

fact or argument that illuminates the underlying reasons for the failure of government schools. Lieberman discusses everything from grade inflation to racial bias in standardized testing, usually bringing an insightful, common-sense view to the topic that challenges the prevailing attitudes of the education profession.

The last few years have seen a dramatic shift in popular sentiment toward

public education. Once sacred institutions, public schools are now popular targets. School reform has been exposed as a charade, and parents and taxpayers are demanding real change. In the current climate, Lieberman's *Autopsy* may not be so premature after all. ♦

*John O'Leary is a policy analyst for the Reason Foundation.*

## Southern Discomfort

*By John Shelton Reed*

**They Didn't Put That on the Huntley-Brinkley!: A Vagabond Reporter Encounters the New South, by Hunter James, Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 305 pages, \$29.95**

THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS WAS one of the great morality plays of our century—indeed, one of the greatest of all time—and stage-managing that play was a major accomplishment of the movement and its allies in government and the media. But of course this struggle between black and white (literal and metaphorical) had its gray areas, its ironies and contradictions. As Rheta Grimsley Johnson writes in her foreword to this book, “Save us from more white sheriffs with potbellies battling it out with civil rights saints amongst the magnolias. It was more complicated than that. It *is* more complicated than that.” The reporters who covered the movement knew that, even if they didn't always report it.

Hunter James, a retired newspaperman whose career spanned the era of the civil rights movement in Georgia, North Carolina, and Alabama, has set out to tell the “hidden story of the civil rights movement,” to show how the movement worked itself out as “blacks and whites who had lived together as neighbors and sometimes as friends suddenly had to learn how to become friends and neighbors all over again in a different way.”

James's book flags in places (his ac-

counts of the Nixon and Goldwater campaigns don't add much, for instance), his command of the language sometimes falters (someone is “fomenting at the mouth”; old Atlanta was “a polyglot of festering shantytowns”), and too many punctuation and spelling errors survived copy editing. His attempts to reproduce dialect are probably unfortunate. I don't question the accuracy of his rendition, but it sometimes gives an Amos 'n' Andy flavor to the proceedings. (“Dunno, boss. Can't rightly say. I reckon hit's jes goan depend on how all dis schoolin' turn out en whether dis city ever goan recognize dat we is men too en dat we got our rights jes like de white man has his'n.”)

These flaws don't matter much, though. Basically James is just telling stories, and most of them are good ones. In my experience, old-fashioned working reporters are like small-town doctors and lawyers—worldly raconteurs, pleasantly cynical if they're not too sour—and James is one of the breed. His book ambles from one good yarn or memorable character to another, and if it has a point it's just that, well, it's a funny old world.

Typical (speaking of sheriffs) is the quotation from Sheriff Bill Lee of Greene

County, Alabama, that gave James his title. Lee, a former All-America tackle for the Crimson Tide, described how he saw his job: “Keeping the whites off them, that's the main thing you gotta watch. I just let 'em talk, 'cause I'm used to it, and it ain't gonna hurt me none. But some of these whites, they ain't used to hearing that kind of talk out of niggers. They can say some real vicious things sometimes. But you gotta let 'em march. The courts have done said you gotta let 'em march, and I sure ain't gonna put up no barricade to try and stop 'em...sometimes I join right in and march with 'em. Sometimes I'll kneel with 'em and pray with 'em—whatever they want to do I'll join right in with it and go along. But nobody ever puts that on the Huntley-Brinkley.”

James recognizes that Sheriff Lee was a decent man in his blinkered way, and in his account of the night Lee lost his job to a black insurgent named Tom Gilmore he laments the fact that his fellow reporters were shamelessly partisan. “I hated it when they took sides like that,” he writes.

But it must have been hard for outsiders not to. James quotes Gilmore in his earlier, activist days: “Sometimes when I'm in my bed at night and all the world is dark and all hope seems lost I ask myself ‘When is America gonna change? When is Greene County gonna change? When is Alabama gonna change? O Lord, when're we finally gonna be able to walk in this old world as free men and brothers?’” To which Sheriff Lee responded, “You see? Just plain vicious, that's all.... Just another cotton-patch nigger. That's all.”

NOT ALL OF JAMES'S STORIES ARE MOVEMENT stories, strictly speaking, although most have to do with race, one way or another, as most things in the South in those decades seemed to. He tells us, for instance, about Foley Watkins, a Winston-Salem shoeshine boy and numbers operator who angered a white barber by parking his Cadillac in the white man's customary parking place and refusing to move it. Soon after, Watkins mysteriously attracted the interest of the IRS and subsequently went to jail for nonpayment of 16

years' worth of taxes. Not long after that, the barber was mysteriously murdered. The other barbers seemed to think he had it coming.

Some of James's best anecdotes come from his time in Atlanta, the pretentious capital of the New South, "the City Too Busy to Hate." We're introduced to "Mr. Million," a paper-products salesman alleged to be the city's 1-millionth resident. Atlanta boosters sent Mr. Million on good-will missions to tell the North of their city's magnificence—until he moved to Pennsylvania.

Also in Atlanta, we meet "Big Gentry," a hard-drinking and not very bright laborer caught up briefly in the movement (to the dismay of his mama, who wanted only peace and quiet and her own piece of land), and Lester Maddox, who chased demonstrators from his chicken restaurant with an axe handle, then sold over 100,000 souvenir axe handles (and hammer handles "for the toddlers"), before running successfully for governor.

But my favorite Atlanta stories involve the liberal *Constitution* columnist Ralph McGill and his many enemies. James recounts the legendary last meeting between McGill and Georgia politician Gene Talmadge. One election night, the victorious Talmadge dropped in at the *Constitution* to find his old adversary in consultation with the sitting governor, Ellis Arnall, a wealthy Atlanta liberal who had beaten Talmadge four years before.

"Give you a good whuppin' this time, didn't I, Ralph?" said [Talmadge] as he reached across the desk to shake hands. 'Yessir. A real good whuppin' this time.'

"McGill's voice failed him. Arnall was looking for a quick exit. He didn't find it. Talmadge stood pointing at him with his cigar. 'Another thing, Ralph, this little fellow here woudna beat me the last time if that black widow spider hadna bit me on the balls!'"

But the Wild Man of Sugar Creek hadn't come simply to gloat: He had come to propose that McGill write his biography. He even had a title: *The Life of Gene Talmadge by His Old Enemy Ralph McGill*. (The book was never written.)

James moved on to Greensboro, North Carolina, where he encountered Ralph Johns, a former Hollywood bit player and double for George Raft who ran a Greensboro clothing store to support his true vocation of crusading for left-wing causes. Johns apparently shamed four North Carolina A&T students into undertaking the historic sit-in at the Woolworth's

**At North Carolina A&T,  
Jesse Jackson was  
already a skilled  
manipulator of the media  
and a little careless  
about the facts. (That he  
wasn't in Greensboro at  
the time of the original  
sit-ins is "just one of the  
things that's got all mixed  
up over the years," says  
a participant.)**

across the street from his store, but never got the recognition he (and they) feel he deserves. He has now returned to California and writes for an environmental weekly in Beverly Hills.

We also meet the young Jesse Jackson. As a football hero and student-body president at North Carolina A&T, he was already a skilled manipulator of the media; already, too, a little careless about the facts. (That Jackson wasn't yet in Greensboro at the time of the original sit-ins is "just one of the things that's got all mixed up over the years," says one of the four participants.)

But the best of James's characters come from Eutaw, Greene County, Alabama, "a town so lost to the world that it was almost in Mississippi." It's there we meet Lula, the live-in maid in a plantation house owned by the family of James's wife. Hired for \$50 a month to clean, gar-

den, cook, and tend to an invalid old lady, Lula dismayed her employers by using the indoor toilet, eating at a "white" table, entertaining her guests in the house, and watching her soap operas on the family's television set. Despairing of teaching her correct behavior, "Uncle Dud" rehabilitated the old privy for his own use.

As a symbol of segregation, Uncle Dud is almost too good to be true. He believed that the U.S. government should compensate the descendants of slave-holders for their losses at emancipation: "I still say it's a good fair debt that the government of the country owes the South. And they'd be well rid of it. Why, it's the right thing—the only honorable thing. And I'm bound to think they'd feel a whole lot better about themselves if they'd just go ahead and clear it off the books."

EUTAW WAS ALSO HOME TO O.B. HARRIS, a black merchant and chairman of the local NAACP chapter. Harris believed in the power of voter registration, and he opposed the demonstrations and boycotts brought to town by the young organizers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. (They also brought signs left over from demonstrations in other towns. "Integrate the Bowling Alley!" said one. There was no bowling alley in Eutaw.) James tried to interview Harris after he was kicked out of office for being too moderate, but Harris said that he was saving most of his material for his own book, to be called *Uncle Tom Speaks Out*.

Harris was succeeded by a 47-year-old preacher named William McKinley Branch. Like so many black preachers, Branch was a powerful speaker, and James gives us some samples. In support of a boycott: "Stay outa them white men's stores. Let them balonies rot. Let the cheeses rot. The vegetubbles and the fruits and the fresh meats, let all them things rot." But also: "I believe we are made of the same order other men are made by.... I believe that we can be stronger and better, and the world made stronger and better because we have lived."

The boycott was supported by a good many of what Southern white folks used

to call "outside agitators," including SCLC members. But what made the boycott work was outside help of another sort: An outsider named Andrew Marisette organized teenaged boys into "goon squads" to tear up grocery bags and to intimidate, sometimes to beat, black folks who didn't cooperate. Looking back, a local preacher observes, "Yeah, I guess you might say there's lots of things we did that was against King's guidelines, all right enough. But we saw it took that technique to get the thing over, and so we contraried a lot."

Greene County was no stranger to violence. Civil rights demonstrators had been threatened with chainsaws and sprayed with poison from a crop-dusting airplane. But increasingly, the violence directed against Greene County black folks came from other blacks. One of the most painful conversations in this book is with Wes Taylor, an aged black man whose young daughter was blinded by shotgun blasts from enforcers, out to get those who did not vote the insurgent line. "Why'd dey pick me out, cap'n?" Taylor asks. "Why'd dey want to go en shoot my little girl?"

In Greene County neither the worst fears of whites nor the highest hopes of blacks have been realized. Some whites have left the county, but the feared mass exodus never happened. Economic power is still solidly in white hands, political power now in black. Although there has been a measure of rapprochement (over the objections of some diehards, both black and white), there has been nothing like redemption, and James makes bitter fun of some writers who wrote that story prematurely.

His book ends, oddly, in a different Alabama town, with the old story of the rape of a white woman, racial tension, rumors flying, muttered threats—and a lynching that doesn't happen. That, he suggests, is progress, of a sort. Even those of us who are more optimistic than he can agree with that. ♦

*John Shelton Reed teaches and directs the Center for the Study of the American South at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

## Playing with Fire

*By Jonathan H. Adler*

**Fire in Paradise: The Yellowstone Fires and the Politics of Environmentalism, by Micah Morrison, New York: HarperCollins, 253 pages, \$22.00**

**O**N AUGUST 20, 1988—A DAY THAT came to be known as "Black Saturday"—about 160,000 acres were consumed by fires in the greater Yellowstone Park area. A dozen or so fires in the area had been burning for a little over a month, and already a half million acres in and around Yellowstone had gone up in flames. Before the fires would be extinguished, they would burn nearly a half-million more, at a total cost of about \$120 million. Nationwide, 1988 saw the burning of nearly 6 million acres, the most since 1924.

While only a fraction of the total, the Yellowstone fires received national attention and sparked a heated debate on the management of public lands. Far from a freak accident of nature, the massive fires of 1988 were largely the result of a deliberate National Park Service policy, a policy designed to let forests burn.

The awesome sweep of the Yellowstone fires and the policies that produced them are the subjects of Micah Morrison's *Fire In Paradise: The Yellowstone Fires and the Politics of Environmentalism*. More narrative than wonkish analysis, *Fire In Paradise* tells the story of the fires as seen by those who were in charge of their control. After covering the fires for *The American Spectator*, Morrison spent the next four years conducting research and interviewing the park rangers, government officials, and nearby residents whose lives the fires touched. In the resulting book, he provides a rich and detailed account of the Park Service's attempt to reckon with wildfire. At times, the fire advanced with human acquiescence; at others, concerted human effort was impotent in the face of nature's awesome force.

When the first several fires were identified in mid-July, the official policy at

Yellowstone was to do nothing. Fires would produce "no ecological down-sides," according to one Park Service official. As Morrison points out, this policy grew out of the desire to impose "natural regulation" on Yellowstone Park. This means that, as much as possible—i.e., until people or specific properties were directly threatened—Yellowstone was to be left alone. As one official noted, this policy "was simply another logical step to return the park's ecology...to its original state." A local environmental activist put it more succinctly: "Save a forest; let it burn."

Where suppression efforts would be allowed, fire-control officials were still responsible for living lightly on the land. This meant that some of the most effective fire-suppression methods were officially off-limits, except in the most extreme cases. By the time firefighters were allowed to use the most powerful techniques—creating control lines with bulldozers and the like—it was too late. The fires had grown too large and were moving too fast.

In more than one instance, spot fires—small, external fires caused by wind-borne embers—would ignite more than a half mile in front of an approaching front. Fires of this magnitude are "a kind of self-sustaining mobile world of destruction," notes Morrison. They create their own wind and weather and give natural obstacles little heed. If allowed to extend to this point, they will stop only when nature is ready. In 1988, it was not until the mid-September showers that the fires could be subdued.

**A**S ANYONE FAMILIAR WITH THE MANAGEMENT of federal lands would expect, administrative infighting and bureaucratic ineptitude played a role in the fires' ad-