

A Matter of Justice

Eisenhower and the Beginning of the Civil Rights revolution

By David A. Nichols

A book review

by

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It has been widely assumed that President Dwight D. Eisenhower opposed and worked against the civil rights movement in the United States during his tenure in office. In fact, historian David A. Nichols, using then newly available documents from the Eisenhower Presidential Library and other documents neglected by previous accounts of Eisenhower's civil rights position, argues this is incorrect and goes about setting the record straight.

“We have been pursuing this quietly, not tub-thumping, and we have not tried to claim political credit. This is a matter of justice not of anything else.”

~~Eisenhower on his civil rights policies, October 12, 1956

A leading expert on the Eisenhower presidency, David A. Nichols is a former professor and academic dean at Southwestern College in Kansas and holds a Ph.D. in history from William and Mary. This book is an engrossing read for those interested in the history of the twentieth century civil rights movement, especially for people who participated. Written in 2007 it covers the period from 1944 to Eisenhower's death in 1969. It is a fascinating look back on the inter-workings of the Eisenhower administration.

Central to the Eisenhower candidacy and administration was his Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr. Brownell was instrumental and influential in the legal advances of the movement. According to Brownell on a pre-election trip to meet with him, Eisenhower stated “flatly”, if elected, “the first order of business” was “to eliminate discrimination against black citizens in every area under the jurisdiction of the federal government.” This position was key to Eisenhower's strategy to bring equality of the races steps closer to reality.

Born in 1890 in Abilene, Kansas, a small town of about three thousand residents including about one hundred blacks, Eisenhower was raised in an atmosphere of tolerance toward an individual without regard to race, even though *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court ruling, stating separate but equal facilities were constitutional was decided when he was child. Taught by his mother, immersed in the Mennonite sect, completing his formal studies at West Point and enjoying an assignment with General Fox Conner for three years in Panama he developed “a set of egalitarian principles.”

Brownell was also raised in the Midwest in Peru, Nebraska. He focused his studies on Lincoln's writings and was a serious student of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution,

granting citizenship rights to former slaves. He is said to have been a very persuasive man with “enormous knowledge and experience”. This is the man who convinced Eisenhower he should run for the top office in the land and acted as his campaign manager.

Importantly the book reiterates that Eisenhower was the driving force speaking up for opportunity for advancement of Negroes in the armed forces. He lobbied to allow volunteers to serve on the front line and eventually persuaded General Marshall to form the first Negro infantry unit. Worry was initially expressed by General Patton that the Southern soldiers would not serve with the black units.

“Our experience was just the opposite,” Eisenhower recalled. “There was not a single objection brought to my attention.” This was the experience that convinced Eisenhower that integration could be successful throughout the country.

Nichols lays the groundwork for Eisenhower’s strong push for civil rights for all in example after example. In response to a query from his brother, then president of Kansas State University in 1946, when asked for input about an educational course on citizenship, he wrote, “In presenting the objective of the course I should bear down hard on elimination of racial intolerance.”

It is interesting to note that Eisenhower understood that Negroes were at a terrible educational disadvantage. In testimony before the Congress he advocated establishing separate units in the military so Blacks could compete against each other for advancement, not white soldiers, who were given educational and, of course, many other advantages. In hind sight, after then President Truman, issued executive order 9811, requiring equal treatment and opportunity for Negroes in the U.S. military, it may have appeared Eisenhower was repeating a stereotype that continues today.

Nichols spends time establishing Eisenhower’s preference for action over speech from his high school days through his military term to the presidency. He also wrote of the conflict within the president over establishing civil rights and justice for all without forcing people to “like someone else”. He never believed legislation would in and of itself change the minds and hearts of Southerners. He saw the role of the federal government as his purview and state rights to be paramount.

I propose to use whatever authority exists in the office of the President to end segregation in the District of Columbia, including the Federal Government, and segregation in the Armed Forces.

~~Dwight D. Eisenhower, February 2, 1953

The first steps President Eisenhower and Attorney General Brownell instituted were to hire and appoint staff that believed in equality for all. One of the most fascinating sections details the first Supreme Court appointment of Chief Justice Earl Warren. By the time of Warren’s appointment Eisenhower had “integrated the armed forces, including the schools for military dependents, desegregated the District of Columbia, and worked to end discrimination in government contracts and public accommodations.” When the famous Brown decision was announced Warren had good reason to believe Eisenhower would support it even if he did so in a way that many found cryptic and mushy.

The book continues telling the story of the actual task of desegregating the country via the national public school systems, including the infamous Little Rock stand off; the murder of Emmett Till, the Montgomery bus boycott, and the 1957 Civil Rights Act.

In a progress report from August, 1955 the President wrote:

“We believe in the equal dignity of all our people, whatever their racial origin or background may be; in the equal rights to freedom and opportunity and the benefits of our common citizenship.”

The Civil Rights Act of 1957 was first written by Brownell “in keeping with the President’s message” in 1956, in four parts calling for the creation of a civil rights commission, a civil rights division in the Justice Department, authority for the attorney general to protect all of the rights guaranteed by the Constitution” and mechanism for prosecution of voting rights violations.

The story of Eisenhower and Civil Rights ends in 1964 and 1965 with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and 65 under the leadership of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. But truth be told it would not have passed if Eisenhower had not laid the groundwork so assiduously and with such great determination.

Mr. Nichols’ copious research and notations cement the accuracy of his account of these times.

After reading this book, one may decide Eisenhower was more progressive and exercised more leadership than Presidents Truman, Kennedy or Johnson in moving the United States forward on the issue of equality of the races. I know I did.