

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Timothy J. Minchin, John A. Salmond. *After the Dream: Black and White Southerners since 1965.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. x + 405 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2978-5; ISBN 978-0-8131-2988-4.

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Commissioned by Christopher R. Waldrep

I must begin this review with a disclosure: not only do the authors and I share a publisher, and not only are our books in the same series, but in fact they are sequential: mine follows theirs in the publication order. I have done my best to evaluate their work fairly. If I have erred in any direction it has been that I may be *too* critical of what is essentially a well-researched and -written book which fills a gap in the current scholarship and makes an important contribution to our understanding of the history of civil rights.

After the Dream covers civil rights progress (and the lack thereof) in the South from 1965 through 2007, with a postscript on the historic election of President Barack Obama. The choice of the starting point is entirely logical. That year saw the high-water mark of interracial civil rights protests in the South at the march from Selma to Montgomery in March, followed by passage of the Voting Rights Act in June. In July, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 went into effect. The choice of region is logical from the perspective of the authors' attention to implementation of the Voting Rights Act and integration of public accommodations, but a full picture of the overall progress on civil rights on a national scale since the sixties is yet to be written.

I count six rights denied to African Americans during Jim Crow. These are the right to fair or equal treatment in public accommodations (restaurants, public restrooms, water fountains, and the like), education, employment, housing, interracial marriage, and voting. By 1968 Congress or the Supreme Court had addressed all six of these areas. But only public accommodations, marriage, and voting were uniquely Southern problems, the other three being national in scope (whether the segregation was *de facto* or *de jure*). The authors' choice to limit the scope of their

book to the South is therefore complicated by their decisions as to which rights to discuss and which to leave out. Their focus on school desegregation and equal employment opportunity in a book about the South of necessity pays short shrift to the iterations of these national problems outside the region. Their focus on voting rights and representation, as well as the rapid desegregation of public facilities, however, is spot on. They pay very little attention to fair housing—also a national issue—but strangely none at all to the legality of interracial marriage, which by 1967 was a strictly Southern issue (all other states by then having abolished their “miscegenation” laws).

The book's genuine strengths lie in its treatment of the civil rights areas on which the authors focus: education, employment, and voting in the South since 1965, and its relation of the post-1965 efforts of individual civil rights leaders like Andrew Young and Coretta King (and less well-known figures like the North Carolina NAACP leader Kelly Alexander). Well-chosen photos accompany the text as an insert, and a penultimate chapter on history and memory includes an excellent exposition on the quest for justice in the cases of the civil rights era's high-profile killings, especially the 1963 murders of James Cheney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in Neshoba County, Mississippi. And the authors' references to various cities of the South by their nicknames (Birmingham, Alabama, as the “Magic City,” etc.) is both informative and fun, but more importantly reveal a penchant for local details.

One particular civil rights area stands out in *After the Dream*. The authors' focus on school desegregation is so thorough that at certain points the reader might be forgiven for assuming that this is really a book about the use of “forced” busing in the South to desegregate public school systems. While only one of

the thirteen chapter titles (chapter 5) directly refers to the practice, busing is given complete treatment in nearly every chapter thereafter. An early attempt to meet the provisions of *Brown*, “freedom of choice,” allowed integration but only when fearless parents—the authors list Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and Mrs. King among these—enrolled their children in formerly white schools. The 1971 Supreme Court decision in the case of *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg County Board of Education* set busing as the standard integration tool: districts with predominantly white and predominantly black schools would bus percentages of students from one neighborhood to another to integrate the schools, and formerly all-white and all-black districts would merge. This brought vociferous protests from white parents, and resulted in the founding of whites-only “segregation academies” for the wealthy and white flight to the suburbs for the less so. This, coupled with the parallel movement of better jobs from city to suburb, led to continued racial stratification in employment opportunity.

On the subject of protests by white parents, it should be noted that throughout the book, the voices of white moderates and integrationists are heard, which is another of its strengths (and charms). But the reader is rarely given hard information on the proportional strength of such voices in the white community, and how that strength changed. Were such voices few and far between, or representative of a growing direction of opinion?

Another area where the hard facts are left half-explained is Southern black office-holding. It’s clear from the book that Southern blacks made major strides in voter participation and representation. “In June 1973 there were 1,144 black elected officials in the South ... an impressive advance on the 72 offices blacks had held when the [Voting Rights Act] was passed” (p. 131), and “[b]etween 1968 and 1978, the number of black elected officeholders quadrupled, and most of these gains took place in the South” (p. 171). All well and good, but what was the percentage of black officeholders to total officeholders, and

how did that relate to the percentage of blacks in the overall population? In other words, how proportional was black representation among Southern officeholders, and how did that change over time? That said, the treatment of voter participation is well covered.

A few minor quibbles. The book poses a dichotomy between Titles VI and VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, implying that Title VI covers education while Title VII covers employment; in fact, both titles cover employment. Title VI covers the expenditure of government funds, which includes public education and employment on federal contracts. Second, the index is not intuitive and seems incomplete. Also, a list of abbreviations would have been nice; as it is, the reader must keep track of all acronyms. (There is a list of archive name abbreviations preceding the notes.)

I must bring up Arthur Fletcher, who rates a brief and one-dimensional mention in the book (and, again for the sake of full disclosure, is the subject of my current research). The authors minimize him as one of “President Bush’s nomination problems” (p. 238). In fact, once confirmed, Fletcher proved something of a thorn in the president’s side during a period when Bush was trying to defeat what became the Civil Rights Act of 1991. (The attendant footnote does quickly mention Bush’s “displeasure” that Fletcher had become a “trenchant critic” [p. 368]). Further, the book incorrectly states that Fletcher “had also served briefly as secretary of labor in the Nixon administration.” Fletcher was Richard Nixon’s *assistant* secretary of labor for employment standards, never the secretary, and not briefly (he held the job for more than two years, longer than the average political appointment).

On the whole, however, the research is sound, and the variety of the sources thorough. With the exception of the caveats raised above, this book is an important addition to the scholarship on civil rights, and is the definitive work on the implementation of the advances and setbacks made in the South in the cause of civil rights since 1965.

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