The civil rights movement and the global community

By Sarah Azaransky
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When President Obama argued for U.S. strikes on Syria, he used a familiar trope:

> When, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death and thereby make our own children safer over the long run, I believe we should act. That's what makes America different. That's what makes us exceptional.

Yet his proposed Syria policy put him in new political territory: against the views of a majority of African Americans, his most loyal constituency. Most African American intellectuals rejected the president's position as well. Instead, they've urged the U.S. to reconsider our role in the world—and pointed out how American exceptionalism reveals moral contradictions.

Whether or not Obama heeds contemporary black intellectuals, he has leaned on earlier intellectual traditions connected to the civil rights movement, from which he often adopts moral cadences to pronounce his own political and civic ambitions. What Obama—and many others—have missed is that movement's international roots. These roots help shed some light when people appeal to American exceptionalism, as Obama did again yesterday at the United Nations.

From the 1930s to the early '50s, a network of black Christians drew lessons from anticolonial movements in order to develop a black social Christianity to confront Jim Crow. Some experimented with nonviolence in their own *Satyagrahas* of freedom rides and sit-ins, tactics that would later propel the movement.

Benjamin Mays was integral to this group. Though best known as a mentor to Martin Luther King, Mays was influential in his own right. He authored pioneering works in black religion, helped lay the foundation of black theology, and was a leader in ecumenical movements that led to the World Council of Churches. On his frequent international travels, Mays saw how black Americans' fight against Jim Crow was part of a global resistance movement to end colonialism and white supremacy.

During a 1953 trip to India, Mays challenged American exceptionalism in a series of columns for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a black newspaper with a national readership. Mays reported how India's independence movement had created the world's largest democracy, one populated by people of color. The Indian constitution guaranteed freedom of speech, assembly, equality in employment and equal access to shops—rights unavailable to black Americans.

Mays acknowledged that "many wrongs" had to be corrected—referring to the violence that followed partition—but emphasized that Indian leadership opposed racial segregation, including in the United States. Indian independence demonstrated for Mays that

> moral leadership of the nations may come from the East. Nineteen centuries ago, an eternal light did come out of the East in the person of a Palestinian Jew whose race was in bondage to Rome. In our own time, Mahatma Gandhi startled the world with his spiritual and moral leadership. It may be that the moral leadership of the world will not come from the so-called great powers.

These words undermine an American claim to the mantle of moral leadership. Furthermore, Mays wondered if a "great power" could exert such leadership, since history has shown that moral leadership emerges from oppressed communities. Technological advancement and military capacity, warned Mays, do not guarantee moral authority.

Mays's columns offer one example of how the greatest American social movement of the 20th century had international roots—a fact with implications for today's demographic transformations. In 1953, Mays identified himself within a global majority of people of color. By 2050, African Americans will be part of a similar majority within the States. If our democracy becomes more representative, our foreign policy could shift toward more critical questioning of America's role in the world—and of our relationships with fellow non-white-majority nations.

It's worth noting Obama's ties to the anticolonial tradition. In 1959, his father was selected to study in the U.S. by Tom Mboya, a leading Kenyan anticolonial activist. The same year, at a dinner honoring Mboya, King affirmed that "we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality." Obama's father was connected through his patron to this international freedom network.

It’s unrealistic to think President Obama might consider these ties as he develops a military plan for Syria. Yet I already look forward to his post-White House career, when the author of *Dreams from My Father* may indeed reflect on this aspect of his own inheritance and what it means for America’s future. In doing so, he could explore connections to the U.S. civil rights movement—and a rich moral vocabulary to articulate an alternative vision for American participation in the global community.

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