Quest and Response

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Although the adaptation of minorities to American life has been varied, by the 1930s most immigrant groups had attained or approached equality of opportunity and rights. It was a different story, however, for those who because of color, geographical origins, or religion differed considerably in their backgrounds from the vast majority of Americans.

The 1930s marked a change in the trends affecting most of the nation's minorities, largely because of the New Deal's efforts to ameliorate their plight. Discrimination and segregation, however, were still standard principles in 1940 in the United States. Only Jews, chiefly because of their European background and advanced skills, were close to the economic and political means of American life. The condition of most Negroes, Indians, Mexican-Americans, and Oriental-Americans was still pitiful.

The Second World War brought substantial changes in the position of the minorities. All except Japanese-Americans profited from the prosperity generated by war production, and military service benefited many of the nonwhites who wore the nation's uniform. By 1945, minority-group employment and income stood at record levels, more opportunities for advancement had appeared, further skills had been acquired, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was emerging as a major political force. Equally important, minority-group leaders resolved not only that their people should keep what they had gained but that they should press harder for equality. In this they sought, with some success, to ally with one another and with sympathetic elements among the majority of Americans.

There were some signs that civil-rights gains would continue in the postwar period. After Franklin Roosevelt's death in 1945, the new
president, Harry S. Truman, urged Congress to establish a permanent FEPC and appointed Irvin C. Mollison to the Customs Court, the highest judicial position at that time for an American Negro. Yet, hope soon receded for minorities. They not only experienced cutbacks in jobs but had to compete in the shrinking job market with returning soldiers and sailors. With increasing unemployment and rapid demobilization came mounting racial tensions. Particularly in the South and West, many returning minority-group servicemen faced indignities, intimidation, and even violence. Urban housing, already cramped because of large-scale migration to the cities, worsened as demobilization progressed. Despite strenuous efforts by civil-rights lobbyists, all civil-rights measures before Congress failed, except for the Indian Claims Commission Act of 1946.

It was violence, however, the unwarranted assaults on blacks in 1946, that regenerated civil-rights progress. Outraged, Negro leaders demanded action; and they were supported by a surge of concern among whites. The Department of Justice and the White House sought to curb attacks on nonwhites. Because of the inadequacy of federal laws, however, the government had only a paper sword to wield in the form of investigations and prosecutions, but that at least harassed alleged assailants. Pressure was also brought to bear on southern governors to uphold state laws. Whether these actions, and the nation’s shocked reaction to the assaults, were primarily responsible for the calming of tensions remains arguable. Nevertheless, racial violence declined during the latter part of 1946 and remained on a low level for five years.

In effect, 1946 was a turning point, if only because of a conjunction of pressure from indignant civil-rights groups with rising White House determination to forestall a reoccurrence of the racial violence and intolerance that had marred the post-World War I period. And this was set against the willingness of public opinion for some action on civil rights. The immediate result was the scrutinizing of the whole range of minority problems, mainly through the instrumentality of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, which Truman appointed late in 1946.

There is no need here to itemize the actions of the Truman administration or the civil-rights advances in the various sectors of American life. The results can be discussed by categories. The president became the prime educator for the need to secure the rights and dignity of all citizens, and he strove to make opportunity and treatment more nearly equal for minorities in the civil service and the armed forces. He
worked, though with little success, for enactment of a cohesive civil-rights program and, with greater success, to block legislation that would jeopardize minority interests. Truman also made occasional appointments of minority-group members to public offices and sought to heighten self-government in America’s territories. The federal government became increasingly sensitive to complaints about discrimination in discharging public services. The Justice Department encouraged law officers everywhere to give an even break to minority peoples and intervened, through its amicus curiae briefs, to gain favorable court decisions in civil-rights cases. Like Truman, the department came to accept the argument that segregation and discrimination were inseparable problems, for segregation was a pattern that fostered and perpetuated discrimination. The Supreme Court, building on earlier decisions that had combated the widespread disenfranchisement of nonwhites and segregation in Pullman cars and interstate buses, responded in a series of cases that withdrew the legal bases for restrictive covenants, unequal school facilities, and segregated railway dining cars. Progress also occurred on state and local levels, as an increasing number of laws and ordinances struck at discrimination in hiring, public housing, schooling, and the use of public facilities. Some change came in private areas, as minorities increasingly participated in a wider variety of activities and jobs. Noteworthy was the extent to which civil rights and minorities became acceptable themes in literature and public discussions; and highly significant were Hollywood’s changing image of the Negro and the breakthrough of blacks in organized athletics.

These developments, together with advances in social-security benefits, minimum-wage levels, and health programs, constituted a substantial step forward. Minorities, particularly Negroes, occupied a place in government planning and programs as they never had before. They saw heartening responses to their pressures and, from time to time, even tangible results. The pace of change and encouragement had quickened beyond what their leaders had envisaged in 1945.

Progress came about for a number of reasons. Thanks considerably to wartime gains, minority groups—especially Jews and Negroes—now had the money, inspiration, organization, and leaders to fight for advancement. And they had the goals. America’s wartime propaganda had held these goals on high; and this reinforced and refined what minority citizens had been telling themselves for years. Moreover, the spate of books and articles on minority problems, beginning in 1940, had well publicized their plight and potential. Migration, especially of
blacks to the North, and the growing number of minority-group citizens who could vote honed their sensitivity to the possibility of change and heightened their political power. Minorities were all the stronger because of their informal postwar coalition and because of the greater concern of white liberals and a number of religious and labor leaders, who acted sometimes out of principle and sometimes in search of quid pro quo. In short, minorities had gained a secure foothold in the foothills of American democracy, enabling them to exert pressure that could be felt in the cold high range of the nation’s institutions.

Crucial to effective minority pressure was the fact that government was more than ever receptive to it. Harry S. Truman was a man intent upon further securing constitutional guarantees to all Americans—a man who wanted to do, as he often said, “the right thing.” Here, too, was a president who increasingly turned to advisers who were not only sympathetic to the quest for equal rights and opportunities, but were also keenly aware of the political advantages, at home and abroad, of assisting that quest. At home, the administration would gain more leverage with congressional liberals, the bedrock of support for the Fair Deal legislative program. The administration’s stand on civil rights also strengthened it in vying for liberal and minority-group backing in Truman’s bid for nomination and election in 1948. Abroad, America was under serious attack from international communism and from the emerging nonwhite nations because of the gap between its principles and practices in racial matters. As the cold war developed, the Truman administration sought to blunt communism’s exploitation of the issue in order to enlist allies from among the new nations, or at least to keep them uncommitted.

The application of nonwhite pressure and the frequently positive response to it during the Truman years were aided by the increasing disposition of some white, Christian Americans to favor progress for minority groups. They were sickened by the brutality of Nazism and had accepted the egalitarian teachings of political liberals and leftists. Many Americans, especially among the young, read of the plight of minorities; some of them came increasingly in contact with Negros, Jews, Mexican-Americans, Indians, and Oriental-Americans and found that they were in no way diminished or threatened.

The upshot was not a revolution in the lives of America’s minority peoples, but by the end of the Truman administration substantial progress had been made. Although Congress had not enacted a fair employment practices law, by 1953 twelve states and thirty cities had adopted such legislation, though it was of varying effectiveness. The
general conclusion of studies of fair employment legislation was that where it was enforced, it had an impact in reducing racial and religious discrimination in employment. Of course, the labor requirements of the Korean War, President Truman’s wartime National Manpower Mobilization Policy, and especially his Committee on Government Contract Compliance supplemented the work of fair employment agencies and private groups, such as the Urban League.

Generally favorable employment needs and public and private pressures for fair hiring practices created an unusually favorable job situation for minorities. Employment and income rates after World War II remained considerably higher than prewar levels. The coming of the Korean War opened opportunities even wider, and minorities experienced relatively little trouble in finding jobs of some kind. As of 1953, only 4.1 percent of the nonwhite labor force was unemployed, compared to 2.3 percent of whites. Median nonwhite family income rose from $1,614 to $2,338 between 1947 and 1952; and that income grew in its percentage of median white family income from 51 to 57—a record. There was also a great shift in the occupational categories of black Americans, from 19.3 percent in 1940 in professional, white collar, skilled, and semiskilled work to 37.1 by 1950.

Other advances were evident by the end of the Truman administration. Racial minorities benefited from social-welfare measures, such as the 1950 amendments to the Social Security Act, which liberalized payments and covered additional workers, and health and minimum-wage programs. Some progress was made in opening eating places, hotels, parks, and theaters to minorities, although it was uneven and small in terms of the number of people affected. Some unions eliminated or relaxed their discriminatory practices. With little fanfare, the American Medical Association and many medical specialist societies dropped racial bars to membership; and by 1953 twenty-seven medical associations in six southern states and the District of Columbia had black members, whereas none had had any in 1947. Only one state nursing association refused Negro members by 1954. The nonwhite life-expectancy age jumped from 53.1 in 1940 to 61.7 in 1953, compared to 64.2 and 69.6 for whites over the same period. The gap was still monstrous, but it was closing.

There were dramatic changes in schooling, too. The percentage of nonwhites from ages five to nineteen who were enrolled in school rose from 68.4 to 74.8, and of whites from 75.6 to 79.3, between 1940 and 1950. The median of school years completed increased during the decade from 5.7 to 7 for nonwhites and from 8.7 to 9.7 for whites; and
the percentage of nonwhites in high school and college rose from 16.7 in 1940 to 20.6 in 1950. Indeed, Woodson and Wesley report that the number of Negroes in institutions of higher education had increased between 1940 and 1950 from 23,000 to 113,735. Partly because of fear that the Supreme Court would force integration in schools, southern states greatly expanded the outlay for Negro education between 1940 and 1952, with the per-pupil expenditure in nine states rising from $21.54 to $115.08, and capital outlay per pupil increasing from $.99 to $29.58, although the dollar increases for white schools were a bit larger. The gap in twelve southern states in the number of years of college training received by white and black teachers narrowed, however, and the dollar increase in average salaries for teachers was slightly larger for Negroes, rising $1,902 compared to $1,846 for whites.4

Furthermore, owner-occupied dwellings of nonwhites increased from 23.6 to 34.9 percent between 1940 and 1950, compared to 45.7 and 57 percent for whites. A veritable revolution occurred in the military services, accelerated by President Truman’s actions and the Korean War, which was revealed primarily in greater desegregation, integration, and opportunity, but also in racial proportions of manpower strength. In the army the percentage of black officers grew from 1.7 to 2.9, and of enlisted men from 9.6 to 12.3, between 1949 and 1953; airforce figures showed an increase in black officers from 0.6 to 1.1 percent, and of Negro enlisted men from 5.1 to 8.6 percent. The marines and the navy went from virtually no black officers to precious few; and although the percentage of black enlisted men in the navy declined, it rose substantially in the Marine Corps—from 2.1 to 6.5.5 In short, desegregation of the military was one of the most significant breakthroughs in civil rights in the twentieth century.

That more was not accomplished during the Truman years was disappointing and regrettable in terms of social justice and national welfare. Plainly, not enough whites were willing to go much further in combating discrimination and its effects through private actions or the work of state and local governments, and minorities did not possess sufficient strength to force more progress. The spur of civil-rights advocates was compelling, but the bridle of their opponents was almost proportionately discouraging. As black men struggled to rise economically, politically, and socially in the postwar period, they found themselves increasingly in competition with whites, many of whom felt such confrontation threatening and impossible to accept. Little more could have been expected of Congress, which did little, and of the Supreme Court, which accomplished much. The White House might have dared
more—for example, a thoroughgoing attack on discrimination in the
civil service and in the rendering of public services, additional appoint­
ments of minority-group officeholders and actively sympathetic whites,
and the earlier formation of the Committee on Government Contract
Compliance (with better financial support). Yet although Harry Tru­
man often moved by fits and starts and left something to be desired, he
was the first president to have a civil-rights program, the first to try to
come to grips with the basic problems of minorities, and the first to
condemn, vigorously and consistently, the presence of discrimination
and inequality in America. His endeavors, courage, and accomplish­
ments far surpassed those of his predecessors, and at a time when it
would not have been difficult to have treated the civil-rights problem
with soft soap alone. The record of the Truman years showed the
strength of the American system in that progress was made; but it also
revealed society’s weakness in its inability, in a whirlpool of conflicting
interests and pressures, to move forward either rapidly or wisely
enough.

Nevertheless, the position of minorities in 1953 had improved.
Jews rarely gave signs of feeling like an aggrieved or besieged minority.
Oriental-Americans had moved forward on all fronts, so that today, for
example, Japanese-Americans are more middle class than the white
majority in terms of education and accomplishment. To be sure, most
Indians and Mexican-Americans could complain that matters had not
changed markedly for them; and the Puerto Ricans, who had flocked
to the mainland to gain their fortunes, had received little. The largest
minority by far—black Americans—had gained considerably, however
inadequate their advances appear today.

In 1923 had minority leaders been told that the following year
their people would possess what they did in 1953, it would have seemed
a fantastic achievement. But what black, brown, and red Americans
actually enjoyed in 1953 fell far short of fulfilling their aspirations.
They too were children of the American heritage. Franklin Roosevelt
made the same golden promises to them that he did to whites, and
Harry Truman singled out the racial minorities for attention in 1948.
The minority peoples knew, as they had witnessed during depression
and war, what government could do when it applied its power. They
saw the life styles of whites as depicted in motion pictures, advertising,
and television. The lessening of discrimination, segregation, and vio­
lence was fine as far as it went; so was the increase in opportunities,
income, and freedom. But these were not enough, and they were not
all that the nation could give. It was clear that America had an obliga-
tion to grant more in order to provide the equality under law that it had for generations been promising. Moreover, in view of the cold war, the emergence of nonwhite nations, and the need for domestic stability, the United States could not afford less than full payment of its promises to all citizens—throughout the country, and soon.

Yet, by 1953, the omens were mixed. A new president had made promises, but Congress gave no signs of being less intransigent than in preceding years. Moreover, the civil-rights coalition had been seriously weakened as anti-Semitism diminished and Jews became increasingly caught up in the affairs of Israel and as Japanese-Americans became better integrated into society. During the 1950s, much of the energy of Democratic liberals was spent in combating McCarthyism and, after 1952, in efforts to regain political power. Many civil-rights advocates flagged in their work, stung by repeated charges of communism and even harassment by government agencies. Minorities also were hindered by the repeated declarations that in a prosperous nation, they too must be prospering. Blacks found themselves increasingly alone in the civil-rights struggle; and Indians, Mexican-Americans, and Puerto Ricans were seldom in a position to help themselves, much less to help revitalize the civil-rights coalition. During the Eisenhower years, some progress was made in education and home ownership. There were also the desegregation decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, rudimentary civil-rights legislation in 1957 and 1960, and advances in completing integration in the armed forces. The pace of progress, however, had plainly fallen off.

Had the civil-rights changes brought about during the years from 1945 to 1954 continued at least at the same pace, the adjustment of the races after the Brown decision might have been a happier story. But progress slackened. The rate of nonwhite unemployment rose to range between 7.5 and 12.6 percent—more than twice that of whites—between 1954 and 1962. The proportion of nonwhite income to white slid below that of the Korean War average, and the dollar gap in incomes widened alarmingly. The stark fact was that black, brown, and red Americans were not keeping pace economically. Violence and intimidation were still standard commodities in race relations in many areas, and the political rights of most southern blacks were violated. Indeed, massive resistance to civil-rights gains rose in the South after the Brown decision. Ghettos and reservations continued to exist with scant improvement. De facto segregation was as oppressive as legal segregation, and plenty of the latter still remained. The government under Dwight Eisenhower after 1954 was less effective, if not less con-
cerned, with meeting minority problems than under Truman; and interest among white citizens declined. Traditional Negro leadership—primarily middle-class oriented—seemed too often during the Eisenhower years to sit back and wait for something to happen, but little did happen for the mass of blacks. Perhaps W. E. B. DuBois’s “Talented Tenth” of the race had found satisfaction; but, contrary to expectations, they were not doing enough to raise their less happy brothers with them. Until the mass of Negroes, and indeed of Indians and Spanish-speaking Americans, was better educated and was afforded opportunities for decent work and dignified living, minority problems would remain a cancer in American life.

Yet the gains of the period 1945 to 1954 were not wasted. Not only did they represent some improvement in the conditions of minorities, but, more important, they contributed to consolidation of their goals and to the building of a base of power and skills, at least for blacks. Moreover, every small gain had bolstered hope for the achievement of greater gains. Indeed, by 1954, Negroes had the goals, the pride, and much of the tactics and financing necessary to enable them to press the struggle. Particularly, they had the potential leadership of their young people, a group that had been teethed on the rhetoric of black militancy and equal rights during the preceding fifteen years. Black aspirations had been spurred by what had been achieved by 1954 and by the example of what most whites and the more affluent nonwhites enjoyed. Because these aspirations were not reasonably met, frustration was the accomplishment. And as frustration grew after 1954, blacks drew increasingly on the skills, pride, and potential leadership that they had developed during the years after World War II; and in doing so, they lent support to the later development of similar movements among Indians, Mexican-Americans, and Puerto Ricans. America had let them down, but it had also provided them with the resources and spirit to press forward vigorously, on many fronts, by the 1960s and 1970s.