



Rabble Rousers: The American Far Right in the Civil Rights Era (Politics and Culture in the Twentieth-Century South)

Clive Webb

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The decade following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision saw white southerners mobilize in massive resistance to racial integration. Most segregationists conceded that ultimately they could only postpone the demise of Jim Crow. Some militant whites, however, believed it possible to win the civil rights struggle. Histories of the black freedom struggle, when they mention these racist zealots at all, confine them to the margin of the story.

These extremist whites are caricatured as ineffectual members of the lunatic fringe. Civil rights activists, however, saw them for what they really were: calculating, dangerous opponents prepared to use terrorism in their stand against reform. To dismiss white militants is to underestimate the challenge they posed to the movement and, in turn, the magnitude of civil rights activists' accomplishments. The extremists helped turn massive resistance into a powerful political phenomenon. While white southern elites struggled to mobilize mass opposition to racial reform, the militants led entire communities in revolt.

Rabble Rousers turns traditional top-down models of massive resistance on their head by telling the story of five far-right activists—Bryant Bowles, John Kasper, Rear Admiral John Crommelin, Major General Edwin Walker, and J. B. Stoner—who led grassroots rebellions. It casts new light on such contentious issues as the role of white churches in defending segregation, the influence of anti-Semitism in southern racial politics, and the divisive impact of class on white unity. The flame of the far right burned brilliantly but briefly. In the final analysis, violent extremism weakened the cause of white southerners. Tactical and ideological tensions among massive resisters, as well as the strength and unity of civil rights activists, accelerated the destruction of Jim Crow.

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