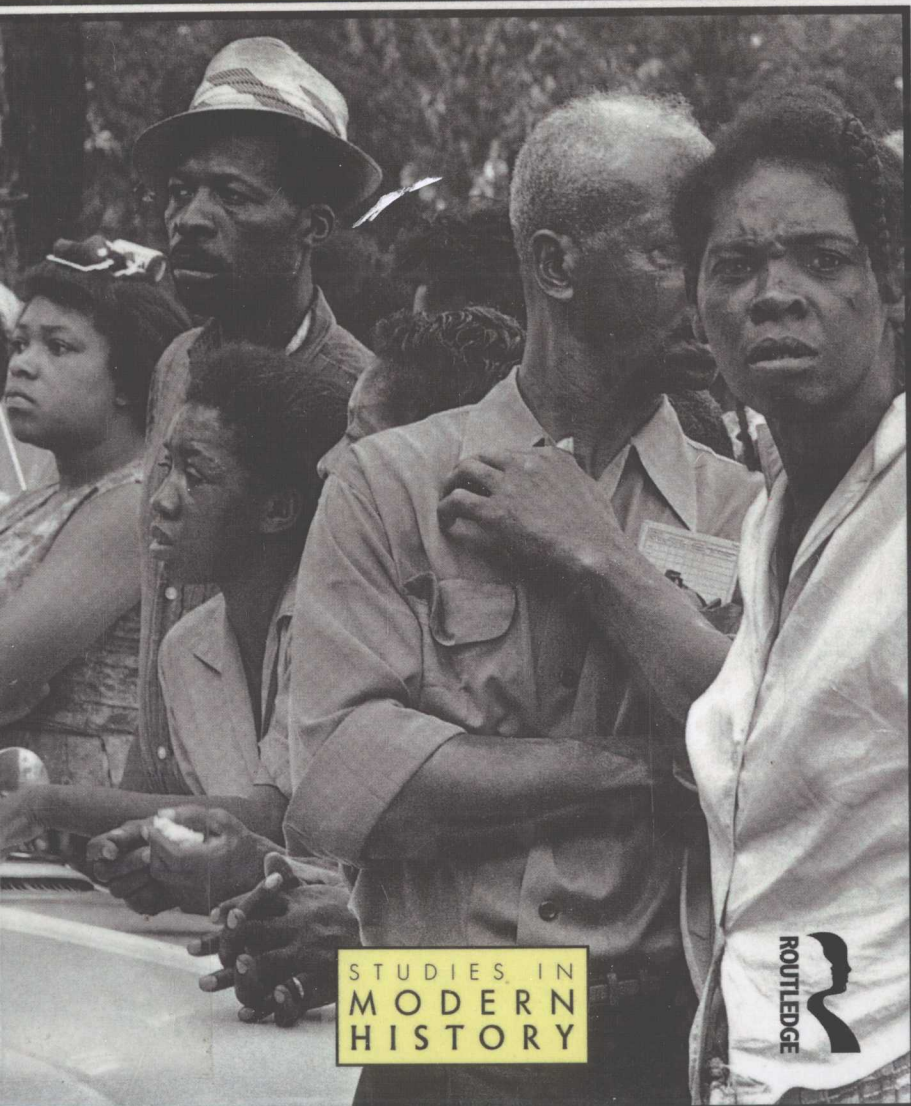


SWEET LAND OF LIBERTY?

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN STRUGGLE FOR
CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

ROBERT COOK



STUDIES IN
MODERN
HISTORY

ROUTLEDGE

Sweet Land of Liberty?

*The African-American Struggle for Civil Rights
in the Twentieth Century*

ROBERT COOK



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To the memory of
George Atkinson
(1905–1988)

and

Lenore Atkinson
(1904–1996)

My Country 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died;
Land of the pilgrim's pride;
From every mountain side
Let Freedom ring!

Samuel Francis Smith (1808–1895), 'America'

With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning – 'my country 'tis of thee; sweet land of liberty; of thee I sing; land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride; from every mountain side, let freedom ring' – and if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

Martin Luther King Jr., 'I Have A Dream' speech,
28 August 1963

Note on Terminology

The interchangeable use of the terms *black* and *African American* in this book reflects common usage in the United States today. Readers, however, should be alerted to the fact that earlier in the century blacks and whites alike preferred the terms *Negro* (or *negro*) and *coloured*. When such terms appear in the text quotation marks are employed in order to reflect their current redundancy.

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List of Abbreviations

AAA	Agricultural Adjustment Administration
ACMHR	Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights
AFDC	Aid to Families with Dependent Children
AFL	American Federation of Labor
AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
AHR	<i>American Historical Review</i>
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BSCP	Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters
CAP	Community Action Program
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting System
CCCO	Coordinating Council of Community Organizations
CDGM	Child Development Group of Mississippi
CEP	Citizenship Education Program
CFM	Chicago Freedom Movement
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIC	Commission on Interracial Cooperation
CIG	Civic Interest Group
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CNAC	Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee
COFO	Council of Federated Organizations
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
CPUSA	Communist Party of the United States
CRDP	Civil Rights Documentation Project, Moorland– Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC
CREB	Chicago Real Estate Board
EEOC	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
ESCRU	Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FEPC	Committee on Fair Employment Practice
FOR	Fellowship of Reconciliation
FSA	Farm Security Administration
FTA	Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union

HEW	Department of Health, Education and Welfare
ICC	Interstate Commerce Commission
<i>JAH</i>	<i>Journal of American History</i>
<i>JAS</i>	<i>Journal of American Studies</i>
<i>JSH</i>	<i>Journal of Southern History</i>
KC	Martin Luther King, Jr Center for Nonviolent Change, Atlanta, Ga
LC	Library of Congress, Washington, DC
LCCMHR	Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights
LCFO	Lowndes County Freedom Organization
MFDP	Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
MIA	Montgomery Improvement Association
MOWM	March on Washington Movement
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NBC	National Broadcasting Company
NCC	National Council of Churches
NCNP	National Convention for a New Politics
NRA	National Recovery Administration
NYA	National Youth Administration
<i>NYT</i>	<i>The New York Times</i>
OEO	Office of Economic Opportunity
OFCC	Office of Federal Contract Compliance
PUSH	People United to Save Humanity
PWA	Public Works Administration
SCEF	Southern Conference Education Fund
SCHW	Southern Conference for Human Welfare
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SCU	Sharecroppers Union
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
TCA	Tuskegee Civic Association
TVA	Tennessee Valley Authority
UAW	United Auto Workers
UMWA	United Mine Workers of America
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association
USCC	United States Civil War Centennial Commission
VEP	Voter Education Project
WiSH	State Historical Society of Wisconsin
WPA	Works Progress Administration
WPC	Women's Political Council

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Introduction

The past intrudes upon the present

Ninety-four years after the demise of the southern Confederacy, the people of the United States paused to mourn the passing of the last surviving veteran of the American Civil War. Walter W. Williams died in Houston, Texas, on 19 December 1959. He claimed to have been born in the cotton kingdom of Mississippi in 1842 and to have enlisted in the Confederate army at the age of 22. President Dwight D. Eisenhower accepted these remarkable assertions and issued a short proclamation to mark the historic event. Having observed thankfully that 'the wounds of the deep and bitter dispute which once divided our nation have long since healed', he went on to contend that 'a united America in a divided world now holds up on a larger canvas the cherished traditions of liberty and justice for all'. With Williams's death, he said, 'the hosts of Blue and Gray who were the chief actors in that great and tragic drama a century ago have all passed from the world stage. No longer are they the Blue and the Gray. All rest together as Americans in honored glory.'¹

While purporting to look back to a bygone era, the president's carefully crafted words were designed to have maximum relevance for contemporary affairs. By 1959 the United States was embroiled in an ongoing power struggle with the Soviet Union. Proclaiming the Civil War's contribution to the unity of modern America made sound political sense in the context of the battle for global hegemony between the two nations. There was more to Eisenhower's proclamation, however, than its obvious Cold War resonance. Rapid

1. NYT, 21 December 1959, p. 27; *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower 1959* (Washington, DC, 1960), pp. 864–5.

social and economic change in the United States after 1941 had begun to erode the sectional harmony between North and South which Eisenhower was so keen to posit. This was indicated most clearly by the growth of racial tensions in the wake of the US Supreme Court's rejection of segregated schools in 1954. Eisenhower himself had been forced to dispatch American marines to Little Rock, Arkansas, in order to protect black schoolchildren from a baying white mob. Solemnifying the patriotic endeavours of Walter Williams and his peers may have made nonsense of the veterans' motives for fighting (enlisting in the Confederate army was an odd way to preserve American unity) but the president could hardly be blamed for seeking to sanitise the past, given the burgeoning problems of the present.

Eisenhower's strenuous efforts to gloss over resurgent sectional tensions were soon undermined by the approach of the Civil War centennial.² The long series of commemorative events began in early 1961 with a wreath-laying ceremony at the tomb of Union commander Ulysses S. Grant in New York City, a week-long celebration of the founding of the Confederate government in Montgomery, Alabama, and a spectacular pageant and rocket display in Charleston, South Carolina, where the first shots of the war had been fired. Such festivities were intended to contribute towards national unity (in the same way that Eisenhower's proclamation had attempted to do) as well as give a boost to the domestic tourist industry. In fact, while the centennial did attract the crowds, it did little to promote the sectional harmony that federal officials were determined to accentuate.

In April 1961 the United States Civil War Centennial Commission (USCC), set up by Congress to oversee the heritage jamboree, scheduled its annual meeting in Charleston to coincide with a grand re-enactment of the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter. Sadly for the Commission, anxious to avoid the slightest hint of controversy, New Jersey's centennial commission chose to send a black delegate, Madeline Williams, to attend the national convention. When it became clear that municipal segregation laws would prevent Mrs Williams from being accommodated in the same hotel as the other delegates, a political storm ensued.

2. For a full account of the centennial and its impact on the civil rights movement see R. Cook, 'From Shiloh to Selma: The Impact of the Civil War Centennial on the Black Freedom Struggle in the United States, 1961-65' in *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. B. Ward and A.J. Badger (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 131-46.

Furious at the slight delivered to their delegate, the New Jerseyans announced immediately that they would not attend the Charleston convention. Segregation was a thing of the past in the North, they insisted, and Mrs Williams was an American citizen entitled to equal treatment with the other delegates. Other northern state commissions followed suit and declared that they would be withdrawing from the planned proceedings.

This concerted response was mirrored by America's oldest civil rights organisation, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a long-time opponent of racial segregation. On 17 March the organisation's New York office directed its branches across the country to promote a boycott of the Fort Sumter observances. A segregated gathering, it was contended, would constitute 'a betrayal of everything the Civil War was fought for'.³

Initially the national Centennial Commission sought to stand its ground, rejecting even a plea from the newly inaugurated president, John F. Kennedy, that all delegates to the Charleston meeting should receive equal treatment. At this point liberal northern state governors like Otto Kerner of Illinois and Richard Hughes of New Jersey denounced the Commission's behaviour as supine and President Kennedy stepped in once again, this time decisively, to insist that a federally funded body like the USCC must find a solution which would accord equal treatment to black delegates under the Constitution. The USCC's elderly chairman, Major General Ulysses S. Grant III, had no alternative but to back down. On 25 March he announced that the Commission would hold its meeting at the desegregated US naval station outside Charleston. The New Jerseyans declared themselves satisfied with this partial victory with even Madeline Williams declaring that it had wrought 'a victory for the democratic process in America'.⁴

The second battle of Fort Sumter was the first of many controversies over race during the Civil War centennial. The problem was that far from concluding an era of bitter sectional tension, as Eisenhower asserted in his proclamation, Walter Williams's death had occurred at a time when the meaning of America's Civil War was being contested by two of the key groups most directly affected by that conflict, namely southern whites and African Americans. The truth was, as the president well knew, that the nation's racial problems remained unsettled, General Lee's surrender at Appomattox

3. H.L. Moon to R. Wilkins, 26 January 1960, General Office File, Box A76, Group 3, NAACP Papers, LC.

4. NYT, 26 March 1961, I, p. 72.

Court House in April 1865 notwithstanding. As the southern writer Robert Penn Warren made plain in his sensitive reflections on the centennial, the Civil War held 'in suspension so many of the issues and tragic ironies – somehow essential yet incommensurable – which we yet live'.⁵

The civil rights movement in context

African Americans have been struggling for freedom in the United States since the birth of the Republic in the eighteenth century. Originally brought to North America against their will, they have consistently put abstract promises of freedom, equality and democracy to the test and frequently found them dismally wanting in practice. Of all the nation's diverse ethnic groups, blacks (in common with Native Americans) have always been best placed to discern the gap between the fiction and the reality of the American Dream.

During the course of the twentieth century the black search for equal citizenship developed into a full-blown social revolution designed to achieve what Martin Luther King, Jr called 'certain basic structural changes in the architecture of American society'.⁶ This social revolution was labelled 'the civil rights movement' by contemporaries – a term which is generally accepted by most scholars of post-1945 American history. The movement provides the central focus of this study, for it was during the 1950s and 1960s, particularly the latter, that African Americans launched a major challenge to southern segregation (or 'Jim Crow' in contemporary parlance), the success of which was dependent on organised protest at every level of the federal polity. This does not mean that black people did not contest their subordinate status in the years before the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–56 nor does it imply that their struggle ended with the breakdown of the civil rights coalition in the late 1960s. What it does mean is that the pace, shape and style of black protest altered significantly in the middle decades of the twentieth century. A shift in gear occurred which culminated in the movement's greatest triumph: the destruction of the southern caste system.

5. R.P. Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* (New York, 1964), p. 108.

6. Quoted in D. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986), p. 323.

For most Americans, black as well as white, the civil rights movement was pre-eminently the work of one man: Martin Luther King. King, assassinated in the spring of 1968, was rapidly apotheosised and has now taken his place in the pantheon of great American heroes. His once controversial career has been sanitised by the myth-makers, his home has become a museum-piece owned by the National Park Service, and his birthday is now a national holiday. By no means all Americans regard him as a saint but few would question his historic role as leader of the civil rights movement.

During the 1960s, however, King's place within the civil rights movement was a hotly contested one. As well as being ridiculed by black nationalist critics such as Malcolm X, he was not regarded as leader by many of those active within the movement. As early as the winter of 1964–65 a white scholar, August Meier, wrote an important essay in which he reflected on '[t]he phenomenon that is Martin Luther King':

The Nobel Peace Prize winner is accepted by the outside world as *the* leader of the nonviolent direct action movement, but he is criticized by many activists within the movement. He is criticized for what appears, at times, as indecisiveness, and more often denounced for a tendency to accept compromise. Yet in the eyes of most Americans, both black and white, he remains the symbol of militant direct action. So potent is this symbol of direct actionist, that a new myth is arising about his historic role.⁷

Meier's concern with the paradoxical nature of King's career was largely a product of his own grass-roots involvement in the movement.⁸ Prior to his appointment as a lecturer at Roosevelt University in Chicago, he had served as an adult adviser to the Civic Interest Group, a student organisation founded on the campus of Morgan State College in Baltimore. The group participated in a number of civil rights campaigns, notably an attempt to bring social and economic justice to the segregated town of Cambridge on Maryland's eastern shore. King, viewed by so many contemporaries as the movement's figure-head, played no role in Baltimore or Cambridge or, indeed, in most southern communities where demonstrations and boycotts were taking place.

Meier's experiences at the local level taught him that the movement was much more than Martin Luther King. His path-breaking

7. A. Meier, 'On the Role of Martin Luther King' in Meier, *A White Scholar and the Black Community 1945–1965: Essays and Reflections* (Amherst, 1992), p. 212. The essay first appeared in *New Politics* 4 (1965), 52–9.

8. Meier, *White Scholar*, pp. 24–33.