

A Victory Half Won

By David J. Garrow

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FREEDOM BOUND

A History of America's Civil Rights Movement.

By Robert Weisbrot.

Illustrated. 350 pp. New York:

W. W. Norton & Company. \$21.95.

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FOR well over a decade the historiography of the civil rights movement has featured many admirable middle- and small-gauge studies. Some have treated particular groups — the Congress of Racial Equality, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee — or single leaders, especially Martin Luther King Jr. Others have focused on individual locales — Greensboro, N.C., Tuskegee, Ala. — or singular events, such as the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till or the 1965 Selma voting-rights campaign.

Until now, only several books from the early 1980's, including Harvard Sitkoff's "Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980" and Rhoda L. Blumberg's "Civil Rights," have sought to provide comprehensive, single-volume surveys of the black freedom struggle after World War II, and readers have not had a dependable, scholarly introduction to the civil rights era.

Robert Weisbrot's "Freedom Bound" is a commendable and often beautifully written effort to fill this gap. Ranging widely and inclusively from World War II to the Reagan Administration, Mr. Weisbrot's cogent survey describes the better-known events in the South — the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955-56, the 1963 Birmingham demonstrations — while also giving full and fair attention to Northern activists and commentators, from Malcolm X to Imam Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) to the social critic Harold Cruse. In many instances, such as his depiction of the generational tensions that troubled the Southern movement in the early 1960's and of the political ambivalence that marked the Kennedy Administration's dealings with Southern black activists, Mr. Weisbrot's account is

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FROM "FREEDOM BOUND" /BLACK STAR/CHARLES MOORE
Civil rights demonstrators being hosed by firemen in Birmingham, Ala., 1963.

interpretively astute and superbly phrased.

"Freedom Bound" is based more on secondary sources than on original oral history or archival work. Although much of that research appears to date from 1984-85, only rarely — such as in his accounts of the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City and the 1966 Chicago freedom movement negotiations between King and Mayor Richard J. Daley — does Mr. Weisbrot err seriously by relying excessively on single sources. Those sections and some others should be corrected and improved before "Freedom Bound" makes its way into the paperback college-course market, along with the mangled names and erroneous photo captions that also mar what otherwise would be a first-rate piece of work.

Such errors detract and distract, but they are easily correctable in a book that should enjoy a relatively long life because of its unrivaled breadth and perspicacious analyses. Mr. Weisbrot, a professor of history at Colby College in Maine, stumbles by repeatedly using "underclass" far more loosely than social policy analysts do, and ought to rephrase a characterization of the Watts ghetto as "a squalid human anthill";

otherwise, his fluid prose and apt diction capture the ascent and the descent of the civil rights struggle.

The young organizers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were on the cutting edge of the Southern movement during both those successive stages, and "Freedom Bound" astutely portrays what Mr. Weisbrot terms "SNCC's political journey from faith to cynicism." His account of how "'Black Power' could mean all things to all people" is similarly trenchant, and he straightforwardly addresses how the Johnson Administration and the civil rights movement failed to mount massive or sustained assaults on black poverty and economic exclusion. King recognized in Chicago in 1966 that poverty would be a far more intractable opponent than Southern segregation, but only in the last six months of his life did he turn his full attention to economic

issues. King's growing realization that questions of class were equally if not more important than distinctions of race foreshadowed many of the conclusions that analysts such as William J. Wilson have recently reached regarding black America's economic bifurcation and decline over the past 20 years. King warned that deep economic division was just as great an evil as deep racial division, and no scholar or even casual observer can fail to note, in any major city, that the cost of America's failure to heed that warning continues to grow every day.

Mr. Weisbrot correctly observes that "the roots of racial inequality have proved too deeply embedded in centuries of American history to be washed away" by the reform statutes of the 1960's. "Freedom Bound" more often than not does a praiseworthy job of explaining both the familiar and the unheralded aspects of this chapter from our recent history, a history we all should know, if only better to appreciate the growing economic and racial divisions that mark the United States today. As Mr. Weisbrot concludes, "In important respects the society's newfound emphasis on interracial harmony has been more rhetorical than real." □