

Whitney Young and the Politics of Moderation

WHITNEY M. YOUNG, JR. And the Struggle for Civil Rights

By Nancy J. Weiss
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By David J. Garrow

WHITNEY YOUNG, executive director of the National Urban League from 1961 until his accidental drowning in 1971, was a significant figure during those years, someone whose personal influence reached well beyond his organizational position. Although Young's name has been only rarely acclaimed in the years since his death, this superb, comprehensive and well-written biography by Princeton University historian Nancy Weiss makes an important contribution to 1960s historiography by detailing Young's achievements and struggles and by placing his unique role in the broader political context of those times.

When Young was named head of the Urban League in 1961, the organization "was generally acknowledged to be in the doldrums" as well as in "desperate financial straits," unable at times even to meet its weekly payroll. On paper the 40-year-old Young, a veteran of two local Urban League posts and then dean of the Atlanta University School of Social Work, might not have seemed a likely candidate to rescue and revive the struggling organization. However, Young's gifted and dynamic personality—"extremely gregarious, almost magnetic in his ability to establish immediate, lasting connections with other human beings"—more than made up for what he lacked in executive experience and administrative ability. Within a few short years Young succeeded not only in transforming the National Urban League from a struggling social-work agency into a major civil rights organization, but at the same time vastly increased the League's ability to attract sig-

nificant funding from both major corporations and foundations.

Young's personal gifts stemmed at least in part from his "unusually happy and comfortable childhood" in a middle-class Kentucky family that was "warm, close-knit" and supportive. After graduating from college at age 20, Young enlisted in the Army in 1942 and in short order became a first sergeant, mediating and serving as liaison between a segregated command structure of white officers and black soldiers. Young's experience there led to his choice of race relations and social work as a career field, but in setting after setting it was his personality traits, not formal credentials, that opened doors, recruited supporters and sparked organizational growth.

Young's remarkable achievement in reviving and enlarging the Urban League was based not on successful supplication at white corporate America's door but on skillful and sagacious arguments that only through widespread improvement in black Americans' economic opportunities and basic living conditions could long-term racial peace and justice be attained. Young's success, of course, stemmed as much from the activism of others as from his own tough but friendly approaches to powerful whites. As Weiss perceptively notes, "The receptivity of corporate leaders to Young and his message grew in direct relationship to developments in the racial situation in the United States."

The visible and noisy presence of militant—and sometimes violent—black activists and masses tremendously increased white establishment support for upper-middle-class black leaders and organizations. Some perceptive observers, such as Bayard Rustin, recognized that at the time, and some younger scholars, particularly Herbert Haines (*Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954-1970*), have persuasively expanded that analysis in more recent years. That leverage was especially important for Young, and his pragmatic appeals to white self-interest sought to make the most of it: "Either they could give blacks a stake in society by employing them, 'by helping [them] to become productive consumers and producers of goods and ser-

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Whitney Young in 1970

"Young's gifted and dynamic personality more than made up for what he lacked in administrative ability."

vices," Weiss writes, quoting Young, "or they could leave blacks outside the system 'as producers of violence and consumers of taxes.'"

Young pursued redistributive economic policies at the same time that he enjoyed and sometimes reveled in the perquisites and pleasures that came from hobnobbing with white America's corporate and political elite. "At times, celebrity and prestige became their own reward," Weiss notes in explaining the "dissonance" between Young's

"lifestyle and his public role." The "high living was more an expression of Young's own ego needs than it was a vehicle for realizing his social goals," and at times it clearly distracted from if not obstructed their pursuit. Nowhere was this a greater problem than in Young's multiple relationships with women, where it was not so much the involvements themselves as Young's unabashed style that surprised—and sometimes impressed—others. Weiss handles this subject with commendable frankness and commendable sensitivity, writing that "Young's preoccupation with other women" was "plainly an integral part of the way he lived his life." Not only was Young "striking in his boldness, in his seeming disregard for consequences, in his willingness to live dangerously," but he had "a need to flaunt his conquests," "to make certain that his friends were aware of the prominent white women he attracted."

WEISS ESCHEWS any psychological speculations on Young's tendencies, but she provides a superb portrait of how Young was able to slough off criticisms—both from black radicals and avant-garde white journalists—that he was simply an upper-class Uncle Tom or "Oreo." "In an age of dramatic gestures and strident voices," in "a movement where recognition came as much from headline grabbing as from real influence," Young's private accomplishments and tough but quiet message "were usually overshadowed." Although this biography at times offers considerably less information on the programmatic work of the National Urban League than an organizational history would provide and some readers will want, *Whitney M. Young, Jr., and the Struggle for Civil Rights* is a first-rate book. In particular it should help remind present-day readers of the considerable success that Young had in telling uppercrust white Americans that fundamental economic change was in their own—and not just blacks'—long-term self-interest. America's growing economic divisions since that time have only increased the relevance and importance of Whitney Young's message, and Weiss's excellent work will help us all to remember it. ■