

Power, Politics, and the Decline of the Civil Rights Movement: A Fragile Coalition, 1967-1973

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Reviewer: Emma Folwell

Power, Politics and the Decline of the Civil Rights Movement traces the movement in its waning years, focusing primarily on the fates of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and SNCC (as the Student Nonviolent and the Student National Coordinating Committee). The book explores the relationships between national Civil Rights and Black Power organisations, and their relationships with the Nixon administration. It also addresses the impact of gender discrimination, leadership failings and ideological divisions – particularly regarding non-violence – on the fortunes of SNCC and SCLC, highlighting the internal problems that plagued both organisations. The decline of national Civil Rights organisations forms the central focus of this study, behind which Lehman provides rich detail of the shifting political ground, ideology and rhetoric of these years, by tracing the career of Spiro Agnew. The book follows Agnew from his tenure as Governor of Maryland to his resignation from the Vice-Presidency, focusing on the impact and development of his rhetoric and his role as the spokesman of law and order.

The book proceeds chronologically, providing a narrative of major events beginning with the ‘inflammatory’ rhetoric of Rap Brown following the 1967 police shooting and riot in Maryland. The failure of leadership is a key theme of this work: Lehman offers detailed consideration of Ralph Abernathy’s leadership of SCLC, deftly illustrating the shifting circumstances through which he steered the organisation, and exploring the impact and use of Martin Luther King’s memory (p. 67). However, Lehman does not focus solely on King’s assassination and legacy, or on Abernathy’s leadership failings. He weaves these into a broader narrative of crisis within the movement. Alongside Abernathy, Rap Brown is a prominent figure in this study. Lehman traces Brown’s activism, his relationship with SNCC and his role as target for Agnew’s law and order rhetoric. Lehman offers insight into the range of factors that caused difficulties for SCLC and SNCC, as well as the National Urban League, and very brief considerations of the NAACP, the Black Panthers and CORE. He also shows how significant was the failure of the majority of Civil Rights leaders to establish a relationship with Nixon or to gain access to his advisors (pp. 90–1). The book ends in 1973 amidst the breaking Watergate scandal, the decline of law and order and the rise of the New South. For Lehman, the Civil Rights movement was over. Internal struggles over the role of female activists, lack of funds and the failure to capture media attention without a charismatic and controversial chairman led to SNCC’s decline to only a few, loosely connected regional offices (p. 285). Similarly SCLC suffered under Abernathy’s

leadership, facing money troubles (including conflict over Coretta Scott King's fundraising) and internal strife (p. 312). Law and order was in decline and a range of New South Governors had been elected with biracial support. African Americans, Lehman suggests, were winning progress without the need for national Civil Rights organisations and mass demonstrations (p. 316). For Lehman, the lack of a coherent response from national Civil Rights organisations to the Boston anti-busing campaign was the final signal of the demise of the Civil Rights movement (pp. 323–4).

In the context of a long Civil Rights movement, these often overlooked years of the movement have recently received greater scholarly attention. Most recently, for example David Chappell's *Waking from the Dream* explores the impact of King's death and legacy on the movement.⁽¹⁾ There have also been a number of studies that explore different facets of the movement post-1965, including its relationship with the War on Poverty, a renewed focus on legal challenges, and the move into politics, among others.⁽²⁾ Lehman offers a new perspective by tracing national Civil Rights organisations through their decline, allowing for a nuanced and fascinating exploration of their internal divisions, and of the relationships between these organisations and their leaders. The author offers interesting insights into the relationship between Civil Rights leaders, between these leaders and the White House, and into the ideological differences between the national Civil Rights organisations that undermined successive attempts at coalition. Lehman thus adds to our understanding of this period by exposing the complex internal and inter-organisational divisions that undermined SCLC's Poor People's Campaign, and SNCC's attempts to reinvent its identity after the departure of successive charismatic, headline-grabbing chairmen.

Lehman has made a valuable contribution to our understanding of the declining years of the movement, and offers a new perspective on the movement post-1967 and the factors contributing to the decline of SNCC and SCLC. Through Lehman's narrative of these years, he convincingly illustrates how internal divisions, personality clashes, poor leadership, ideological conflicts over the role of militancy and non-violence, the loss of King, COINTELPRO and the lack of political influence led to national Civil Rights organisations becoming side-lined, ignored and increasingly irrelevant. However, I think it is somewhat problematic as it offers only a partial view on the decline of the movement. Using only national Civil Rights organisations and leaders as a barometer of the movement's existence or success is a flawed approach. By the late 1960s, the Civil Rights movement had moved into other arenas: as successive waves of historiography have shown, through intensely local activism the movement continued down new paths, incorporating activists, organisations and tactics both old and new. Thus while *Power, Politics, and the Decline of the Civil Rights Movement* offers an interesting insight into the decline of national Civil Rights organisations, it provides less insight into the demise of the Civil Rights movement. By 1973 SCLC and SNCC had declined, perhaps to the point of irrelevance. It is clear that the movement had changed in shape and nature again by 1973. However, to argue that a lack of cohesion among national Civil Rights organisations and the localisation of activism marked the end of the movement is not reflective of its scope. The study lacks the broader perspective that would provide an overview of activism at the grassroots beyond SNCC. There is an acknowledgement of the different paths taken by activists in this period, but little consideration of these paths and their impact on the movement. There is sometimes a willingness to extrapolate too far without sufficient breath of analysis or example. This problem of scope is partly reflective of the restricted range of archival research on which the author draws. For example, Lehman refers in general terms to the New South and the Governors of this New South, but draws primarily on one example, Mississippi Governor William Waller (p. 316). Likewise, when discussing the increased political power and engagement of African Americans in 1969, the election of Charles Evers as Mayor of Fayette is the only example provided (pp. 111–2). To take Mississippi as representative of the Deep South or the New South is also indicative of the lack of geographical sensitivity present at times in this study.

One of the strengths of the book lies in the deft weaving of the multiple strands that undermined the cohesion and power of the national Civil Rights organisations. Lehman draws on the extensive FBI records to trace the impact of COINTELPRO on these organisations (e.g. pp. 171–3). The book explores relationship between politics and the organisations, tracing the impact of Abernathy's exclusion from the White House and the politicisation of activism, through the move of high profile activists such as Andrew Young and

Jesse Jackson into state and national politics (pp. 131, 186). While the impact this politicisation had on the movement would have been more fully realised by the addition of a grassroots perspective, Lehman deftly explores the advantages and disadvantages of this move into politics. The author also offers interesting insights into the gendered divisions in SCLC and SNCC. In one of the most fascinating threads running through the book, Lehman traces the impact of women such as Fran Beal, Coretta Scott King and Angela Davies on SNCC, SCLC and the broader movement. There are other, less developed threads running through Lehman's narrative, including sporadic but tantalising comments on the relationship between the media and the decline of SNCC and SCLC. Interesting also is the exploration of the ideological divides between the organisations over pan-Africanism and ethnic solidarity, through relationship between SNCC and Mexican American activists, including alliances with the Southwestern Hispano Land Grant (p. 26) and later La Raza Unida party (p. 243). Lehman offers fascinating insight into Abernathy's move away from vocal rejection of violence to a tacit acceptance of AIM's policy of armed self-defense in his speech to Native American activists at Wounded Knee in 1973 (p. 295). It would have been interesting to see the relationship between Native American and African-American activism more fully explored.

By incorporating Agnew's rise and decline into his narrative, Lehman weaves the organisational histories of SNCC and SCLC into the context of law and order and the Southern Strategy. However, I find Lehman's portrayal of Agnew – particularly the importance Lehman places on Governor Agnew's opposition to Rap Brown in 1967 – somewhat problematic. The significance of Agnew's role is over-emphasized throughout, most significantly when suggesting that Agnew's response to Rap Brown's militant rhetoric informed President Johnson's response to black militancy and the composition of the Kerner Commission (p. 16). It is clear that Agnew's rhetoric would become the dominant response to black militancy in the 1968 election campaign and the years of Nixon's presidency. In 1967 Agnew was one of a set of newly-elected Republican Governors who opposed the 'permissive culture' they claimed set the stage for the urban riots. Agnew's meteoric rise from relatively unknown Governor to Vice President owed much to this rhetoric and to his 'get-tough' persona.⁽³⁾ However, suggesting Agnew's rhetoric was significant enough to shape the President's response is overstating his profile and significance in 1967. Lehman's portrayal of the role of Vice President Agnew is interesting but the focus on Agnew leaves Nixon somewhat muted. At times, this makes the President's 'benign neglect' of race less a carefully calculated strategy, and more a default state of inaction. Lehman's focus on Agnew does clearly illustrate how useful the Vice President was as a mouthpiece for the Southern Strategy. This left Nixon able to remain silent on race during the 1972 campaign, in the hope of convincing African Americans to judge him on his record, not the rhetoric of his Vice President (p. 274).

This study provides an engaging and much-needed narrative of the fate of national Civil Rights organisations in the later years of the movement. There is compelling analysis of the inter-organisational relationships and conflicts of SNCC, SCLC and other Civil Rights organisations, and interesting insights into the complex and inter-connected factors that contributed to the decline of these organisations.

Notes

1. D. L. Chappell, *Waking from the Dream: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Shadow of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (London, 2014).⁽¹⁾
2. A number of studies explore the links between the Civil Rights Movements' post-1965 goal of economic justice and the War on Poverty: For example S. Y. Ashmore, *Carry It On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964–1972*, (London, 2008); T. F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia, PA, 2007); R. Bauman, *Race and the War on Poverty: From Watts to East L.A.*, (Norman, OK, 2008). C. Danielson, *After Freedom Summer: How Race Realigned Mississippi Politics, 1965–1986*, (Gainesville, FL, 2011) traces the development of black politics and the white response to the movement's return to legal activism in the 1970s.⁽²⁾
3. J. Elfenbein, T. L. Hollowak, and E. Nix, *Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth in an American City*, (Philadelphia, PA, 2011) p. 19.⁽³⁾

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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