

Internationalizing the African American Civil Rights Movement: The NAACP's 1947 United Nations Petition "An Appeal to the World" in the Context of Decolonization

Qianqian He

Affiliation: School of History and Culture, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, Jilin 130024, China

Email: heqianqian1717@163.com

Abstract

Looking at the history of the modern African American civil rights movement, the NAACP played a central role and has continued to speak for people of color in the United States up to today. In 1947, the NAACP's petition to the United Nations actively brought the problems of African Americans to the international stage, seeking racial equality and civil rights. This article examines the domestic and international background of the petition, its preparation process, and the main points of An Appeal to the World. It aims to trace how the NAACP promoted the internationalization of the civil rights movement, with special attention to the petition edited by W. E. B. Du Bois. It also explores the response to this activity in the context of the wave of colonial independence, in order to better understand how African Americans struggled for racial equality and civil rights, and how the global human rights agenda developed under decolonization.

Keywords: Civil Rights Movement in the United States; NAACP; An Appeal to the World; Internationalization; Decolonization

1. Introduction

The 1947 petition to the United Nations was not a sudden move by the NAACP, but the result of several combined factors. First, the difficult situation of African Americans was both the reason for the NAACP's founding and the urgent problem that this petition aimed to solve. Second, the petition continued earlier forms of struggle and also matched the changes in the international order of the twentieth century. Third, it followed and went beyond the 1946 petition to the United Nations by the National Negro Congress. That earlier petition served as a lesson and provided guidance for the NAACP's effort.

1.1 The Situation of African Americans

Around the end of World War II, African Americans were still trapped in systematic discrimination and violence. By "systemic discrimination" we mean a structured network of laws, institutional practices, economic arrangements, and social norms that together produced and reproduced racial inequality across generations. Legally, the Plessy v. Ferguson case of 1896 had established the rule of "separate but equal," racial segregation was enforced in education, transport, housing, and almost all areas of public life. This forced Black people to live on the edge of society. At the same time, lynching and racial violence continued, used by Southern whites as a tool of terror to maintain racial order. African Americans had little protection for their lives and property, and their basic civil rights such as voting and education were also taken away.

In the early twentieth century, the Harlem Renaissance appeared. It opposed racial discrimination, rejected the old submissive "Uncle Tom" image, and celebrated the spirit of the "New Negro." The movement encouraged a sense of pride and self-awareness among African Americans. Yet in reality, legal and policy discrimination, fixed social attitudes, and the federal government's passive response caused repeated setbacks. Facing weak political institutions at home and a biased judicial system, African Americans came to see that internal struggle alone could not change their fate. For the NAACP, turning to the international community for attention and support became an important way to break the deadlock and push forward the civil rights movement.

1.2 The Evolution of the International Order after World War II

In August 1944, representatives from the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and China gathered in Washington, D.C. for the Dumbarton Oaks Conference, where they drafted proposals for creating a new international body. Yet the issue that mattered most to many African Americans—the future of colonies—was largely ignored, leading to

frustration within Black communities. In *Color and Democracy*, W. E. B. Du Bois criticized this omission and urged the organization to address both colonial independence and universal human rights.^[1] He emphasized the global ties among people of color, arguing that the African American struggle for civil rights was linked to broader fights against imperialism and colonial rule, and that advances made by African Americans would resonate across colonized regions.^[2]

On June 23, 1945, the Charter of the United Nations made clear the purpose of the UN: “To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; and.”^[3] The Charter also defined the role of the General Assembly, authorizing it to encourage cooperation across economic, social, cultural, educational, and health matters, and to support the realization of human rights and basic freedoms for everyone, regardless of race, gender, language, or religion.^[4] With these principles, the African American civil rights movement found an institutional entry point to engage internationally. In the postwar years, the UN not only emerged as a hub for global cooperation but also offered the NAACP a new venue to present the concerns of African Americans before the world.

1.3 The Shortcomings of the 1946 Petition by the National Negro Congress

The National Negro Congress (NNC) was established in Chicago in 1936 to combat racial inequality and defend the rights of African Americans. “From the beginning, the NNC made it clear that the main purpose of its plan was to internationalize the problem of racism in the United States.”^[5] It also became the first Black civil rights group to bring a petition before the United Nations. In 1946, the NNC commissioned historian Herbert Aptheker to prepare an eight-page memorandum outlining the systemic discrimination faced by African Americans in different spheres of life. The introduction highlighted the UN’s potential role in addressing such injustices.^[6] On June 6, the report and petition were officially delivered to the UN Secretariat. They described the hardships endured by some 13 million African Americans, expressed “profound regret” that domestic constitutional remedies had failed, and urged the UN to recognize the urgency of the problem and take steps to improve their situation.^[7] Although the National Negro Congress (NNC) was the first Black organization to submit a petition to the UN in 1946, its initiative influenced and, to some extent, intersected with the NAACP’s later effort. The NNC demonstrated the possibility of internationalizing U.S. racial issues, and NAACP leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois drew on this precedent. Yet because the NNC was increasingly stigmatized for its left-wing affiliations, the NAACP pursued a more legally framed and institutionally cautious petition, thereby maintaining both continuity with and distance from earlier activism.

However, this early action was soon limited by the domestic political climate. The FBI labeled the NNC a “communist front organization,” and the leadership became divided by personal ambition and ideological conflicts. The organization failed to meet the UN’s request for “stronger evidence,” and it also did not gain support from Black churches or prominent leader Mary McLeod Bethune, who criticized the move, saying that the problem of African Americans should not be “transferred to the doors of the United Nations.” Branded as an organization “tainted by communism,” the NNC was gradually isolated by other groups and public figures.

On June 22 of the same year, India brought a complaint to the United Nations against South Africa’s discrimination toward Indian workers. The United States, worried that the UN would pay too much attention to its own racial issues, tried to downplay the matter by claiming that “international courts have no authority to interfere in human rights.” This was opposed by the Soviet Union and the Third World. NNC leader Max Yergan saw this as a good chance to draw the UN’s attention. He invited representatives from more than 200 organizations to discuss the issue, and on February 8 of the following year, the NNC added an appendix to its petition. The appendix noted that these instances of mistreatment reflected, and were rooted in, the broader systemic pattern of racial discrimination against African Americans in the United States.^[8] Yet this “last struggle” failed to gain attention from the media beyond the Black press. A lack of funds and growing internal divisions further weakened the NNC. In November 1947, the NNC was absorbed by the Civil Rights Congress and was completely dissolved, bringing the petition to a final failure.

2. A Difficult Voice: An Appeal to the World

2.1 The Petition Process of the NAACP

Although the attempt by the National Negro Congress ended in failure, it inspired W. E. B. Du Bois. He pointed out: “The National Negro Congress submitted such a petition ... but it was too brief and not detailed enough. If we make an impressive and firm effort in this area, our attempt will not simply repeat theirs.”^[9] With the support of leading NAACP

figures such as Walter White and Channing Tobias, the organization formally approved Du Bois's plan in September 1946. Du Bois was put in charge of drafting, which eventually produced *An Appeal to the World*.

Although the petition was finished, its delivery faced significant hurdles. John P. Humphrey, head of the UN Division of Human Rights, declined to receive it, arguing that the United Nations lacked the mandate to interfere. Warren Austin, head of the U.S. delegation, also rejected it, citing the expiration of the deadline. Du Bois then wrote to Indian representative Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, hoping to gain support by stressing the shared experience of peoples in Asia and Africa under colonial rule. Pandit at first expressed sympathy but later declined, saying it was a matter of "non-interference in U.S. domestic affairs."^[10] On October 23, 1947, the NAACP finally managed a brief submission ceremony at the office of UN Assistant Secretary-General Henri Laugier.

Although the petition was received, the UN declared that it had no power to take further action. Walter White personally traveled to Geneva for the meeting of the Human Rights Commission but was not allowed to speak. Twice, the Soviet delegation raised proposals on the issue, but both failed to pass. The U.S. delegation and Eleanor Roosevelt, worried about harm to America's international image, refused to lend support. White further stressed that the NAACP should not become a tool for Soviet attacks on the United States, which deepened his disagreements with Du Bois.^[11] In 1948, Du Bois was removed from his position because of political differences, marking a complete split within the NAACP.

Although *An Appeal to the World* attracted some international attention, the petition ultimately failed because of external resistance and internal division. The effort revealed both opportunities and challenges in the path toward internationalization: the UN platform, the discourse of human rights, and potential alliances in the Third World, but also the heavy obstacles facing the civil rights movement.

2.2 The Demands of An Appeal to the World

The petition *An Appeal to the World* is divided into six parts. The introduction was written by W. E. B. Du Bois, while the other five chapters discuss: the deprivation of African Americans' legal rights from 1787 to 1914; the legal status of African Americans since World War I; the current legal and social status of African Americans; patterns of discrimination in basic human rights; and the human rights provisions guaranteed by the UN Charter. The work reveals the condition of African Americans and the roots of discrimination from historical, legal, and social perspectives.

In the introduction, Du Bois raised a dilemma for African Americans: whether to strengthen internal cultural unity to resist racial discrimination or to compromise and gradually adapt to mainstream American culture.^[12] He traced the roots of slavery and argued that its essence was not a matter of morality or race but of economic interest. To hide the profits behind slavery, society invented the excuse of "racial superiority," which became the root of discrimination. Du Bois emphasized that the legitimacy of discrimination had already been destroyed by the facts, and the next step was to explain why the NAACP issued *An Appeal to the World*.

On the domestic level, he pointed out that the denial of voting rights to African Americans showed the failure of American democracy. In the South, a small number of white voters gained excessive political power because Black voters were excluded, and this power combined with cheap Black labor and industrial capital to form an alliance of capital and politics. This not only threatened democracy but also weakened military efficiency in wartime.^[14] On the international level, the United States called itself a "moral leader," but racial discrimination seriously damaged its reputation, and even visiting diplomats suffered discrimination at UN meetings. Du Bois further stressed the importance of the African American problem on the world stage: first, given the U.S. population, the demands of African Americans were representative enough to deserve international attention; second, African Americans had relatively high levels of education, property, and improving health and crime rates compared with other groups; third, the NAACP had built a large and organized membership, making it an important force among civil rights organizations.^[15]

After the introduction, *An Appeal to the World* turned to analysis of specific fields. The first chapter, written by Earl B. Dickerson, president of the National Bar Association, examined the gap between the laws granting rights to African Americans and their actual enforcement. From the founding of the United States, the federal government promoted ideals of freedom and equality while maintaining slavery and discrimination. After the Civil War, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments established rights for African Americans.^[16] But in the federal system, their effectiveness depended more on the attitudes of individual states than on judicial justice. The federal government was both unwilling and unable to intervene in state laws, and the enforcement of the Constitution was arbitrary, making it nearly impossible for African Americans to gain real equality under the law.^[15]

The second chapter, written by Milton R. Konvitz, associate professor at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, analyzed the judicial status and living conditions of African Americans from World War I to 1946. He argued that the Supreme Court often showed "racial discrimination under procedural justice" in cases concerning African Americans. Outcomes fell into two categories: in cases about criminal procedure and the treatment of suspects, African Americans sometimes won, but these cases did not address their collective rights; in cases about housing, education, voting, public facilities, or unions, African Americans usually lost. At the same time, federal criminal law targeted only official actions and could not prevent mob lynching. Wide differences in state legislation further weakened constitutional protections. Konvitz therefore described the federal government's role in protecting the lives, liberty, and property of African Americans as one of "legal impotence."

The third chapter was authored by William R. Ming, Jr., who served as assistant general counsel at the Office of Price Administration and taught law at the University of Chicago as an associate professor. He described the contrast between the wide range of rights guaranteed to every person under law and the very limited rights usually allowed to African Americans.^[17] To explain this, he examined American history, politics, and social structure. He stressed that African Americans, as a minority, were often only "tolerated." Their rights existed on paper but were rarely protected in practice.

The fourth chapter, written by Leslie S. Perry, assistant to the director of the NAACP's Washington Bureau, shifted the focus from the loss of civil rights to the deprivation of basic human rights. His discussion placed the African American problem within the universal framework of international racial issues. Perry analyzed how African Americans were excluded from basic human rights confirmed by the United Nations, such as education, employment, housing, and health. Education was the most harmful and hidden deprivation, since its essence was to control the thinking of African Americans.^[18] Black schools were given the worst resources, creating a vicious cycle of intellectual and economic poverty. In employment, African Americans faced low wages and poor security, and were often excluded even from unions. In housing, they were confined to ghettos, and even those who could afford to move were prevented from doing so. The Federal Housing Administration even became an accomplice in discrimination. In healthcare, African Americans had long lacked access to basic services, with high maternal and infant mortality rates. These conditions showed that African Americans were almost systematically deprived of human rights.

The final chapter, written by Rayford W. Logan, professor of history at Howard University, linked the UN Charter's provisions on human rights and minority rights to the situation of African Americans. He argued that discrimination in the United States was no different from the oppression faced by people of color worldwide. If the United States could not protect the basic rights of African Americans, the peace and security promised by the UN Charter could not be realized. In other words, the African American problem was not simply a domestic issue but a key matter for international order and human security.

2.3 The Impact of An Appeal to the World

Unfortunately, this sincere and well-reasoned petition did not receive fair treatment from UN officials. Although it was eventually submitted to the United Nations, the issue was shelved, and the road ahead for both the African American civil rights struggle and colonial liberation remained difficult. The 1947 petition ended in failure, but its profound arguments opened a new path for the Black movement. As the struggle shifted from violent resistance to rational debate, no one could deny that African Americans were striving to engage in equal dialogue with mainstream society. The very presence of an intellectual such as Du Bois itself challenged the white-centered discourse of power.

An Appeal to the World sought to internationalize the "Negro problem" in the United States through the language of human rights, but it encountered strong resistance at home. On one hand, the petition emerged during the early Cold War, when internationalism was seen as a suspect commitment. The NAACP was forced to sever any association with communism and instead embrace American patriotism.^[19] On the other hand, in December 1947, President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights released its report *To Secure These Rights*,^[20] which blurred the sharp questions raised by the petition through a balancing of political interests. The glaring gap between the lofty ideals of the Constitution and the realities of implementation was a contradiction deeply rooted in American democracy. Federal authorities were expected to respect the independence of state governments, and national power could not intrude on the private sphere of citizens. This allowed racial discrimination to run rampant at the state level, with lynching persisting despite repeated prohibitions. Admittedly, *An Appeal to the World* posed a serious challenge to American democracy and helped push federal policies on racial issues. The publication of *To Secure These Rights* laid the groundwork for later social legislation. Yet the fundamental problems were left unaddressed, raising doubts as to whether the Truman administration's response to the civil rights issue was little more than a temporary expedient.

In the final part of *An Appeal to the World*, references were made to the UN Charter and its Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, as well as decisions already made under the Charter. This showed that aligning with global struggles for minority rights was an essential goal of the petition. NAACP leader Walter White informed Eleanor Roosevelt that more than a dozen UN delegations—including those from the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, South Africa, India, Argentina, Denmark, Mexico, Poland, Pakistan, Egypt, Haiti, and Liberia—had asked for copies of the petition, and that journalists worldwide were also seeking access to it.^[21] Across the globe—especially in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—national liberation movements increasingly connected their own struggles with the African American fight for civil rights. Decolonization became an unstoppable historical trend, and worldwide attention placed the U.S. government under unprecedented diplomatic pressure and moral scrutiny.

3. Conclusion

In the twentieth century, especially after World War II, the African American civil rights movement resonated with the global wave of decolonization, inspiring worldwide struggles against racism and for human rights. The NAACP's petition to the United Nations in 1947 built on earlier experiences of resistance and brought the "Negro problem" into the arena of international opinion, pressing the federal government to confront external pressure. Edited by Du Bois, *An Appeal to the World* was the first systematic statement of the African American condition in the language of human rights. It elevated what had long been treated as a domestic issue into an international matter and gave voice to African Americans' pursuit of equality and citizenship.

As a milestone in civil rights history, the petition not only won sympathy and solidarity from the international community but also linked the African American struggle with anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements, advancing the cause of human rights on a global scale. Its significance went beyond its own moment, offering both a model and an inspiration for later civil rights and human rights movements in the United States and across the world.

REFERENCES

- [1] Mitoma, G. (2013) *Human Rights and the Negotiation of American Power*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia. p. 70.
- [2] Marable, M. (2007) *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945–2006*. 3rd Edition. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson. p. 21.
- [3] United Nations. (2024) *Charter of the United Nations*. <https://www.un.org/zh/about-us/un-charter/chapter-1>
- [4] United Nations. (2024) *Charter of the United Nations*. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-4>
- [5] Yu, Z. (2019) The United Nations Petition of African Americans in the Early Cold War. *Journal of Capital Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 4: 12.
- [6] Aptheker, H. (n.d.) *The Oppression of the American Negro: The Facts*. Part 2. Archival document, Reel 26, National Negro Congress (NNC).
- [7] National Negro Congress. (1946) *A Petition to the United Nations on Behalf of 13 Million Oppressed Negro Citizens of the United States of America*. National Negro Congress, New York. pp. 2–3.
- [8] Anderson, C. (1996) From Hope to Disillusion: African American, the United Nations and the Struggle for Rights, 1944–1947. *Diplomatic History*, 20(4): 548–551.
- [9] Du Bois, W.E.B. (1946) Memorandum to Walter White, August 1, 1946. ProQuest: History Vault, Papers of the NAACP, Part 14: Race Relations in the International Arena, 1940–1955, Folder: 001439-016-0243. p. 2.
- [10] Plummer, B.G. (1996) *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill. p. 182.
- [11] Berg, M. (2007) Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War. *The Journal of American History*, 94(1): 83.
- [12] NAACP. (1947) *An Appeal to the World*.
- [13] <https://www.aclu.org/documents/appeal-world>, 2024. pp. 1–2.
- [14] NAACP. (1947) *An Appeal to the World*. pp. 11–12.
- [15] NAACP. (1947) *An Appeal to the World*. pp. 13–14.
- [16] United States Congress. (n.d.) After the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, Congress undertook constitutional amendments to abolish slavery and address related issues: the 13th Amendment was passed and ratified on December 18, 1865; the 14th Amendment on July 28, 1868; and the 15th Amendment on March 30, 1870.

- [17] NAACP. (1947) *An Appeal to the World*. p. 47.
- [18] NAACP. (1947) *An Appeal to the World*. p. 62.
- [19] Roark, J.L. (1971) *American Black Leaders: The Response to Colonialism and the Cold War, 1943–1953*. *African Historical Studies*, 4(2): 253–270.
- [20] The President's Committee on Civil Rights. (1947) *To Secure These Rights*. <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/to-secure-these-rights> . 2024.
- [21] White, W. (1947) Letter to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, October 20, 1947. ProQuest: History Vault, Papers of the NAACP, Part 14: Race Relations in the International Arena, 1940–1955, Folder: 001439-016-0625. p. 137.