

Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around

*Higher Education and the Civil Rights Movement: White
Supremacy, Black Southerners, and College Campuses*
edited by Peter Wallenstein

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Peter Wallenstein's edited volume, *Higher Education and the Civil Rights Movement: White Supremacy, Black Southerners, and College Campuses*, provides a collection of narratives about the individuals and institutions that played a role in desegregating higher education in the South. As Wallenstein notes in his introduction, the "major roles are assigned to the people who forced the changes, who made things happen, whether as lawyers or litigants, whether as applicants for admission or matriculated students." As such, the collection adds to a growing body of historical literature that considers the Civil Rights Movement from the "bottom up," focusing less on the role of the heroes or the federal government in promoting desegregation, and more on the work of reformers at the local level. The book illustrates the complexity of the Movement by documenting the myriad forms of local resistance. However, the breadth of these local stories also means that there is less depth in each narrative, and less nuance at the local level. As such, I often found myself yearning for more—a feeling that is simultaneously a critique of the collection and an indication of how much these chapters have to offer.

In the introduction, Wallenstein highlights important themes like racial iden-

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tity, the dual nature of dissent, regional differences, and the relationship between higher education and civil rights. The first essay in the collection, written by Wallenstein, describes the process of desegregation that took place between 1935 and 1965 across the South, placing the essays in historical context and within the existing literature. While it is easy to think of the South as a monolith, the process of desegregation was shaped by region. The Wallenstein essay makes clear that incremental steps toward desegregation almost always required litigation, given the unwillingness of most college administrators to take a stand in opposition to the racial and social structure of the South. The result was a “minimalist approach to change” in which administrators dealt with the issue student by student in order to manage institutional repercussions. The subsequent essays, and some useful primary documents included in the appendices, provide ample evidence to support the context and process described by Wallenstein.

Some of the more compelling articles deal with the importance of personal resistance. Robert Pratt’s history of the University of Georgia provides a remarkable account of Horace Ward’s quest to enroll at the university, one that is especially compelling given Ward’s later work as an attorney representing other activists. Similarly, Marcia Synnott provides interesting histories about the female pioneers of the Movement. Hayward “Woody” Farrar’s reflections on his role in Black student protest at the University of Maryland at College Park provide a fascinating account of individual effort. All three of these essays reveal the transformative nature of resistance on individual lives and illustrate the importance of these personal and local stories.

Other chapters took a more institutional perspective. Michael Wade, in his essay on desegregation in Louisiana’s state colleges, describes the efforts of Black citizens who went to court and won the right to enroll in the colleges but were still denied the right to enter. This essay tells not just of the fight for desegregation, but also the broader implications of that fight for both the individuals and institutions. Charles H. Martin focuses on Black exclusion and athletics, providing an interesting case for how the “exalted position” enjoyed by college football meant that desegregation in athletics could be a positive force in the white community. Joy Ann Williamson provides a particularly interesting institutional perspective, pointing out that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the South played an important role as “movement centers” that could provide venues for mobilizing the resources of the student community in the quest for civil rights. Her essay provides a more theoretical framework regarding the role of HBCUs as a dynamic force within and beyond local communities. These chapters illustrate the strength of institutional history, and the extent to which this perspective can contribute to our understanding of the long and dynamic process of desegregation.

This collection moves beyond more elite narratives, providing further evidence that desegregation in the South was not an event, or even a series of notable events. At the same time, it was also more than the sum of its parts, and it would

have been helpful to have had a stronger connection between each of these stories and the broader movement, as well as greater depth in examining the complexity of the Movement at the local level, particularly the social and ideological divisions that existed within it. It is true that there was a “dual tradition of dissent” between the Black and White communities, but it is also true that neither of these communities was truly homogeneous in either action or belief. This limitation also makes it more difficult to place each struggle within a larger continuum of protest. For example, some of the essays tell of the battles that took place— with the assistance of the courts— in 1950s and 1960s. However, the process of getting Black southerners to the point that they were willing to utilize the courts to this end was one that took place over the preceding decades. As such, local resistance is really part of a broader continuum. These local battles in higher education are part of a fight for educational equality that began decades earlier and mobilized the Black community at all levels.

There is much to be learned from this book about the histories of individual institutions, local heroes, and the role of higher education in the Civil Rights Movement. It is certainly too much to ask of an edited volume also to capture a more dynamic process, although some of the chapters do manage to do this to some degree. As such, these important stories contribute not just to the current literature, but are likely to contribute to subsequent work. 

