

Book Reviews

Lift Every Voice and Sing: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement. Patricia Sullivan. New York: The New Press, 2009.

Patricia Sullivan's *Lift Every Voice and Sing: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* describes the development and conduct of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from its founding in 1909 to the onset of first-wave civil rights in the early 1950s. She argues that it is impossible to understand the Civil Rights Movement without understanding the work of the NAACP in the first half of the twentieth century. Its work was legal and political in many respects, but in Sullivan's hands, the NAACP was also a powerful cultural force, marshalling varied black cultures, divided as they were by ideology, region, education, and money, and providing a unifying element that allowed such cultures to coalesce as one—or as close to one as was possible.

The formation of the NAACP was ultimately a triumph over a three-tined advocacy problem that had plagued the black community since the 1895 death of Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise of the same year. An increasingly radical group of black activists worked for civil rights, but a group of whites were similarly inspired and saw themselves as inheritors of the antebellum abolition movement. Also the acolytes of Booker Washington seemed to be the foil for both.

The NAACP was a predominantly white organization in its first incarnation, but the participation of W. E. B. DuBois, Joel Spingarn, and James Weldon Johnson gave the group a tangible legitimacy

amongst the frustrated African-American population. That legitimacy wouldn't come overnight, but it would come, pushed in large measure by the culture of racism fomenting during the teens and twenties: the incongruity of American claims about foreign and domestic democracy during World War I, for example, or the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan. It is in situating such development that Sullivan's work is so effective. The NAACP's most successful work came in organizing disaffected black America in the two generations before the onset of first-wave civil rights and spearheading legal challenges to racist and discriminatory practices. Such political and legal work could not have been possible without the organization's ability to respond effectively to the bigoted cultural outgrowths of the majority, while simultaneously making itself an intrinsic part of the assumed culture of the minority. Such cultural legitimacy became all the more ingrained as the group found more and more black leadership.

The NAACP worked to integrate higher education, publicize lynchings, and lobby for legislation that would make mob violence and race murder federal crimes. In these actions, the NAACP put civil rights in the minds and on the tongues of every African American in the country. All of this occurred during the massive cultural tumult of the Great Migration, as millions fled the segregated bounds of the rural south for opportunity in the north and west. The NAACP, then, was able to make the resulting diaspora a little less diasporic. It provided constancy, even as it advocated for change often seen in the new popular culture.

Sullivan's book is a valuable and exhaustive treatment of the NAACP from its founding until World War II's aftermath, and it stands, like John Egerton's *Speak Now Against the Day* (1995) and others, as paramount to understanding the Civil Rights Movement as it developed after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). It also has much to say to students of African-American culture. Sullivan's NAACP was both an intrinsic part of every form of black culture in the first half of the twentieth century and the glue that held those (sometimes disparate) cultures together.

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