

HEART OF ATLANTA MOTEL, INC. v. UNITED STATES (1964)

This suit challenged Title II of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned racial discrimination in public accommodations. A motel owner in Atlanta, Georgia who mostly served interstate travelers refused to allow African Americans to stay at the hotel in violation of the act. He claimed that Congress lacked the authority under the Commerce Clause to regulate his private business.

Case Question: Did Congress have the power under the Commerce Clause to ban discrimination as it did in the Civil Rights Act of 1964?

Decision Excerpt:

The Senate Commerce Committee made it quite clear that the fundamental object of Title II was to vindicate "the deprivation of personal dignity that surely accompanies denials of equal access to public establishments." At the same time, however, it noted that such an objective has been and could be readily achieved "by congressional action based on the commerce power of the Constitution." . . . Our study of the legislative record, made in the light of prior cases, has brought us to the conclusion that Congress possessed ample power in this regard. . . .

. . . [There is ample] evidence of the burdens that discrimination by race or color places upon interstate commerce. . . . [O]ur people have become increasingly mobile with millions of people of all races traveling from State to State; Negroes in particular have been the subject of discrimination in transient accommodations, having to travel great distances to secure the same; . . . often they have been unable to obtain accommodations and have had to call upon friends to put them up overnight, and these conditions had become so acute as to require the listing of available lodging for Negroes in a special guidebook. . . . [T]here was evidence that this uncertainty stemming from racial discrimination had the effect of discouraging travel on the part of a substantial portion of the Negro community.

That Congress was legislating against moral wrongs in many . . . areas rendered its enactments no less valid. In framing Title II of this Act Congress was also dealing with what it considered a moral problem. But that fact does not detract from the overwhelming evidence of the disruptive effect that racial discrimination has had on commercial intercourse.

. . . [T]he power of Congress to promote interstate commerce also includes the power to regulate the local incidents thereof, including local activities in both the States of origin and destination, which might have a substantial and harmful effect upon that commerce.

We, therefore, conclude that the action of the Congress in the adoption of the Act as applied here to a motel which concededly serves interstate travelers is within the power granted it by the Commerce Clause of the Constitution, as interpreted by this Court for 140 years.

Has the Court's decision in this case increased Congress's power or held it in check?