

The Washington Post February 9, 2014 Sunday Outlook Pg. B6.

“Marching For Hope and Finding Ugliness”

By David J. Garrow

DOWN TO THE CROSSROADS Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March Against Fear By Aram Goudsouzian Farrar Straus Giroux. 351 pp. \$30

WAKING FROM THE DREAM The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Shadow of Martin Luther King, Jr. By David L. Chappell Random House. 249 pp. \$27

In early June 1966, the U.S. civil rights movement faced an uncertain future. President Lyndon B. Johnson had signed the landmark Voting Rights Act into law just 10 months earlier, but since then Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) had shifted most of its efforts northward to Chicago, and the two other most influential activist groups, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), had installed new, little-known leaders: Floyd McKissick and Stokely Carmichael.

James Meredith stood entirely apart from every civil rights organization. Four years earlier, the 32-year-old African American Mississippian and military veteran had demonstrated what Aram Goudsouzian rightly calls “singular audacity” in desegregating Ole Miss, the University of Mississippi, in the face of a segregationist onslaught that left two onlookers dead and dozens of federal officers wounded. Goudsouzian’s “Down to the Crossroads,” an estimably well-researched and pitch-perfect work of history, picks up Meredith’s story in early June 1966, when his “mystical self-assurance” led him to set out, accompanied only by four friends, on what he called a “March Against Fear,” southward from Memphis toward the Mississippi state capitol in Jackson, a distance of more than 200 miles.

On Monday, June 6, the second day of their trek down U.S. Route 51, Meredith and his companions reached the small town of Hernando, where more than 150 black Mississippians, buoyed by Meredith’s courage, turned out to greet him and buy him a hamburger and a glass of milk. Meredith urged them to register to vote, and decades later he recalled to Goudsouzian — whose book is informed by more than 100 personal interviews as well as a comprehensive review of written sources — that “Hernando represented to me the whole purpose of my return to Mississippi” and the energizing impact he hoped to have.

A few miles south of Hernando, at 4:15 p.m., a white onlooker emerged carrying a shotgun and calling Meredith’s name. As others scattered, the gunman fired first one blast, then two more, as Meredith fell to the pavement and tried to crawl away. The gunman, 41-year-old Memphian Aubrey Norvell, quietly walked into the woods as an ambulance was summoned from Hernando. Within minutes, Meredith was headed to a Memphis hospital.

The Associated Press erroneously reported that Meredith was dead, but Norvell had fired only No. 4 birdshot, and while Meredith suffered about 75 bloody and painful pellet wounds, from his legs to the back of his head, most of the birdshot had missed him. As updated news spread, CORE’s McKissick was the first to announce that he would continue Meredith’s

march, and King soon said likewise. Tuesday morning both men arrived in Memphis and visited Meredith's hospital room, joined there by SNCC's new chairman, the 24-year-old Carmichael.

By mid-afternoon all three men and various aides were stepping off from the spot where Meredith had been shot, but when Mississippi highway patrolmen shoved them from the pavement onto the unkempt shoulder, all that kept Carmichael from striking one of the lawmen was King's tightly linked forearm. That evening everyone returned to Memphis for a large church rally, and the next day the march resumed southward from where it had ended the day before.

Day by day the column attracted local youths and a wide variety of civil rights supporters from outside Mississippi. Directly and without evasion, Goudsouzian, chairman of the history department at the University of Memphis, addresses the widespread sexual harassment that women marchers experienced and that march leaders chose to ignore. Inter-organizational rivalries and conflicts ran rampant, but in some towns the march passed through, such as Grenada, it fulfilled Meredith's wish of stimulating a black community movement that had not previously existed.

From Grenada, the marchers headed southwest into the Mississippi Delta, and in Greenwood, on the night of June 16, Carmichael and his SNCC compatriot Willie Ricks gave voice to the slogan for which the march would be remembered: "Black Power. We want Black Power." The phrase itself, as Goudsouzian notes, was hardly novel, but Carmichael's intentional ambiguity — "I'm not anti-white," he stressed — coupled with Ricks's rhetorical excesses — "We're gonna get some of that white blood" — ignited a public firestorm.

Washington Post correspondent Nicholas von Hoffman labeled Black Power a "totalitarian-sounding phrase," and national coverage focused on the march's internal battling as SCLC chants of "Freedom Now" were answered with "Black Power" from the SNCC and CORE. A brutal attack on the marchers by highway patrolmen in Canton did not generate national outrage, and after Meredith rejoined the column on June 26 for the last leg into Jackson, the final rally was a downbeat affair at which King reached back to 1963 and sorrowfully declared, "I have watched my dreams turn into a nightmare."

The Meredith March "catapulted Stokely Carmichael into celebrity" while leaving the wider civil rights movement mired in "fatigue, jealousy, confusion, and ugliness" that persisted through King's April 1968 assassination. Goudsouzian's well-written book is a model of authoritative and jargon-free scholarship.

University of Oklahoma historian David L. Chappell's "Waking From the Dream" offers "a fresh look at the post-King era," featuring six distinct historical episodes that Chappell strives to link into a meaningful pattern. Three chapters consider congressional enactments: the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act of 1978 and the 1983 law that made King's birthday a federal holiday. Admitting that the employment law was "pretty toothless," Chappell perceptively notes that the 1980s "featured a remarkable — though still

unheralded — run of successful civil rights legislation” that reached from the extension and strengthening of the Voting Rights Act in 1982 through passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1991.

Had Chappell followed that insight and focused on each of those significant measures, “Waking From the Dream” could have offered a more compelling interpretive argument. Instead, chapters on the National Black Political Conventions, the political emergence of former King aide Jesse Jackson, and short-lived public controversies about King’s private life and his academic plagiarism while in graduate school offer valuable insights but little thematic unity.

Chappell persuasively contends that “national memory has been unkind to Jackson” by failing to appreciate that his widely popular 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns were a remarkable achievement. The 1983 King holiday law of course represented “symbolic as opposed to substantive memorialization,” but in retrospect what is most remarkable is that 112 members of Congress — 22 senators and 90 representatives, including John McCain and Ron Paul — voted against so honoring King.

Chappell’s thoughtful chapter on the 1989-91 public debates about King’s character cites this reviewer in ways that are always accurate and fair-minded, and his forceful argument that Boston University erred grievously by failing to revoke King’s PhD is refreshingly powerful. Had Chappell more comprehensively pursued his argument that truly substantive acts of Congress “take more human energy, planning, and dedication than the sweeping rhetorical gestures that Americans all too easily remember,” “Waking From the Dream” would have been a more substantively robust volume.

David J. Garrow is the author of “Bearing the Cross,” a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Martin Luther King Jr.