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A Long Road to Freedom

BY **DAVID J. GARROW. David J. Garrow,** who received a Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Martin Luther King Jr., "Bearing the Cross," is the author, most recently, of "Liberty and Sexuality: The Right to Privacy and the Making of Roe v. Wade."

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CRUSADERS IN THE COURTS: How a Dedicated Band of Lawyers Fought for the Civil Rights Revolution, by Jack Greenberg. Basic Books, 634 pp., $ 30.

LOCAL PEOPLE: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi, by John Dittmer. University of Illinois Press, 530 pp., $ 29.95.

WITH TUESDAY marking the 40th anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education, the Supreme Court's landmark 1954 school desegregation ruling, and June 21 witnessing the 30th anniversary of the three killings that tragically highlighted the civil-rights movement's 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer, American publishers are disgorging a veritable pile of new civil-rights memoirs and histories. Without a doubt the two most important books in this torrent are "Crusaders in the Courts," Jack Greenberg's history of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and "Local People," John Dittmer's account of the black freedom struggle in Mississippi.

Greenberg, now a 69-year-old Columbia University law professor, joined the small, five-lawyer "LDF" fresh out of law school in 1949 at age 24. His boss, LDF director-counsel Thurgood Marshall, was himself only 41, and the court cases that would culminate in Brown were just beginning to take shape. In time, the following five years would come to be seen as the golden age of civil-rights lawyering, and Greenberg's insider account is faithful to the legal developments while also offering important insights into the personalities and strategies that paved the way to the Supreme Court triumph.

The author accurately characterizes the sagacious, story-telling Marshall as "a complex man, much more so than usually has been described," but Greenberg keeps his own personal reflections within relatively strict bounds, emphasizing that "this is a history of LDF," not "a book about me." When Marshall became a federal appellate judge in 1961, six years before being named America's first black Supreme Court justice, he chose the white, Jewish Greenberg as his successor at LDF, ignoring those who privately questioned the political correctness of his choice.

"Crusaders in the Courts" becomes somewhat more frankly personal once it reaches Greenberg's own 23-year span (1961-1984) as LDF's chief. He provides an invaluable survey of LDF's remarkable record of courtroom victories and legal milestones, and gives fundamentally fair accounts of the behind-the-scenes tussles that characterized movement politics from the 1960s right into the 1980s. Greenberg refuses to use his book to settle old scores with one-time

rivals, but he admits his own lack of charisma and confesses how his shy, almost standoffish personality created a reputation for "ineptitude at making small talk."

Greenberg correctly calls the years before Brown "a time when going to court offered the only avenue of reform with any real prospect" for civil-rights success, but he acknowledges how even after Brown, LDF lawyers did not get to see many "concrete results of our work" i.e., actual desegregation on a more-than-token scale - "until others . . . reinforced our victories" with direct action protests led by local activists and students, not by lawyers. For LDF's attorneys, the demonstrations that characterized the southern movement's five-year heyday from 1960 to 1965 meant that while "previously we had taken the initiative, carefully choosing the issues and arenas we considered propitious, now we had to respond to situations" created by non-lawyer activists affiliated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) or Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

Many of the most heavily publicized confrontations between movement organizers and segregationist lawmen took place in either Georgia or Alabama, but among all the southern civil-rights groups there was universal acknowledgment that "the middle of the iceberg" - as SNCC's Robert Moses memorably put it - was the state of Mississippi.

John Dittmer's history of the Mississippi movement has been more than a decade in the making, and it is likely to stand for many years to come as the most comprehensive account of the black freedom struggle in what was once America's most intensely racist state. What made Mississippi different, even from Alabama, during the 1950s and '60s was the overall intensity of segregationist violence. "In no other southern state," Dittmer writes, "was the use of terror against the black population so systematic and pervasive."

White supremacy in Mississippi first came under new assault when black veterans returning from World War II started to challenge some of the most despotic manifestations of racial oppression. Even in the mid-1950s, however, black activists in Mississippi were relatively few in number. Brown offered them a tremendous inspirational boost, but when the Supreme Court's 1955 implementation order - usually termed "Brown II" - "placed the burden of desegregation on the shoulders of black parents" by indicating that black children, rather than local governments, would have to take the lead in integrating southern schools, intense retaliation rained down upon those families that courageously stepped forward.

Despite the efforts of indigenous leaders like Amzie Moore and Medgar Evers, black progress in Mississippi remained essentially static until Robert Moses and other young organizers from SNCC arrived in the state in 1961. First in McComb, and then in Greenwood, the college-age SNCC workers tried to launch voter registration drives and met with violent white opposition. Shunned by many older blacks, SNCC's early success came largely with black youngsters, but often the involvement of those students drew local adults into the movement.

Dittmer expertly traces how from 1961 through 1964 the Mississippi movement struggled to overcome both local white intransigence and the relative inattention of federal authorities in Washington. The June, 1964, Ku Klux Klan killings of young civil-rights workers James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman - the latter two of whom were white New Yorkers - starkly revealed the white terrorism and widespread police collusion that left black Mississippians and their allies all but defenseless.

Congressional passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and especially the Voting Rights Act of 1965 finally began to force Mississippi toward the national mainstream. Only in the fall of 1964 - a full 10 years after Brown - did the first desegregation of any Mississippi schools take place, but in the wake of the powerful 1965 Act, black voter registration soared.

By then, however, SNCC's forces in Mississippi were undergoing a precipitous decline. Battle fatigue and emotional burnout left many organizers looking for a respite, and even those as dedicated as Robert Moses, deeply disillusioned by the political rebuffs they had suffered from the Johnson administration and white liberals, began questioning whether racial integration was indeed the goal to pursue. "When you come right down to it," Moses asked privately, "why integrate their schools?"

Stokely Carmichael's strident "Black Power" rhetoric of 1966 presented a decidedly new image for SNCC, but Dittmer reports that it "did not attract a large following" among Mississippi blacks. By fall, 1966, there were hardly a dozen SNCC workers left in the state, and when in December the group formally expelled its few remaining white members, SNCC's most celebrated Mississippi activist, Fannie Lou Hamer, resigned in protest.

The decline and eventual disappearance of such major '60s groups as SNCC, however, did not spell political disaster for black Mississippians. Thanks in part to the Voting Rights Act and the litigation efforts of such unheralded attorneys as Frank Parker, a small handful of black victories in the state's 1967 elections grew into larger and larger numbers during the 1970s and 1980s. As Dittmer reports at the close of "Local People," by the end of 1992 Mississippi had some 825 black elected officials, including 42 black members of the state legislature, far and away the highest totals of any American state.

"Local People" is an impressive chronicle of perseverance and triumph under the most legally grueling circumstances that any citizens have had to face in 20th-Century America. But, as both Dittmer and Greenberg recognize, black Mississippians' remarkable political achievements are not an unalloyed success story, given what Greenberg honestly terms "the present tragic situation" in black America.

"No promised land ever turns out to be as true to its promise as we hope it will be when we view it from afar," he sorrowfully observes. That's a melancholy truth to which both the lawyers and the local activists can ruefully attest.

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