

A Day Late?

By David J. Garrow

Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South by John Egerton (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 704 pp. \$35.).

John Egerton's group portrait of Southerners who opposed virulent white racism in their region during the period from 1932 to 1954 is a rich and impressive book, but all too often--as Egerton himself realizes--his narrative bestows excessive praise on white "liberals" who could never quite bring themselves even to publicly denounce racial segregation.

Speak Now Against the Day--Egerton's title comes from a phrase used by Mississippi novelist William Faulkner in a 1955 speech--is a tremendously valuable book, bringing together into one volume a cast of characters and organizations whose efforts heretofore have been memorialized largely in specific scholarly mono-graphs. Egerton, however, a sixty-year-old white Kentuckian who has long written about the South, is not as tough-minded as he might be in portraying Southern "liberals" limited and often hesitant efforts in the twenty-plus years from the election of Franklin Roosevelt to the revolutionary *Brown* desegregation decision by the U.S. Supreme Court. Egerton's subjects were more completely bound and blindered by their times and places than Egerton can bring himself to fully admit, and one must read *Speak Now* with some care in order to appreciate that Egerton's bottom-line judgment of his subjects is considerably less glowing than a casual reader might conclude.

Intentionally or not, Egerton's title highlights both his book's somewhat excessive attention to writers as well as those writers' often-ambivalent stances concerning racial justice. William Faulkner's best statements notwithstanding, the Nobel Prize novelist was anything but an outspoken or committed integrationist, and Faulkner's uncertainties and inconsistencies with regard to race were fully representative of the other writers, academicians and journalists upon whom Egerton focuses his attention. Georgia's Lillian Smith may have been a more complete opponent of white racism than any other well-known white Southern writer of her age, but Smith's somewhat isolated life left her political judgments--such as a 1949 prediction that "in five years there will be little legal segregation left in the South"--dangling far off base.

More regrettably, Egerton time and again accords excessive stature to professors and newspaper editors whose full records, in the long eye of history, merit little positive comment. North Carolina sociologist Howard Odum was certainly a cut above most Southern academicians, but Egerton errs grievously in terming the cautious Odum-- a man who could never bring himself to attack segregation--"one of the pivotal figures of the twentieth-century South." However, even much more justly-celebrated University of North Carolina president Frank Porter Graham, whose 1950 defeat in a U.S. Senate race marked North Carolina's mid-century low point, had refused to support desegregation of his institution when the superbly qualified Pauli Murray, later a well-known lawyer and writer, applied for admission to UNC's graduate school in 1938.

Egerton writes correctly--and revealingly--that questions involving desegregation "were hardly in the fore-front of any [WHITE!] Southerner's thinking in the late

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1930s," but only in passing does he acknowledge the reticence and hesitancy that marked Southern white liberals' responses to even the most modest racial reforms, such as the U.S. Supreme Court's 1944 ruling in *Smith v. Allwright* striking down exclusionary Democratic party "white primaries" all across the South. Not even the most "progressive" of Southern U.S. Senators welcomed *Smith*, and, Egerton's repeated commendations for various editors and publishers notwithstanding, "not one newspaper in the region editorialized against Jim Crow segregation laws until after" the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown*.

Egerton throws his net *so* widely that those truly rare Southern whites who actually and explicitly attacked segregation and discrimination head-on, such as South Carolina U.S. District Court Judge J. Waties Waring, come across to the reader as simply one more tree in a very heavily wooded forest rather than as the especially courageous and morally commendable figures they were. History should--and does--judge Waties Waring and Howard Odum *very* differently, and if readers of *Speak Now* were to come away from the book believing that what these two men represented was one and the same, that would be very regrettable indeed.

On occasion, when his judgment is most acute, Egerton fully acknowledges the shortcomings that threaten to permeate his approach to the mid-century South. "[I]t is probably an overstatement to call the writers and the rest of the intelligentsia influential, though I have characterized them as such more than once in this narrative," Egerton rightfully confesses. In truth, he admits, "there is not much evidence that they ever persuaded" anyone to do much of anything, and "Nobody who had the power to lead, as far as I can tell, was truly influenced by the South's writers to depart from" the old order of heavy-handed racism and explicit segregation.

Egerton's most powerful conclusion is his repeated judgment that "What the region lacked most grievously was honest, dedicated leadership," and that the "vacuum of responsible moral and political leadership at the state and local levels" continued right on up through the tumultuous aftermath of *Brown*.

Speak Now's other most frequent assertion is Egerton's less persuasive contention as to "how favorable the conditions were for substantive social change in the four or five years right after World War II" in the South. Egerton correctly argues that it was indeed World War II, rather than either the Great Depression or the New Deal, that really "ushered in the modern age" in the South, but his desire to believe that the South in 1945-1946 had some significant prospect of substantively reforming its racist superstructure *from within* is simply not convincing. Egerton asserts that those years represented "a narrow window of opportunity through which the South might have reached both internal social reform and external parity with the rest of the nation," but Egerton fails to make even the beginnings of a compelling case for this wishfully optimistic view of the South's post-war prospects.

Egerton's pronounced desire to imagine *some* chance that the South *could* have transformed itself prior to national intervention in the form of federal judicial action does his history little if any harm, however, though it does lead him to further bemoan the dramatic shortcomings of the white South's civic leadership and to highlight how the exceedingly modest efforts of Southern white dissenters were further hamstrung by their own small-minded personal and organizational divisions.

But Egerton's focus upon "Why was the moment of opportunity after the Second World War not realized and captured and converted to the South's advantage?" unfortunately again betrays his imbalanced over-concentration upon the small and largely impotent world of white Southern writers, journalists, and academicians. True, neither Judge Waring nor the most interesting of the region's elected officials from the 1940s, such as Georgia Governor Ellis Arnall, are by any means absent from Egerton's story, but Egerton's over-emphasis upon white word-smiths does his story a double-barrelled disservice: first in understating how the most important and influential developments in the South between 1945 and 1954 involved what was happening (often locally and quietly) among *black* Southerners, and, second, in further pushing to the narrational sidelines those citizens who weren't busy leaving behind a record of books, articles, and columns that forty years later could be unearthed in library stacks and newspaper microfilms.

Egerton is by no means blind to these issues and dangers, and especially with regard to South Carolina, where he pays valuable and important attention to such largely unheralded black activists as Osceola McKaine and newspaper publisher John H. McCray, Egerton makes a significant contribution to future historiography. But the question of proportion remains, and in that context, as Egerton himself certainly knows, *Speak Now Against the Day* devotes more time and effort to the writings of a favored few and considerably less to the thoughts and hopes of the relatively unlettered segments of the Southern populace, both black and white.

Speak Now Against the Day is a considerable achievement, one which to large degree probably--and properly--"closes the books" on a certain segment of privileged white Southerners whom scholars and writers have favored with much--perhaps too much--attention. But,

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just as properly, in the months and years ahead the spotlights of pre- as well as post-1954 Southern history scholarship will turn more and more toward the words and deeds of those citizens--*black* citizens--whose efforts DID bring about the racial and political revolution that most Southern white liberals before 1954 could only uncertainly imagine.