. There was also timely symbolism in his receiving Black leaders in the White House. After signing the Civil Rights Act of 1957, Eisenhower had the statesmanship to be photographed with Martin Luther King, Jr.

It was with more "deliberate speed" that Malcolm X found the courage to be photographed with King. Indeed, it took him seven years! Malcolm and the Nation of Islam, known for their thinly-veiled references to "Uncle Tom Preachers," were reputedly backed by Dallas segregationist H. L. Hunt, who was rumored to have been involved in the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Malcolm belittled and disparaged King's and Eisenhower's activities until 1964, insisting that intelligent Black people did not want integration. Louis Lomax, the Black journalist who revealed Hunt's backing of the Nation of Islam, was killed when his car was forced off the road in Arizona. The former Malcolm Little, quondam Detroit Red, erstwhile

Malcolm X, and born-again Malik Shabazz, eventually found it useful to exploit a “surprise” meeting, where he was photographed grinning (and is that a foxy wink?) as he shook hands with King.

Few people ever saw this myth-making photograph while either man was alive. It was practically unknown until David Lewis published it in his 1970 biography of King. Indeed, one early biographer of King went so far as to claim that the two men never met. Today, the iconic image is used to foster a false historical memory of a unity of aims that never existed, even after Shabazz modified his Black nationalism.

The opinion is carefully nurtured that Eisenhower was a bumbling segregationist, who signed the 1957 Civil Rights Bill against his will, and whose motivation in sending the army to Little Rock was no more than a military officer’s rage at a challenge to his authority and a fear for his image when Louis Armstrong publicly questioned his fortitude. Seldom challenged is Stephen Ambrose’s assertion that Eisenhower regretted naming Earl Warren chief justice. Eisenhower was supposedly oblivious to the liberal opinions of his other judicial appointees. He desegregated Washington, D. C., in a senile daze, failed to commit to the United Nations Charter and its human rights provisions, and was duped by two attorneys general over the course of eight years. Such views (reminiscent of the smear campaign conducted by Jeffersonians on George Washington) defy common sense and endow private gossip with greater authority than public actions.

The reasons why Eisenhower is not credited with his administration’s civil rights accomplishments are twofold. Present-day Republicans are embarrassed by, and hostile to, the “*judicial activism*” of the Warren court as well as the executive activism of Eisenhower’s attorneys general. Democrats deny Eisenhower any credit because he was a Republican. *It’s that simple.* Martin Luther King, Jr., Louis Armstrong, and Norman Rockwell have all been rehabilitated. Dwight David Eisenhower deserves the same treatment. Like Booker T. Washington, he was a Machiavellian fox circumspectly but “deliberately” supported civil rights. He was the “White Booker T. Washington.”

Wilson J. Moses is Ferree Professor of American History at The Pennsylvania State University. He is the author and editor of numerous works, including the definitive biography of Alexander Crummell.