FOREWORD

Scholarly interest in the importance and effects of photojournalists' depictions of well-known Deep South civil rights protest campaigns of the 1960s reaches back more than thirty years. My own *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (published 1978) devoted two chapters to comparing and contrasting the photographic coverage of the Selma-area voting rights protests of early 1965 with similar images generated during the 1963 mass demonstrations and confrontations in Birmingham, Alabama. In the years since then, other scholars have further enriched our understanding of the impact of news coverage of the African American freedom struggle on viewers and readers both in the United States and abroad.

To my mind, however, Martin Berger's *Seeing through Race* is the most insightful and analytically original treatment of civil rights photojournalism yet to appear. In this thoroughly researched and persuasively written study, Berger expands our appreciation of the meaning and impact of widely known photographic images. It is a superb work of thoughtful and at times brilliant scholarship that every student of civil rights historiography should read with care and reflection.

Some of the major building blocks of Berger's analysis will not surprise knowledgeable civil rights scholars, yet they will resonate most affirmatively. "The determined efforts of the white press to frame the civil rights movement as nonthreatening," Berger rightly notes of the major national media of the 1960s, "had the collateral result of casting blacks in roles of limited power. With great regularity, iconic photographs show white actors exercising power over blacks."

Famous images of segregationist excess—Birmingham's snarling police dogs and clothes-rending fire hoses, Selma's cattle prods and billy clubs—presented impulsive violence as the face of white racism and cast black protestors as passive victims. As Berger observes, such images minimized "the bravery and accomplishments of blacks," who were risking life and limb in locales where African American assertiveness had historically been reciprocated with bombs and lynch mobs. But such photographs had other effects as well.

Protest at Selma and related works of early civil rights scholarship established the powerful impact such widely distributed images had in mobilizing vocal support for the legislative reforms enacted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As Berger writes, the iconic photographs from Birmingham and Selma presented black protestors as victims of unwarranted aggression from violent lawmen and thus generated "white sympathy for blacks, and hence more support for legislative action." Similarly, in an irony perhaps first articulated in President John F. Kennedy's well-known wisecrack that the infamous Birmingham public safety commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor "has done more for civil rights than almost anybody else,"[1] a scholarly consensus has emerged that Connor and his compatriots must be understood as unwitting "agents of progressive social change."

Yet, as Berger accurately notes, those world-famous images conveyed additional powerful messages that the first generation of civil rights historiography failed to appreciate and understand. For one, the photographs provided an emotionally compelling portrayal of white racism that not only mobilized conscience-stricken viewers against southern violence but simultaneously offered them a powerful definition of racism that absolved them from complicity. As Berger argues, by "picturing 'racists' as the most violent southern thugs," the photographs enabled northern whites to conclude reassuringly that they of course were not racists in any way.

Further, the news media's promulgation of images that emphasized blacks' physical victimization focused "white attention on acts of violence and away from historically rooted inequities," as Berger points out. Indeed, Berger's analysis parallels one of the 1960s' most insightful contemporaneous documents, a lengthy private letter that Martin Luther King Jr. received from his closest and most influential political counselor, white New York attorney Stanley D. Levison, soon after the triumphal Selma to Montgomery mass march. "The coalition of Selma and Montgomery, with its supporting millions," Levison warned King, "is a coalition around a fairly narrow objective. . . . a coalition for moderate change, for gradual improvements which are to be attained without excessive upheavals as it gently alters old patterns. *It is militant only against shocking violence and gross injustice.* It is not for deep radical change."[2]

In a similar vein, Berger suggests not only that northern whites mistook their horror at the behavior of Alabama lawmen for a commitment to racial equality but also that the photographs in the white press "presented story lines that allowed magnanimous and sympathetic whites

to imagine themselves bestowing rights" on vulnerable blacks who merited both protection and sympathy. Berger, however, also contends that northern whites' reactions to the iconic southern civil rights images "both promoted incremental reforms and served as a barrier to systemic change." Some readers may, like me, remain somewhat unpersuaded by this element of Berger's analysis. He contends that the ubiquity of such photographs may have "limited the extent of reform from the start. To the degree that narratives illustrating white power over blacks helped make the images nonthreatening to whites, the photographs impeded efforts to enact—or even imagine—reforms that threatened white racial power."

While Berger concludes in his epilogue that "the most significant social work of civil rights photographs will continue to be the limits they place on the exercise of black power," my view of the nonsouthern barriers encountered by the freedom movement in the mid-1960s remains highly similar to Levison's in his letter to Dr. King: "America today is not ready for a radical restructuring of its economy and social order," and if leaders like King failed to acknowledge that fact, "the movement can head into a cul-de-sac if it can see no real progress without radical alteration of the nation." With customary bluntness, Levison warned King that it would be "certainly poor tactics to present to the nation a prospect of choosing between equality and freedom for Negroes with the revolutionary alteration of our society, or to maintain the status quo with discrimination. The American people are not inclined to change their society in order to free the Negro. They are ready to undertake some, and perhaps major, reform, but not to make a revolution."[3] But even if Berger's argument about the agenda-limiting impact of those images is not indisputably convincing, his broader contention that the photographs have played a major role in perpetuating 1960s constructions of black-white dynamics in the popular imagination is a significant interpretive contribution.

The final major element in Berger's provocative analysis contrasts the most controversial photographic images of the post-1966 "black power" era with the earlier iconic pictures from the Deep South. Especially in Birmingham, the presence of young black children among the victimized protestors generated particular sympathy, Berger believes, because of "the predispositions of whites to see them as innocent and lacking in agency." Even in Selma, he argues, the national news media made "children (or adults possessing childlike qualities) a near requirement for the sympathetic coverage of white-on-black violence." The crucial if disheartening conclusion, according to Berger, is that America's response needs to be seen as "compassion . . . for a nonthreatening individual rather than for blacks per se." Stanley Levison would have heartily concurred.

In contrast, black power era photographs "illustrate black men as self-fashioned and powerful agents," and pictures "that made the agency of blacks all too obvious diminished the odds of reaching otherwise sympathetic whites" because of "the predisposition of whites to see

expressions of black power as aberrant and threatening." The controversy that engulfed, and significantly misportrayed, African American medal winners Tommie Smith and John Carlos following their "black power" salute at the 1968 Olympics encapsulates the contrast that Berger seeks to illuminate. In a social context where black suffering resonated in politically useful but inherently limiting ways, the two strong and successful young African American athletes "delivered their message from a position of power" and were met not with sympathy or understanding but with widespread denunciation and condemnation.

Seeing through Race is a powerful and important work of impressive scholarship and is a study that students of the black freedom movement of the 1960s will read, cite, and widely discuss for many years to come.

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