

BOOK REVIEWS

Steeped in the Blood of Racism: Black Power, Law and Order, and the 1970 Shootings at Jackson State College.

By Nancy K. Bristow.

(Oxford University Press, 2020. xiv, 299 pp. \$34.95)

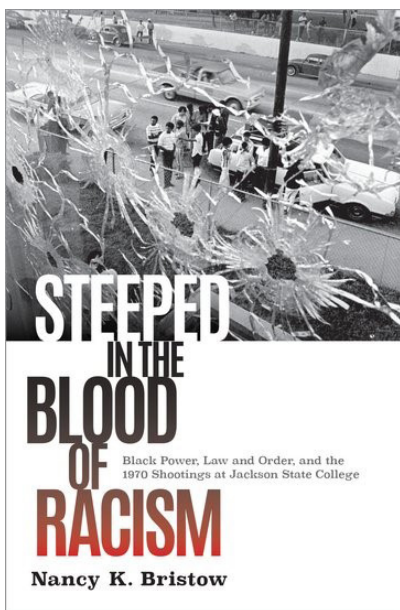
Jackson, Mississippi, is most often remembered in histories of the Black freedom struggle for the horrific June 1963 assassination of NAACP organizer Medgar Evers. The wider story of the Jackson movement has been detailed in John R. Salter's powerful 1979 memoir and in M. J. O'Brien's superb 2013 history, *We Shall Not Be Moved*. Until now, however, the subsequent law enforcement killings of two young Black men at Jackson State College in the early morning hours of May 15, 1970, and the wounding of twelve others have not received book-length treatment by any academic historian.

When they are remembered, the Jackson State killings are linked to the far more famous shooting deaths of four white students at Ohio's Kent State University by National Guardsmen eleven days earlier. But as U.S. English professor Patrick Chura rightly highlighted in a fine 2019 analysis in *Peace & Change*, "the color line

separating the two events and their victims was not incidental but fundamental," for as the excellent *New York Times* journalist Roy Reed wrote at the time, the Jackson State deaths were "almost entirely a Mississippi phenomenon" of white official violence directed at Blacks, not poorly-trained soldiers targeting white students protesting against the war in Southeast Asia.

Nancy Bristow's thoroughly-researched monograph explicates the truth of Reed's statement in extensive detail. Bristow distinguishes the Jackson State deaths from those at Kent, but even in 1970 it was widely appreciated that the Black Mississippi deaths had attracted

far less fanfare than the four white dead in Ohio. *Time* magazine wrote acerbically of the African American victims being treated as "second-class martyrs," yet this discriminatory dynamic was already very well-known. In 1965, the killing of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a Black movement participant, by an Alabama state trooper drew only modest attention, but when two fellow white voting rights propo-



nents, James Reeb and Viola Gregg Liuzzo, were shot to death soon thereafter by Alabama Klan supporters, even President Lyndon B. Johnson personally consoled their families. Likewise, when state lawmen in February 1968 shot and killed three Black students at South Carolina State College in Orangeburg, national reaction was muted.

In Jackson, even a local investigation into the Black students' rock and bottle-throwing, which had preceded the thirty-second burst of over 150 rounds of gunfire, found "no evidence that the crowd . . . threatened the officers prior to firing" (128). Likewise, a subsequent federal probe called the shootings "unreasonable, unjustified . . . clearly unwarranted" and concluded that "racial animosity on the part of white police officers was a substantial contributing factor" in the capricious barrage (134).

Bristow does a fine job in showing how Jackson State's students, often from working-class backgrounds and the first in their families to attend college, had manifested "a determination to stay out of trouble" that sharply distinguished them from young white activists angered by U.S. conduct in the war in Southeast Asia (67). Her insistence that Jackson was thus different in kind from Kent State, where race played no role in the students' deaths, is powerfully clear but also fully congruent with other knowledgeable commentators from Reed in 1970 through Chura in 2019.

Better editing would have saved Bristow from a trio of errors. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, not "the Fifth District," turned aside a

suit for civil damages on behalf of the victims (160). Bristow also fails to cite, or fully utilize, the appellate court's richly detailed 23-page opinion (*Burton v. Waller*, 502 F. 2d 1261), relying instead on only news summaries of it. The prominent civil rights activist Julian Bond was a state representative but never a "Georgia Congressman" and Eric Garner, a Black man who died at the hands of a New York City police officer in 2014, was killed not "in Brooklyn" but in the borough of Staten Island (173, 193).

The tradition of official state violence against Black Americans is now better understood and more widely condemned than at any prior point in American history. The long roster of deaths such as those of James Green and Phillip Gibbs in Jackson in 1970 will receive ongoing reflection for—in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words—"as long as the cords of memory shall lengthen."

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Resisting Equality: The Citizens' Council, 1954-1989. By Stephanie R. Rolph. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018. Acknowledgements, notes, bibliography, index. Pp. xii, 237. \$48 cloth. ISBN: 9780807169155.)

In 1971, historian Neil McMillen published *The Citizens' Councils: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction* (University of Illinois Press). McMillen exposed the organization at the center of massive