
BOOK REVIEW

Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–55, by Carol Anderson. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2003.

Although the golden anniversary of the *Brown* ruling draws attention to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) fight to achieve equality through the U.S. court system, the celebration overshadows other struggles for equality in the civil rights era. Before they obtained justice in the court venue, African Americans sought equality and humanitarian assistance from the United Nations. As World War II ended, the Allies created the United Nations to maintain world peace and to prevent such atrocities as the Holocaust and the Rape of Nanking. As the organization developed, black leaders turned to the new council, seeking to prevent the injustices and horrific acts committed against their race within the United States. In *Eyes off the Prize*, Carol Anderson thoroughly explains black America's search for human rights policy and enforcement from the UN and why the endeavor failed.

The body of literature concerning black America's fight for equality is

vast, covering the NAACP's legal strategy to end school desegregation and the 1964 Civil Rights Act, but it does not include African Americans' push for human rights on the international stage. Anderson, who "is particularly intrigued with the ways that domestic and international policies . . . weave their way through the issues of race, justice, and equality," colors well the political landscape at home and abroad, giving the reader a full understanding of why the struggle failed. She relies heavily on NAACP papers, communication among black leaders, State Department files, presidential papers, and UN documents and provides a dialogue among those who either sought or blocked a human rights covenant.

The author lays a solid foundation for why African Americans petitioned the UN, providing horrific examples that are not for the faint of heart. Her examples include a street car conductor who shot a black war veteran in execution style for challenging Jim Crow and an angry white man who "partially dismembered, castrated, and blow torched [a disobedient African American] until his eyes popped out of his head" (58). She also includes Emmett Till, the Scottsboro boys, and the incident in

Groveland, Florida. Lobbying Congress to prevent such violence, she reminds us, had already failed because of Dixiecrat delays. African American leaders then moved unsuccessfully to petition the infant UN to prevent unequal housing, "southern justice," and lynching.

Eyes off the Prize blames the U.S. government, cold war politics, and unfocused black leaders for the failure. The State Department, especially, avoided placing domestic conflicts in the UN's hands because of conservative ideology and simple bigotry. John Foster Dulles, foreign policy adviser and later secretary of state, forged the "domestic jurisdiction clause," preventing UN intervention within the United States. Later in the struggle, South Carolina's James F. Byrnes, who fought anti-lynching legislation in Congress and defended segregation in the courts, served as a UN delegate, removing any hope of UN involvement to prevent racial violence in the South. The cold war mentality also stymied the endeavor because both the United States and the USSR, aware of their respective violations, wished to prevent negative exposure to the world eye. Finger-pointing at the UN frustrated genuine international attempts, while McCarthyism quashed domestic efforts.

As the appeal lost hope by the mid-1950s, even African Americans and their organizations received blame. Anderson explains the dissent in the NAACP ranks. The organization lost Eleanor Roosevelt, who was its most influential board member, rekindled a relationship with radical founder W.E.B. DuBois, and criticized Walter White for divorcing to marry a white woman. White's new romance raised eyebrows at the NAACP and fueled southern claims that the group's primary goal was to mix the races. Anderson even alleges a degree of Uncle Tomism on the part of some activists because the so-called leaders "were more attuned to befriending the McCarthyites than protecting one of their own from an obvious injustice" (174).

Anderson delivers with a degree of wit and sarcasm, calling one senator's block on human rights "the charge of the *right* brigade" and referring to other opponents who prevent human rights policy with legal arguments as "constitutional vampires." Yet, she is passionate about the subject, concluding, "it is important to remember what was lost and why, so that when the Third Reconstruction begins . . . a nation will arise with a true commitment to equality and human rights. That is the prize" (276).

To Anderson's credit, she provides an international perspective on this issue and reveals foreign opinion about the mistreatment of African Americans, but she fails to determine the concern of most powerful nations in terms of inter-

vening in racial injustice. Nationalist China, having been a victim of human rights violations at the hands of another nation, supported human rights in the original UN Charter and in newly liberated colonies and expressed support for the black Americans' endeavor. But how did fellow Security Council members, especially France, regard appeals from the NAACP and National Negro Congress? And to what extent did the international community feel that it was the UN's obligation to intervene? Answers to those questions would help justify an early delivery of the prize by an international community.

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