

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)

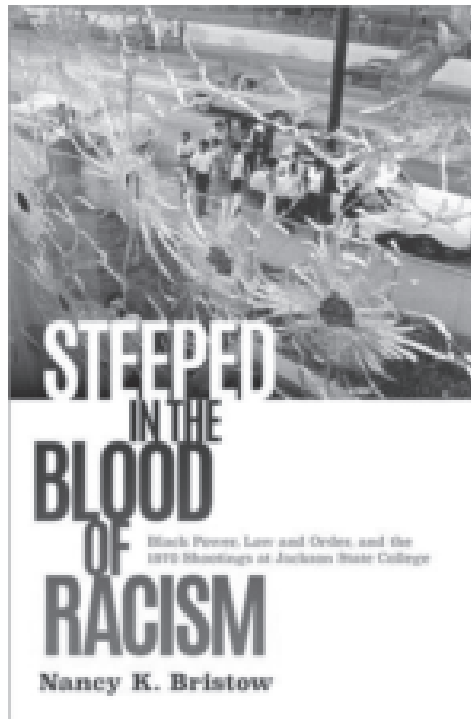
Jackson, Mississippi, is most often remembered in histories of the Black freedom struggle for the horrific June 1963 assassination of NAACP organizer Medgar Evers. The wider story of the Jackson movement has been detailed in John R. Salter's powerful 1979 memoir and in M. J. O'Brien's superb 2013 history, *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

resistance for what it was—a loosely affiliated network of local white supremacist groups that used economic reprisal and other forms of terrorism to combat the efforts of the NAACP during the classical phase of the civil rights movement. Updated and reprinted in 1994, McMillen’s work has remained the standard history of the Council. Its members’ self-styled sophisticated resistance to civil rights agitation, defined against the violent and self-defeating resistance of the Ku Klux Klan, has become an indelible part of the scholarly civil rights narrative.

Stephanie Rolph’s valuable new monograph, *Resisting Equality*, “builds on” McMillen’s work by situating the Citizens’ Council within a long civil rights movement framework, specifically within the transformation of American racism that followed the seeming, though never wholesale, collapse of organized massive resistance in the 1960s (3). Focusing on the Council’s coalition-building efforts on the national stage and its leaders’ steadfast commitment to white supremacy, her work strengthens the historiography of white resistance associated with scholars like Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and Joseph Crespino. She argues that historians have “for the most part, ignored the Council’s later years,” which, she maintains, “restricts our understanding of Council activism to its ultimate failure” (3). She explains that the organization ultimately “cultivated ideology over political positions” and that its “unwavering commitment to white supremacy,” despite a shift in tactics and focus, “ensured its continued

relevance” (3).

Rolph is less concerned with the semi-autonomous local councils that carried out reprisal campaigns against civil rights activists than she is with the Citizens’ Council of America (CCA) and the Association of Citizens’ Councils of Mississippi (ACCM), both headquartered in Jackson. Rolph argues that a “sustained and unapologetic advocacy for white supremacy,” especially via various means of publishing and disseminating propaganda, “won [the CCA and ACCM] a variety of allies within Mississippi, across the country, and around the globe.” Such networks allowed the CCA and ACCM to find their place in the conservative counterrevolution of the 1970s and 1980s, long after civil rights activists managed to overcome the terrorist activities of the local councils (4). These connections allow us to see more clearly how white supremacy was “reborn,” rather than “irreparably weakened,” and how the desire to maintain white power “converged with mainstream thought” (4, 6).

Certain Council leaders loom large in this study, and Rolph emphasizes their intention to develop an elite-led movement that nonetheless inspired whites at the grassroots to take the initiative, sometimes through violent action. The CCA’s William Simmons is the most visible of this cadre. Simmons edited the Council organ, *The Citizen*, and produced and moderated its syndicated radio program, *Forum*. These outlets served as Simmons’ vehicles for positioning the Council within a developing conservative movement while still cham-

pioneering white supremacy. Whether posturing as a staunch Cold Warrior in the pages of *The Citizen*, cozying up to the South African Nationalist regime that was holding fast to Apartheid, or hosting Republican opponents of federal government overreach on *Forum*, Simmons kept an unabashed biological racism at the core of Council ideology.

Rolph combines a fresh examination of some well-worn sources, such as *The Citizen* and the papers of figures like James Eastland and John Stennis, with transcripts of *Forum* and a litany of other Council publications and correspondence, and the papers of Medgar Evers, to provide a rich view of the Council's endurance. As she notes, the Council persevered in the face of conflicts with competing institutions, notably the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, and a sustained challenge from Black activists. Simmons and Council founder Robert Patterson were ultimately unable to maintain white unity under Council influence in their home state, but their broader vision dovetailed with the rise of the New Right closely enough to ensure the Council's relevance until the shuttering of the Jackson offices in 1989.

The book's brief concluding chapter on the Council since 1964 might leave historians wanting more, though Rolph does emphasize the elements of Council activity and ideology in the years prior to 1964 that presaged its evolution in the 1970s and 1980s. This is necessary reading for anyone hoping to fully understand The Citizens' Council and white resistance to the civil rights movement. All scholars of twentieth century and contemporary

American politics should find it engaging and useful.

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Black Litigants in the Antebellum South. By Kimberly M. Welch. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. Acknowledgments, illustrations, map, notes, appendix, index. Pp. xi, 328. \$39.95 cloth, \$29.99 E-book. ISBN: 978-1-4696-3643-6.)

In *Black Litigants in the Antebellum South*, Kimberly Welch examines a largely unexplored record of civil suits involving free and enslaved Black litigants in courts in and around antebellum Natchez, Mississippi. Building on her startling discovery that Black litigants often successfully sued whites and each other in civil court, Welch argues that African Americans found success in such cases by appealing to property, and "claimed legal personhood through the language of property" (13). Property ownership and the rights of legal and social personhood imbued in property offered Black litigants a language and legal infrastructure to press claims (for debt repayment, divorce, the recoup of stolen goods, and even occasionally manumission) and to insist on social belonging. Welch finds that Black litigants understood and utilized slaveholders' preoccupation with the preservation of property rights, exploiting the legal foundation of slavery itself to make claims, as property-holders, for civic inclusion and to create a more "tolerable world"