
Brown as a Cold War Case
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In 1954, in the midst of the Cold War, school segregation was thought by many to be unAmerican. *Brown v. Board of Education*, a major international story, was thought of as a "blow to Communism" because the case would enable peoples of color around the world to believe that democracy was a just system of government. American legal history texts often discuss *Brown* and the Cold War in separate passages, as if they were unrelated to each other, however this essay argues that *Brown* is best understood as part of Cold War history. Cold War concerns help explain the U.S. government's role in the case, for example. The Justice Department's brief in *Brown* argued that school segregation undermined U.S. prestige in other countries, harming U.S. foreign relations. The Supreme Court had been grappling with Cold War concerns in its McCarthy-era cases, so these arguments were made to a receptive audience. Formal legal change in *Brown* aided the U.S. image abroad, whether or not actual desegregation followed. While some treatments of *Brown* see the case as an illustration of the inevitability of legal progress, the Cold War context helps us to see *Brown's* historical contingency. This history also illustrates the fact that seemingly "domestic" American histories have international dimensions, and it underscores the importance of internationalizing American legal history.

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