Quest and Response

McCoy, Donald R., Ruetten, Richard T.

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When most people talk about the civil-rights revolution, they speak of it as something that began in the mid-1950s or the early 1960s. They talk of its origins in terms of the Supreme Court's school desegregation decision, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the sit-ins, or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Yet the drive for minority rights in the United States had roots. It did not start from scratch.

These roots can be traced back to the early contacts between Indians and European settlers and the coming of black men to America; they are embedded in the subsequent development of relations among the races. Let there be no mistake, however. The quest of racial minorities for equal rights and opportunities for advancement has never been a smoothly growing, coordinated movement either in intensity or in success. Despite occasional excitements and successes, it was a scattered, scraggy movement until the beginning of the Second World War. It reflected the weaknesses of black-, brown-, red-, and yellow-skinned Americans, who were largely segregated and intimidated, poverty-ridden and undernourished.

We contend that this situation changed to an unprecedented extent during the years between 1945 and 1953. The change was inadequate in bringing equal rights and opportunities to the people of racial minorities, but it did bend patterns of thought and behavior and did confer tangible benefits. Under President Harry S. Truman, the executive branch of the federal government listened to minority groups as never before—and they spoke as never before—and often responded to their entreaties and pressures. Civil-rights victories were also won in the courts. Educational levels rose, and employment opportunities and the types of work undertaken increased. Legal segregation began to crumble, and the campaign for better housing inched forward. Leadership and individual accomplishment, political activity and organization, and pride and a sense of purpose grew markedly, at least among Negroes. Somewhat effective alliances were forged among racial minorities, Jews, organized labor, and political and religious liberals, in the search for ways to increase minority rights and opportunities in America.
Of course, the impact of these and other developments varied among and within minority groups. Oriental-Americans stood well in front of the racial minorities in all areas, and blacks forged ahead of the bulk of Indians and Spanish-speaking Americans. Within groups, the small middle class expanded and probably profited the most; but substantial segments of the lower classes experienced progress, and their aspirations heightened. In all, for the first time, sizable elements among racial minorities developed a modicum of economic power and political influence, and they often skillfully applied it for their own advantage. This rudimentary power—along with the frustration at not gaining more—and increasing pride, purpose, knowledge, and leadership were among the bases for civil-rights and racial developments after 1953.

Our goals are to detail and to analyze the advances and frustrations of the quest for minority rights and the response of American society, particularly the Truman administration, during the years 1945 to 1953. We view the civil-rights movement as one embracing a variety of minorities, because the problems, battles, successes, and failures were not confined to one group. They were often shared, sometimes in concert, by Negroes, Indians, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Japanese-Americans, and Chinese-Americans—the major groups usually called racial minorities. Jews are included because they occasionally shared grievances with the racial minorities and because they played a key role in sparking the informal civil-rights coalition of the period. But this study emphasizes black Americans. They had the overwhelming strength of numbers and purpose among minority peoples and had generated and led the civil-rights movement since the 1930s. Of necessity, other groups are given less attention because of their smaller numbers and their lesser influence and impact on American life.

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Donald R. McCoy
Richard T. Ruetten
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