



The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation

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This is the story of how America awakened to its race problem, of how a nation that longed for unity after World War II came instead to see, hear, and learn about the shocking indignities and injustices of racial segregation in the South—and the brutality used to enforce it.

It is the story of how the nation's press, after decades of ignoring the problem, came to recognize the importance of the civil rights struggle and turn it into the most significant domestic news event of the twentieth century.

Drawing on private correspondence, notes from secret meetings, unpublished articles, and interviews, veteran journalists Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff go behind the headlines and datelines to show how a dedicated cadre of newsmen—first black reporters, then liberal southern editors, then reporters and photographers from the national press and the broadcast media—revealed to a nation its most shameful shortcomings and propelled its citizens to act.

We watch the black press move bravely into the front row of the confrontation, only to be attacked and kept away from the action. Following the Supreme Court's 1954 decision striking down school segregation and the South's mobilization against it, we see a growing number of white reporters venture South to cover the Emmett Till murder trial, the Montgomery bus boycott, and the integration of the University of Alabama.

We witness some southern editors joining the call for massive resistance and working with segregationist organizations to thwart compliance. But we also see a handful of other southern editors write forcefully and daringly for obedience to federal mandates, signaling to the nation that moderate forces were prepared to push the region into the mainstream.

The pace quickens in Little Rock, where reporters test the boundaries of journalistic integrity, then gain momentum as they cover shuttered schools in Virginia, sit-ins in North Carolina, mob-led riots in Mississippi, Freedom Ride buses being set afire, fire hoses and dogs in Birmingham, and long, tense marches through the rural South.

For many journalists, the conditions they found, the fear they felt, and the violence they saw were transforming. Their growing disgust matched the mounting countrywide outrage as *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, NBC News, and other major news organizations, many of them headed by southerners, turned a regional story into a national drama.

Meticulously researched and vividly rendered, *The Race Beat* is an unprecedented account of one of the most volatile periods in our nation's history, as told by those who covered it.

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Details

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Annie says

This is a must-read book. It's entertaining, insightful, and still relevant in 2014. I started reading this book before any of the Ferguson protests started, then took a break. The book is not a light read. I found myself going back to the book in the midst of the protests and found many parallels between pre-1968 America and 2014. The coverage of race issues in 2014 is drastically improved, but many of the problems are the same.

Katie Wood says

What I liked so much about this book is not only its unique perspective, but also that it tells the story of the civil right movement as a page turner. Even though we know how history turned out, at each chapter's end I was ready to read the next to see what happened. I teach Mass Communications Law and I use this book to put the New York Times v. Sullivan decision in historical context for the students.

Alice says

The Race Beat tells the story of the press, its coverage of the civil rights movement, and its importance in effecting change by bringing to the nation's attention the wrongs of segregation. The argument was compelling, exciting, not too I'm-banging-you-over-the-head, and ... it made an important point about the importance of the press.

The writing was easy to read, elegant, but nothing extraordinary. It was the content that hooked me. The stories within the larger story were fascinating.

Just a few highlights:

- * the Emmett Till trial
- * the [attempted] enrollments of Autherine Lucy and J. Meredith
- * coverage of the Little Rock Nine
- * the role of the press in protecting riders in the Freedom Rides
- * the Alabama libel suit against Salisbury and the New York Times (which threatened freedom of the press)
- * reporter Chancellor fending off a bunch of thugs with the threat that the whole nation would know about it
- * coverage of the Selma to Montgomery march

Really, I could go on. The book is chock full of stories of amazing courage - of people standing up to mobs, and reporters who broadcast their stories to the world.

For me, the only drawback of the book was that the authors named a LOT of names and a LOT of newspapers. In spite of their best efforts to provide interesting personal details about each editor/reporter/photographer named, and backstory on each paper or magazine, I couldn't for the life of me remember who Emory Jackson, or Virginius Dabney, or Lenoir Chambers was. And what's the difference between the Clarion-Ledger and the Atlanta Constitution again, and what's their position on the race issue...?

(A few colorful characters did emerge from the rest of the pack, though, including interposition-theorist Kilpatrick, segregationist Waring, NYT reporter Sitton, hot-headed Bull Connor, and stubborn politician George Wallace. Look for them especially.)

All in all, a worthy and important read about a fascinating time period in American history.

Dawn says

The final quote of the book sums it up well: "If it hadn't been for the media - the print media and television - the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings, a choir without a song." The book is amazing - many viewpoints are explored, as well as key events, the roles of the president, Supreme Court, the states, governors, law enforcement, marshals, FBI, preachers, editors, reporters, photographers, students, Martin Luther King, the Ku Klux Klan - it's all here. The nonviolence King preached and how he worked hard to get the press to cover rallies, sit-ins, the Freedom bus ride, black students integrating into schools and colleges, and any other event where nonviolent black protesters were met with violent law enforcement who used dogs, fire hoses, tear gas and clubs to beat anyone who got in their way. I was stunned at the number of murders not just white racists, but also police (sheriffs and deputies) got away with - even in court, even after white witnesses testified to the murderer's guilt. I also didn't realize the extent of the danger to the reporters and photographers covering all of these events, as well. Many of them were brutally beaten and their cameras (and film) destroyed. An in-depth, eye-opening and deeply moving book.

Susan O says

"If it hadn't been for the media - the print media and television - the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings, a choir without a song." ~ John Lewis

The Race Beat is an excellent recounting of the experiences of the media in the South as the civil rights movement grew and reporters and editors discovered the importance of "the race beat". There were many names, few of which I had heard of in other books on the civil rights movement. The book covered journalists from segregationist papers in the South who attempted to ignore events, to liberal Southern editors and reporters who faced great risk by reporting the truth, to mainstream national papers who struggled to cover a part of the country that they had previously ignored, both black and white newspapers and reporters. During the main time period covered, from 1954 to 1964, television moved from 15 minute news broadcasts to 30 minutes with additional documentary coverage and finally to breaking news as it was possible.

One added benefit to reading the book was it added significant depth to my understanding of many of the main events in the movement that I knew of from other books. I highly recommend it, especially if you have read about the civil rights movement. The Race Beat will add a dimension to your understanding.

Jan Rice says

The mainstream press and the civil rights era

When people imagine the past, they do so with benefit of hindsight, according to which the past had a good side and a bad side, and some people out of habit, obstinacy, selfishness, or sheer badness, took the bad side. Others were on the side of good by virtue of their suffering or their care for the sufferers. Actually, though, the past was full of noise, confusion, mixed messages, and various assumptions, just like the present, and lacked the perspective of the present. The outcome wasn't set in advance, as it can seem in retrospect. There was no guarantee that civil rights would emerge the winner.

What made the difference?

In the '40s, Gunnar Myrdal had the vision that the white press was the missing link in bringing about change in American race relations. Well, his vision, first, was that something was wrong and change was needed. The black press was full of the dilemma, but of course the majority populace didn't read the black press. The majority populace was at home in the status quo. The issue of segregation was under their radar. When it came to racial issues, the white press was silent. The contingent of liberal editors and reporters who eventually would become the conduit for change over the next several decades often started out as gradualists or accommodationists who thought the South wasn't ready for change and who looked negatively at outside interference. How they themselves changed was part of the process.

Gunnar Myrdal had believed that if the facts got out, people would change. How, though, to get the white press writing that separate was not equal and about the conditions under which people on the other side of the color line were having to live?

One of the reasons for the successes of the Civil Rights era, then, must be that silence on the subject of race came to an end--silence within the majority community, that is.

Misinformation and twisted news in the service of the status quo had to be overcome, for example, the meme that the desire for equality among black people was somehow communistic. That got started around the time of the first World War when Negroes were expected to put their desire for equality on the back burner in order to defend the country.

This book describes numerous reporters and editors, often from the South, and highlights some of the most influential. One of the early ones was Harry Ashmore, who, in the '40s, taking a cue from Myrdal, eventually spearheaded the writing of a book and a sort of targeted news service, the Southern Educating Reporting Services, to make sure facts were available to the press.

We sometimes think that twisting the truth and turning it upside down is specific to the Trump era. But it went on during the civil rights era too. A segregationist editor wrote that the Citizens' Councils formed in '55 to resist Supreme Court school desegregation orders were mobilizing to guard whites *and* Negroes and *"protect the rank and file of Negroes from the wrath of ruffian white people who may resort to violence."* Later when the boycotts began, there was the implication that black goons were forcing docile Negroes to participate. And so forth, on into the early '60s, when segregationist writers made heroes of resisters and ridiculed those who wanted change--or threatened and harassed them. George Wallace was a natural on TV, portraying the press as the victimizer and himself as the victim. Elsewhere there also were efforts to censor the news and limit what was put on the air. But mistakes were made; those attempts to censor and suppress the news sometimes backfired.

So, somehow coming to terms with censorship of the news and with twisted news is part of the winning formula.

In the early days, no "Civil Rights movement" could be discerned. In the journalism trade, the stories about racial situations were called "race stories;" hence, being on that beat became "the race beat." First there were the sit-ins, the Emmet Till killing and trial, Little Rock.... Things had to get worse before they could get better, it seemed. And silence had to end; the stories had to be talked about and reported. Around this time the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr entered the picture.

In reading this book I thought that we are talking about more here than facts and reporting them. In order to overcome the fake and twisted defensive news, the facts had to be presented in a certain way. Moreover, the right facts--or right approach to the facts--had to occur. Hence the importance of nonviolence, hence the discipline and dignity of the protesters in their various settings, which permitted the appropriate contrast with the violent attackers. MLK Jr knew this too: despite that, when interviewed on his opinion about press coverage, he decried their focus on violence, he relied on the explosive violence of sheriffs and police chiefs. Without those galvanizing reactions, the press wouldn't be there, the pipeline to the public would be absent, and there would be no change in public opinion.

Ralph McGill, writing in Atlanta, took his editorials beyond law and order and into morality. Blowing up churches and businesses did not play well.

TV news, just coming into its own, added its immeasurable impact. Now what happened could be watched, so couldn't be so easily given a false spin as to who was brutal and who was polite. A key example was when ABC, then the littlest network, interrupted the ongoing program to present footage of the events of Bloody Sunday in March 7, 1965, as marchers attempted to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge on their way into Selma and were attacked by battle-ready troops while whites lining the highway laughed and cheered. It so happens that the program interrupted was *Judgment at Nuremberg*, about how Germans had ignored or joined up with Nazism. That fortuitous juxtaposition spread the movement geographically plus brought in religious and civic leaders from all over.

I have read that the printing press was a key reason for the occurrence of the Reformation, and that radio was central to Winston Churchill's impact. Could TV, the new media during the Civil Rights era, have had a similar role?

Once the focus changed to urban violence, the era was over. Stokely Carmichael would blame the press when it reported on urban rioting. He said the press was white, so was unable to interpret him. Reporters who, in the South, had been protected from violent segregationists by black people, were now being attacked by black rioters in the north and west of the country. To the rioters, a journalist was just another white man.

But before that, the focus had not been on blame. During the era, the focus was on the *good* people who were silent. For example, King, after his Nobel peace prize, spoke about those good people:

If the people of goodwill of the white South fail to act now, history will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition is not the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but the appalling silence and indifference of the good people.

So, the existence of those good (but, so far, silent) people could be part of MLK's dream. Was that aspect of

his vision a key to the outcome?

...Although...surely goodness doesn't necessarily reside in a certain individual or group or side, always and forever, just because of who they are. There are errors enough so that no one is *always* "the good one."

I read this book after being disturbed by the perspective of the novel Darktown. I had read that author was inspired by this book. By reading it I also got to go back through parts of events I missed out on in my youth. The book is full of information and history that reflects on the events of today, especially the blaming of the press.

Gunnar Myrdal was acutely aware of the value Americans placed on freedom of the press, yet nowadays the press can serve as whipping boy for all sides of the political spectrum. I find myself thinking about the press a good bit, which is another reason I was glad to read this book. I have not been comfortable with the ubiquitous blaming of the press. It seems to me that we're inclined to blame it when it's reflecting us and we don't like what we see, in other words, "Mirror mirror on the wall...." Even when the press is falling into moral equivalence (which journalists during the Civil Rights era were getting at by reference to a "cult of objectivity"), I think the press is giving us a reflection of where society is stuck, not the cause. (Society these days just loves to assign blame and in so doing to distance itself from its failings--but that is a subject for the review of another book I'm reading, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*).

Leonard Pitts, in his January 16, 2018, column, says all journalists can do is give the reader accurate facts. But I think sometimes the news has to stray into the territory of right and wrong, or otherwise, as this book says, they are saying the truth is at some point half-way between the segregationists and the civil rights proponents. <http://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op...>

As a society we often come down hard on the press, but where would we be without it? Here are some cases of persecution of the media in other countries that I came across while reading this book or subsequently:

<http://www.thestate.com/news/business...>

<http://www.thestate.com/news/nation-w...>

<https://www.apnews.com/e79e1c0d23cb4d...>

We are fortunate to have our much maligned media.

I also found this PolitiFact article supporting that Trump's "fake news" delegitimization strategy is inspiring dictators around the world. <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-met...>

The Race Beat won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for History.

Martha says

Staggeringly good (I know, they don't give out Pulitzers for nothing). Tells many now-familiar stories of the civil rights movement, but from a totally new perspective, weaving them together with stories of the men who covered them -- their backgrounds, their personalities, their struggles with the movement and what it

meant to them and to the nation as a whole. And, mixed in with all that is consistently pointed media analysis, from illumination of the changing role of the African-American press as the mainstream white press began to pay attention, to the various attitudes of dozens of southern papers. Just an astonishingly accomplished piece of work

Patrick Sprunger says

The subtitle of *The Race Beat* reads: "The press, the civil rights struggle, and *the awakening of a nation*."

The genius of Jim Crow (and key to its longevity) was its ability to operate undetected. Many of the defenders of the fortress segregation of the South lent support without ever knowing the true shape of the institution. Most Southerners were like people with their noses pushed up to the edge of an iceberg. From their vantage point, they had no way of knowing the hulk's true size and shape. This does not absolve them from all complicity, but it does explain how good people can balance a great evil in their collective heart. In short, a great many people didn't actually see how bad segregation was.

Likewise with people living outside the South.

One of the first tactics of the civil rights movement was to gain a high visibility in the media. Unfortunately, fortress segregation was not going to be changed from within. The stormtroopers of segregation lacked the foot soldiers' ambivalence and took a more aggressive role in advancing their cause of white supremacy. Without publicity, all those clashes in the cities of the former Confederacy would have resulted in nothing more than bloodshed and broken bones. It was important that the scenes be published to audiences elsewhere in the country. Only then, only through top-down legislation and federal protection would Jim Crow be spun out.

Whether the scenes portrayed were the contents of condiment bottles being emptied onto the heads of students waiting for service at a lunch counter, children marching past pickets to attend school in Little Rock, churchgoers pinned to the wall by high pressure fire hoses in Birmingham, or the mutilated corpse of Emmett Till, the documentary evidence of segregation galvanized the decency of the country.

To do so placed organizers like the NAACP and SCLC in harm's way. Fortunately, there was another important corps of news men and women who braved physical violence to report a story of great moral and national importance. This, more than the actual narrative, is the point of the authors' work in *The Race Beat*.

In many ways, the generations to come of age after 1965 are as ambivalent and misunderstanding about fortress segregation as those Southerners who lived in its huge lee. Though I have since studied the civil rights era and Southern politics, I grew up one of those people. I found *The Race Beat* a startling lens back to a generation we are in danger of forgetting.

Mikey B. says

This is another significant work on the Civil Rights era. Its' overriding theme is how the media (newsprint and T.V.) played an essential role in presenting to the general public the sordid racist state that existed in the Southern U.S. and by exposing this helped to bring progress to ameliorate the conditions. Without the media

it is doubtful that the racial climate in the Southern U.S. would have improved – it certainly would have taken more time. John Lewis said that without the presence of the various news groups the civil rights workers felt they were struggling in isolation (for instance there was no coverage when many civil rights workers were sent to Parchman Penitentiary in Mississippi).

It did take the media a long time to report this struggle. There had always been Civil Rights protests – starting with Frederick Douglas during the Civil War. It was only during the mid-fifties that the mainstream (white) media began to recognize the Civil Rights struggle. Why it started only during that period is another question – perhaps it was due to the rapid growth of media outlets during that era. It may also be due to persistence of people in power like Eleanor Roosevelt.

The reporters – following a principal similar to the physicist Heisenberg who states that the observer influences reaction – were becoming more and more involved in the Civil Rights struggle. As they observed the conflicts (and many of these conflicts were vociferously rabid and bloody) their reporting became less and less neutral. They recognized the justice and the inherent morality of the Civil Rights workers. They themselves were frequently assaulted by the white southerners. They were seen as trouble-makers on southern soil. The reporting – but more so the images – pictures and film – exposed to the world what was occurring. The bombings of churches, the beatings of Civil Rights protesters in restaurants and during peaceful marches – these made the front pages of major newspapers and the top story on the six o'clock news of the major networks. It also made it to the desks of the White House. When 'The New York Times' (courtesy of Claude Sitton) published front page news of African Americans attempting to register to vote in Mississippi who were set upon by police dogs or pistol-whipped by law enforcement officials, the White House was forced to take action.

In a very real sense the reporters (many of them white southerners) took up the crusade for justice. They became convinced over time that the south had to change.

No matter how often one reads of accounts of Southern racism and brutality against their fellow countrymen, it is always a shock to re-read this hatred. This book offers a new and fresh perspective from the reporting side.

Teri says

This Pulitzer Prize winning book examines the role that the media had on the modern Civil Rights movement. In the late 40s and into the 50s, little coverage in newsprint was given to the issues of African Americans in the southern United States. The stories of beatings, lynchings, and mistreatment were detailed in segregationist newspapers printed for and sold to southern Black Americans. As key figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X began to gain national attention, media sources picked up the stories. In print and eventually in television and radio, the Civil Rights movement garnered headline news and breaking stories. The role of the media during this time should not be overlooked. Indeed, the media brought these issues to the forefront of the nation's mind and helped in the fight to bring about much needed legislation, such as the Voting Rights Act.

Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff recount the events of the civil rights struggle from Brown V. BOE to Selma and beyond through the eyes of the journalists, photographers, and newscasters, both black and white. These were the people working what came to be known as the Race Beat. Many put themselves in harm's

way to get the stories that needed to be told to the nation and it is these stories that helped give a voice to civil rights issues in America.

"If it hadn't been for the media - the print media and television - the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings, a choir without a song." - John Lewis

Sushicat says

I read this book as part of a challenge to read 6 nonfiction Pulitzer winners this year and joined a group read. I originally had not intended to read the book, since I (rightly) expected it to be written for the American readers, who would have a reasonable knowledge of events and their chronology. But I read *Darktown* last month, which is a fictional take on the first black policemen in Atlanta 1948. This made me realize I have a huge gap in knowledge about how things developed after the civil war. So I decided to join anyway. And I found my expectations confirmed that the strong focus on the media leaves out a lot about the underlying history that I (not being American) know too little about. At the beginning I struggled a bit to get into the book, but once I picked up *March* to add a bit more detail to the history of the civil rights, I also started appreciating the focus on the journalists and editors and how their choices of what to cover and comment on shaped the opinions and actors in struggle (mis)used the media to their ends, especially the local papers that were sometimes little more than a hobby for a strongly opinionated person to dispense their view of facts or even made up events. Interesting to see the change in the industry towards more professional newspapers with a code of conduct that separates facts from opinions as well as the introduction of television coverage. What struck me as perhaps a weakness is the low level of inclusion of black journalism.

Sher says

An interesting story about the press, media, and civil rights. Important reporters and editors and their experiences especially during the turbulent 60s are highlighted plus Martin Luther King's brilliance when it came to understanding how to utilize the press to further the civil rights movement along. I particularly enjoy the detailed coverage of the MLK years.

Helga Cohen says

In this Pulitzer Prize winning book on race and the media, the final quote sums up the premise well: "If it hadn't been for the media - the print media and television - the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings, a choir without a song."

Many viewpoints and key events are explored in **The Race Beat**. We understand the roles of the President, Supreme Court, Governors of states, law enforcement, Marshalls, the FBI, preachers, editors, reporters, photographers, students, the Ku Klux Klan, Martin Luther King, John Lewis and many others. King preached nonviolence and encouraged and participated in sit-ins, marches, and Freedom Rides and worked tirelessly to get the press to cover it all. Integration started slowly and with resistance of the southern states with *Brown vs the Board of Education Case* in which the Court declared state laws establishing separate schools for black and white students to be unconstitutional. This paved the way for the Civil Rights

movement and national desegregation. But it wasn't easy. The nonviolent protests were met with violent law enforcement who used dogs, firehoses, tear gas and clubs to beat anyone in their way. It was stunning and horrendous to read about the numerous murders that they got away with. And the danger to the reporters and photographers covering these events.

John Lewis, a congressman representing King's birthplace, Atlanta, reflects about this time period, and on how he survived and the movement kept going. He thinks about how the segregationists worked to keep the prying eyes of the press away. He called these reporters "sympathetic referees" and felt safer. His greatest fear, and his greatest understanding of the press was when officers hauled Freedom Riders away from reporters and hauled them to prison and the guard's sneered, "Ain't no newspapermen out here". But Selma was the catalytic moment in the relationship between civil rights movement and the news media. The media was prepared to write the words and take pictures and capture the sound and spread the news and change the south and the nation.

This is a significant work on the civil rights era. The media was in the middle of it and in many ways took up the struggle as a crusade for justice. They knew and tried to convey that the racist south had to change. No matter how many times I read accounts about Southern racism and the brutality against our fellow human beings, it is always a shock to re-read this hatred. This was a very in depth, eye-opening book and is recommended reading about this era.

Alisa says

"If a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there to hear it does it still make a sound?" The age old philosophical question to verify the existence of an event resonates loudly through the theme of this book. If not for the reporters, editors, and photographers, would the realities of the civil rights movement have entered the consciousness of anyone outside the south? It arguably would have taken a different path. Enlightening in-depth analysis of how newspaper, and later, television journalism narrated the story of the critical events of the civil rights movement starting with post-WWII life through the Watts riots. The bulk of this book focused on the battle over desegregation in public education in the 1950's through the march on Selma for voting rights in the 1960's. Direct and detailed account although at times the players were hard to follow and the narration wandered at times. Still, a lot to digest here and an important and well done body of work. The details are not for the faint of heart and the racial hate rhetoric espoused by the rabid segregationists is alarmingly similar to the dog whistle verbiage embraced by the modern day hard right. Have we not learned anything or evolved from the past?

David says

If you have to read this for a class or otherwise study this book, **don't** try to beat the system by listening to the audiobook instead, because bewilderingly long lists of people and newspapers go whizzing by fairly frequently. They're hard to keep track of.

But for personal edification while driving, cooking, or exercising, this audiobook is first-rate. However, vivid descriptions of beatings and other assorted violent mayhem are wince-inducing, which might draw odd looks from the person on the next exercise bicycle.

But seriously: It's also important in our age to have a vivid reminder of the cruelty perpetuated under the protective fig leaf of “states' rights”. You can't do anything to change the way things were, but you can honor the brave people who fought for the right thing by reading about them, listening to their stories, and remembering them. Even while driving, cooking, or exercising.
