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# Eisenhower: Champion of Federal Activism

## **Abstract**

As we watch the cast of characters vying for the Republican presidential nomination in this not-so-invisible primary season, there appears to be a common thread to their conversations: keep the government out of my life and my business. But this call for out-of-my-life government is contrary to the federal activism that one of the Republican Party's most admired presidents advocated. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Eisenhower, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Presidential Election, Presidential Candidates, Federal Government, Republican Party, Racial Discrimination, Civil Rights

## **Disciplines**

American Politics | Political History | Political Science

# Eisenhower: Champion of Federal Activism

By Shirley Anne Warshaw  
September 20, 2015

As we watch the cast of characters vying for the Republican presidential nomination in this not-so-invisible primary season, there appears to be a common thread to their conversations: keep the government out of my life and my business. But this call for out-of-my-life government is contrary to the federal activism that one of the Republican Party's most admired presidents advocated.

For Dwight Eisenhower, the federal government could finally remedy the injustice of segregation. His administration used its power to crack the intransigence that for too long had allowed racial discrimination and outright segregation to continue.

Eisenhower made the decision that racial inequality was a problem in America; he made the decision it was worth taking action on and he decided the federal government was the best mechanism to take action.

We have a decision to make again today, in 2015: do we have a glaring problem within the United States of America? Is it an issue the government should take action on? Is the federal government, as President Eisenhower decided, the best mechanism to take action against the issue?

It's worked before for a Republican president, and the candidates of today shouldn't be so quick to run from the idea that the federal government is an important instrument for change. This story is about civil rights, but the principle of federal activism is the take-away.

Sixty years ago the Eisenhower administration led the nation in civil rights through federal action. He ordered the desegregation of public facilities in Washington, D.C., and the desegregation of all military bases and veterans' hospitals. No longer, for instance, could military housing be based on race or could schools be segregated on military bases.

Even before the Supreme Court demanded desegregation, Eisenhower was using the tools of office to end the wall of separation that existed for minorities. His determination to end discrimination in the armed forces was front and center in the 1952 election. If elected president, he said, "The first thing I would do was see to it that discrimination was eliminated in every area under federal jurisdiction." In 1954, under Eisenhower's watch, the last all-black military unit was abolished.

But, as he entered office, it wasn't just in the armed forces that he wanted to remove color as a barrier. He issued an executive order that prohibited discrimination on the basis of race or color in every federal contract. Eisenhower also leveraged the power of the presidency in other ways when it came to race. In a meeting he called with leaders of the film industry, including Louis B. Mayer, Eisenhower said that segregation in movie theaters had to be stopped, which they supported and quickly carried out.

Protecting voting rights became a centerpiece of his second term as he championed the Voting Rights Act of 1957. His staff ensured, among other things, that the legislation included a Civil Rights Division in the Department of Justice to provide the muscle needed to enforce the law and an independent Civil Rights Commission.

Perhaps the most important decision made by the Eisenhower administration was to take a very public stand to overturn the 1896 Supreme Court decision of Plessy v. Ferguson, which allowed the standard of “separate but equal” in public facilities such as schools, buses and restaurants.

During the first term of the administration, a landmark civil rights case, Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, emerged to challenge Plessy. Although not a party in the lawsuit, the attorney general wrote a friend of the court brief firmly on the side of Linda Brown and against the precedent of Plessy. Segregation is unconstitutional was the message Attorney General Herbert Brownell delivered as he argued before the nine justices urging that Plessy be struck down.

Three years later, Gov. Orval Faubus of Arkansas stood on the steps of Little Rock High School preventing a group of black students from entering the newly desegregated school. Eisenhower would have nothing of Faubus’ grandstanding. The Supreme Court had ordered the desegregation of the nation’s schools in Brown, and a state could not refuse to enforce the law of the land. Eisenhower sent in federal troops to protect the students as they walked into the school.

Eisenhower set high standards for the federal government as it led the nation to protect the civil rights and liberties of a class of citizens. Now, 60 years later, too many in our political system have lost sight of the role of the federal government as an agency that serves the will of the American people.

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