
Conscience of a Troubled South

THE SOUTHERN CONFERENCE
EDUCATIONAL FUND, 1946-1966

Irwin Klibaner

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Series Editor's Preface

Irwin Klibaner's *Conscience of a Troubled South: The Southern Conference Educational Fund, 1946-1966* is a detailed and extremely valuable study of one of the small and oftentimes unheralded organizations that made an important contribution to the southern civil rights struggle. SCEF (usually called "skeff") played a significant role in linking the earlier, pre-1954 traditions of fragmentary white dissent from the South's segregationist consensus to the post-1954 era when a modest number of white southerners joined with black activists in an aggressively determined struggle for racial justice and equality.

SCEF's roots lay in the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, a white liberal group that foundered amidst the political shoals of the immediate post-World War II years. Especially in the "quiet years" of the early 1950s, SCEF and its two initial leading figures, Aubrey Williams and James Dombrowski, played a crucial role in keeping alive the honorable tradition of white southern dissent from the region's racial norms and segregation statutes. By the late 1950s, when two white Kentucky activists, Carl and Anne Braden, became energetic full-time staff representatives for SCEF, the organization increasingly served as a stimulus and source of advice for younger black activists who were moving to the fore in greater and greater numbers.

Throughout the 1950s and into the mid-1960s as well, SCEF's contributions to the southern civil rights struggle were continually hampered by allegations of Communist affiliations and sympathies that a succession of state and federal legislators aimed at SCEF staff members and supporters. In some instances, as with the NAACP and the Southern Regional Council, civil rights proponents felt they could do better without SCEF's committed staffers at their sides; in other instances, such as with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and especially the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, black activists welcomed SCEF's contributions and learned from

the tradition of hard-earned experience that SCEF's activists brought to their work.

Klibaner's important study tells a generally little-known story, one that is of considerable value both to the historiography of white southern liberalism on the issue of race and to the historiography of white support for the black freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. From his tracing of SCEF's origins in the late 1940s to Chapter 12's valuable and unique depiction of the founding of the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC) in the mid-1960s, Klibaner's history of SCEF makes a notable contribution to civil rights historiography. I am very pleased that its inclusion in Carlson Publishing's series of volumes on *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement* will help bring both its scholarly insights as well as the story of SCEF itself to many students of civil rights who otherwise might remain ignorant of this important but little-publicized part of southern civil rights history.

David J. Garrow

Preface

1989

Reading one's own words written almost twenty years ago can be a cruelly unusual punishment. Dissertations, like Pandora's box, have the reputation of causing their authors to rue re-opening them. Thankfully, however, it has not been unpleasant in this case. Reacquainting myself with the people with whom I lived, if only in my imagination, so closely for a period of two years through the research and writing of this work has reinforced my belief that it was a task well worth doing. My regrets are only that I did not pursue publishing it in book form years ago. I am indebted to Ralph Carlson, my publisher, and through him to David J. Garrow, the editor of this series, for making it more accessible.

I believe the essential story of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) remains as portrayed here. In fact, little has emerged in print over the years to alter the details of its history as presented. There have been a number of works by or about some of the persons active in SCEF, revealing more of their personal lives, emphasizing the enormous price paid for challenging the taboos of the white caste in the effort to bring the South abreast of the revolutionary post-World War II era. In her autobiography, *Outside the Magic Circle*, Virginia Foster Durr has given a sharply etched account of an upper-class white woman alive to the evils of segregation. By attempting to live according to her deepest convictions and to move others to share them, she suffered the fate of a pariah in Alabama in those bitter years. John A. Salmond has written a valuable biography of Aubrey Williams, *A Southern Rebel*, chronicling the life of that extraordinary man, the first president of SCEF. Salmond's work had the benefit of this dissertation and also additional sources unavailable to me, such as the personal recollections and papers of Anita Williams, Aubrey's widow, and the papers of Hugo Black. Unfortunately, no work on James Dombrowski, the first director of SCEF, has yet appeared, though rumors of one in preparation by Frank Adams, chronicler of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee (of which