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How the Press Reported on Racism, and How It Didn't

By DAVID J. GARROW

THE RACE BEAT: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation

By Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff

Alfred A. Knopf. Illustrated. 518 pages. \$30.

“At no other time in U.S. history were the news media more influential than they were in the 1950s and 1960s,” argues “The Race Beat,” an important study of how journalists covered the civil rights movement. One might imagine that influence was all to the good, but Gene Roberts, a former managing editor at The New York Times, and Hank Klibanoff, a managing editor at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, describe here in richly instructive detail how, more often than not, the professional performance of both Southern newspapers and national beacons like The Times left much to be desired.

Mr. Roberts and Mr. Klibanoff begin their account in the 1940s, emphasizing the “astonishingly prophetic” observation of Gunnar Myrdal in “An American Dilemma,” his influential 1944 analysis of race discrimination: “To get publicity is of the highest strategic importance to the Negro people.” In the South, Mr. Roberts and Mr. Klibanoff explain, “one of the secrets of the success of segregation had been the way newspapers had neglected it.” Even the most heralded Southern editor, Ralph McGill of The Atlanta Constitution, “consistently opposed federal laws against lynching and the poll tax” and had written that separation of the races was “the best and only workable system.”

Nationally, too, most white journalists of that era “simply didn’t recognize racism in America as a story.” Even after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 Supreme Court ruling against school segregation, black Southerners faced the challenge Mr. Myrdal had identified: could they make the virtually all-white national news media “discover racial discrimination and write about it so candidly and so repeatedly that white Americans outside the South could no longer look the other way?”

Change began in the aftermath of the horrific 1955 murder of a black teenager, Emmett Till, in Mississippi. The trial of his two killers “brought white reporters into the Deep South in unprecedented numbers to cover a racial story,” and their coverage “had exactly the impact Myrdal had predicted,” Mr. Roberts and Mr. Klibanoff write. “Northerners were shocked and

shaken by what they read,” especially when the all-white jury rapidly acquitted the two defendants.

The Times’s gentlemanly Southern correspondent, John N. Popham, told readers that, “overridingly,” white Mississippians viewed the Till murder “with sincere and vehement expressions of outrage.” The jury’s behavior belied that, and months later, when Mr. Popham led off an unprecedented, 50,000 word, eight-page Times special section on the emerging civil rights struggle, Mr. Roberts and Mr. Klibanoff report that the paper fundamentally missed what was brewing in the South.

The Times, they recount, “failed to note that the region was about to explode.”

“The rigidity and popular appeal of the hard-core segregationist movement,” they continue, “and the determination of an increasingly emboldened Negro population were dismissed amid a lot of sociological camouflage.”

The “cataclysmic” explosion occurred the next year at Little Rock, when the Arkansas governor, Orval Faubus, tried to block the court-ordered integration of an all-white high school. Mobs of hostile whites threatened the black students and assaulted reporters. Army troops stifled the disorder and protected the students, but Mr. Roberts and Mr. Klibanoff cite Little Rock as “a turning point in how the gathering racial storm was presented to the American people and the world.”

After Little Rock, they write, “news organizations would change, in just about every respect, the way they covered” the civil rights story. At The Times that change included naming Claude Sitton as the new Southern correspondent. Mr. Sitton’s writing “packed massive amounts of information into taut word pictures,” Mr. Roberts and Mr. Klibanoff explain, and in Mr. Sitton’s six years on the race beat, “nobody in the news business would have as much impact as he would on the reporting of the civil rights movement, on the federal government’s response, or on the movement itself.”

From 1960 through 1962, Mr. Sitton was unable to report from Alabama, where The Times was under legal assault by public officials in libel suits that led to the Supreme Court’s landmark First Amendment ruling in *New York Times Company v. Sullivan* in 1964. But the rise of television news coverage helped to fill that gap, as “daily visual broadcasts of news as it happened had a profound impact on the nation’s understanding of the race drama in the South.” When Southern lawmen began using police dogs against black demonstrators, first in Greenwood, Miss., then in Birmingham, Ala., the ensuing international uproar highlighted “the explosive potential of images” both on television and in print.

As the civil rights movement built toward its Southern climax in Selma, Ala., in early 1965, The Times expanded its coverage by hiring two excellent, experienced reporters, John Herbers and Roy Reed. But several months later, when the Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles exploded in violent riots, The Times was unprepared to chronicle the race beat’s sudden turn. The paper’s Watts coverage, Mr. Roberts and Mr. Klibanoff report, “read as if it were written from a distance, from outside the ghetto looking in.”

“The Race Beat” devotes only a dozen pages to the post-Watts era. Mr. Roberts and Mr. Klibanoff argue in conclusion that “the national racial trauma might have been even more agonizing if the liberal and moderate editors had not assumed leadership and reached out to the rest of the nation,” but that upbeat view of the Southern press is consistently undercut by the painful evidence their impressively rich and critical book presents.

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