

Robert Weisbrot. *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1990. Pp. xv, 350. Cloth, \$21.95.

Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer. *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*. New York and Toronto: Bantam, 1990. Pp. xviii, 692. Cloth, \$25.95.

Recently, in my African American history course, as we began to study the civil rights movement, I was puzzled and disturbed to find that the students, black and white, knew very little. I had expected them to know something about the horrible cruelties of the jim crow caste system, the March on Washington, and the Selma March of 1965, as well as some of the prominent individuals involved. To be sure, the students knew Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as Malcolm X. But they were completely unaware of SNCC, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner. They knew nothing of the "long hot summers," the Black Panther Party, or any of the cultural productions that came out of this era. The last was truly surprising given that the radio airwaves and television are filled with the music of Motown, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones. Nevertheless, I set about the task of providing them with as much information and knowledge as I could about the period and its significance for their lives.

It so happened that over a weekend I was helping my brother-in-law in his vineyard when we paused to admire the durability of the concrete posts at the end of the rows. When he pointed out to me that the posts were put in eight years before, I commented about how time flies. He then mentioned a trip that we had made to the Adirondack Mountains of Northern New York. I remembered the trip well but was astounded when he reminded me that it had occurred ten years ago. Upon further reflection as we worked in the vineyard, I realized that most of my students were born in the late sixties and the seventies. The only president they knew well was Ronald Reagan (and most certainly then not even his political background). They, of course, could not have had any idea of the intensity and importance of what went on in the sixties. My puzzlement was resolved but not my disturbance for I was once again confronted with America's propensity for social amnesia. If there is a distinctive American trait in our collective identity, it is the ability to forget momentous parts of our history in a short span of time. Worse, what we do remember or recall is highly selective.

My disturbance went deeper as I finished the two books under review here. Robert Weisbrot's *Freedom Bound* is a very competent history. In many ways it resembles Harvard Sitkoff's *The Struggle for Black Equality: 1954-1980* (1982). It is sympathetically written, very accessible to students and scholars as well as the general populace. Indeed it is an excellent volume if one wanted to have a thorough overview of the period up to 1987. But aside from all that, one puts it down vaguely dissatisfied. It is as if one has read this story before, only now there is an added update.

Given the fact that we now have a well done visual recollection of the period, Henry Hampton's *Eyes on the Prize I and II*, it is incumbent upon historians to find fresh perspectives or approaches to telling the history of the civil rights movement. Weisbrot hints at the possibility of one such approach when he mentions, accurately, how the early phase of the civil rights movement was dominated by young middle class blacks and whites.

An interesting and more insightful history would be one that tells the story from within, that is, from within the worldview of Afro-America and the black middle class. After all, the early phase of the movement was dominated by middle class blacks and whites from the South and North. While there were certainly similarities between the two classes that allowed for the building of an interracial "beloved community," what happened to the movement afterwards (from, say, 1963's March on Washington) from the perspective of Afro-Americans becomes very important. For the black middle class did not disappear; it became enlarged, radicalized politically, and fragmented by region and philosophy. But Weisbrot did not set out to write that book. Such a narrative can be gleaned from the excellent oral history put together by Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*.

Hampton and Fayer have produced what is hailed as a companion to the fourteen-episode *Eyes on the Prize*, PBS television series. Within this particular volume students and general readers will find those who participated in large and small ways. In a large sense this book as well as the series will keep much of the memory of that period alive. And yet even *Voices of Freedom* contains glaring omissions. H. Rap Brown, now an imam in the Islam faith in Atlanta, was not interviewed; Julius Lester, who was a SNCC field secretary and speechwriter for Stokely Carmichael, is missing (although he is mentioned in connection with the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school dispute of 1967-8). Both of these men, especially Lester, have much to say about the activities of the most vibrant group of the movement, SNCC. Then again nothing is mentioned of the more radical community-based organizations. These omissions, along with the paths that Hampton and Fayer and Weisbrot have

chosen to take, say much about the kind of history that they seek to put forward. Each in his own but different way presents a history that is meant not only to be a remembrance but also attempts to be integrative in all the senses that word means. But in the end this type of history trips them up. Two examples from Weisbrot and an overall observation regarding Hampton and Fayer should demonstrate my point.

Weisbrot's history of the civil rights movement, which can be safely called a standard treatment, shows a decided fondness for the early phase of the movement. Much of the book is devoted to that period while only three chapters (including the epilogue) are given over to the aftermath up to the present. Indeed the same comment goes for *Eyes on the Prize*. As beautifully done as that program was, one comes away with the feeling that the first six episodes showed a clear confidence and forthrightness in its presentation. The standard cliché has been that this period is easy to deal with; the segregationist bad guys are beaten by the integrationist good guys. Hence the ease with which the story can be mainstreamed into a progressive view of history. But once the story has to deal with the rise of black nationalism and the shift of the movement to the North, and thus is turned into a story of alternative visions of what America was to become, Weisbrot, like most historians of this period, falls apart and all kinds of strange things get written or, in the case of *Eyes on the Prize*, many things get omitted or jumbled.

In many ways the problem has to do with the collapse of the Rooseveltian New Deal coalition and the failed struggle to erect a new coalition that features blacks as equal partners. This collapse and the collapse of liberalism in general has spawned all sorts of histories that not only attempt to explain what, how, and why it all happened but also to prescribe (if not breathe new life) into a neo-liberal agenda. To be sure these histories feature black people prominently and African-Americans are given credit, but there is an attempt at "balance" that obscures if not distorts history. Weisbrot, for example, in writing about Malcolm X, his break with the Black Muslims, and his discovery of true Islam, states, "Not even Malcom's *ingrained racism* could withstand the volcanic flow of experience and ideas following his break with the Black Muslims" (my italics). Malcolm X can certainly be criticized for many things that he said while a spokesperson for the Nation of Islam under the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, but he was not a racist. Not in the sense of the term as meaning that one has the power to enforce an ideology of thought, attitude, and values that says that blacks are superior innately to whites. Not even the major advocates of Black Power in all its various meanings pronounced that whites were inferior or wanted to subjugate whites to the humiliation that black people had endured. At their very angriest they wished to be totally separate from whites. That notion, of course, has a long tradition in Afro-American history.

On a more detailed matter Weisbrot notes incorrectly that the black students who enclosed themselves at Willard Strait Hall at Cornell University had arms because they feared that they would be attacked by a white mob. No, the students originally protested without arms because a black woman had been attacked. When it became apparent that there was going to be no protection afforded, they had arms smuggled into them (by white students, incidentally).

Weisbrot ends his study by noting the changes that have occurred as a result of the civil rights movement. Here again an attempt is made to balance the ledger. Only at this point it is clear that Weisbrot recognizes that the positive aspects of the movement have been drastically overshadowed by the reality of an ever expanding underclass, cities that are racially polarized, and a black middle class that holds dearly to the few gains that were won from the civil rights movement. Nonetheless he strives to end on a positive note. Hampton and Fayer also end somewhat positively by reminding us that "If it is true, as the song says, 'freedom is a constant struggle' then there can be no true ending to this chronicle."

Scholars and participants are debating the effects of the civil rights movement in all its phases. There seem to be emerging two schools of thought. One attempts to present a total picture from all sides and the two books here fall squarely in that camp. The second school, still aborning, seeks to explain the movement not only from the vantage point of who participated in it but to also explain why the movement was not as successful as it could have been. Some may wonder why the second school needs to rehash such a notion, but it can only be suggested that at this juncture in our nation's history it is imperative we understand critically what went wrong and why. Part of the importance of this school's endeavor has much to do with the racial tensions that continue to polarize our society today and are especially pervasive on our campuses. A short story should indicate what I am driving at.

At the conclusion of three weeks of study on the civil rights movement, I asked my forty students—a class pretty evenly split racially—whether they thought that the movement was a success or a failure. All of the white students said yes, some saying that among other things the movement

had given America a new national hero, Martin Luther King, Jr. The African American students who were from urban areas said no; those African American students who were from decidedly middle class backgrounds echoed their brothers and sisters but qualified their statement by saying that there had been changes (voting and the opportunity to get an education) but overall racism from whites had not changed and in many ways had gotten worse. The urban students were far more pessimistic, believing that things would never change. They saw no hope.

My class, I am certain, is really no different from many others that are taught throughout the country. These classes represent a microcosm of the nation at large. Given that and the American propensity for social amnesia, we are going to need tougher and more critical studies of the civil rights movement, not only to remind those who never knew but also to figure out why we are continuing to live with a debilitating racial dilemma.

Colgate University

Charles Pete Banner-Haley

Kenneth O'Reilly. "Racial Matters": The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972. New York: The Free Press, 1989. Pp. viii, 456. Cloth, \$24.95.

O'Reilly legitimates the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr., for America. "No better gauge of the moral state of the United States' domestic policy exists than the history of the federal government's relationship with its most disadvantaged citizens." O'Reilly has no use for the dilemma imposed by the FBI. "Black America's FBI story is also America's story, but it evokes a sense of shame, not celebration." Therein lies a problem.

At no matter what level this work is used, considerable commentary is required for balance. For example, O'Reilly makes at least thirteen references in the language of police brutality and not one in the language law enforcement officers prefer, "excessive use of force." The felicity with which the book is written makes it all the more important to find balance.

At the undergraduate level, students must be alerted and sensitized to the option of taking a more pragmatic and less morally righteous tone than that of O'Reilly. O'Reilly does furnish enough facts and interpretations to develop other less strident moral scenarios. At the graduate level, students must be alerted to the fact that, at a very fundamental level, its own records are being used to discredit the government.

Some of this material has previously appeared in the *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988), 91-114, the *Journal of Southern History*, 54 (May 1988), 201-32, and *Phylon*, 48 (March 1987), 12-25. Graduate students might find it useful to compare passages and documentation. The author of this review has put together a comparison of the documentation between the book and *The American Historical Review* article which he is willing to share, but which seems too extensive to be included here.

Fifty-five pages of footnotes and twenty-three pages of bibliography can leave a misimpression. African Americans are quoted but generally from FBI or secondary sources, rather than from African American sources. For example, two of the three indexed references to *Ebony* magazine are documented from FBI files, rather than from the magazine itself.

O'Reilly offers shock that the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover should regard blacks as problems for white America, rather than the other way around. O'Reilly portrays FBI insouciance at legislation designed to empower black America with citizenship rights, whole and entire, everywhere and immediately, with stupefaction. His portrayal of the politicians in charge of the FBI is far more understanding of the realities at hand. Because of its easy style, this book could catch on and exert great influence in many sectors of society.

The binding of the book sent to me for review broke simply with the use required for this review.

Thomas Nelson Community College

Raymond J. Jirran