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The Civil Rights Movement of the twentieth century is a critical period in American history and a significant amount of historical assessment has been published on this monumental struggle. Scholastic contributions usually focus on the African American community’s fight for equality and the leaders who were responsible for the achievements of legal and political equality. Other histories analyze specific events, places, or people connected to the conflict. There are very few detailed historic studies devoted to white opposition to civil rights. Keith Finley’s *Delaying the Dream: Southern Senators and the Fight against Civil Rights, 1938-1965*, winner of the D.B. Hardeman Prize, is an impressive contribution. Finley adds a fresh perspective to the ever-expanding literature on this socially and politically important era in history.

Finley argues that white southern senators, instead of employing outright obstruction, strategically delayed the struggle for racial equality for nearly three decades. Finley begins in 1938 when southern senators sought to block an anti-lynching bill. He continues tracing the ingenious tactics utilized by these senators to delay civil rights legislations, and the study ends with the inevitable legal defeat of Jim Crow, signified by the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

As the author explores the southern senators delaying efforts, an evolving pattern of deliberate obstruction emerges. Finley states that their “long-term tactical objective thus shifted from preventing to postponing the assault against segregation” (7). These men realized they would ultimately fail at preserving their southern way of life. Southern senators based their arguments against equality on constitutional interpretation rather than racism, while using northern senators’ seeming disinterest in southern civil rights to their advantage. Before World War II, they were victorious in preventing certain measures such as the anti-lynching bill and the anti-poll tax bill. Finley illustrates that when southern senators were faced with bills that began to directly threaten segregation they “realized that defeat represented the only possible outcome of their resistance,” so they began planning for covert strategic tactics (7).

These senators limited the use of overt racism and appealed to their northern colleagues as public support for civil rights grew. Such approaches included the constitutional defense of segregation, the perpetuation of the myth that a peaceful existence was alive in
the Jim Crow South, and the distribution of the idea that both blacks and whites celebrated segregation. Dixie’s senators succeeded with strategic delay at the federal level, but failed at controlling local racial agitators and racial tensions. Thirty years of filibustering led to the rise of an impactful and influential grassroots protest movement in the southern region, while attracting more northern support. After a series of white violent responses to peaceful black protest in the 1950s and 1960s, northern legislators, as Finley states, “could no longer accept southern claims of the racial tranquility created by Jim Crow” (14). Finley explores the change in attitudes among southern senators towards the end of the fight. A few sought compromises, while many fought for their precious southern way of life to the very end.

A book this thoroughly detailed could run the risk of becoming dry, but Finley does a superb job at keeping readers engaged. This is done by the addition of concise biographies and lively anecdotes of each southern senator as he introduces them. Finley exposes Richard Russell’s racism when the senator “unveiled a program to evenly distribute the nation’s black population, then so heavily concentrated in the South, throughout the country” (130). Russell believed that “Northerners should pass judgment on the South only after they had experienced the difficulties of living with a sizable black population” (130). Another character analysis Finley illuminates is that of Lyndon B. Johnson. The author states that the “man who became an outspoken civil rights supporter as president began his Senate career espousing a diametrically opposed position” (111). These descriptions are relevant in order to fully understand the voting patterns, ideologies, and personalities of each man.

_Delaying the Dream_ presents a well-researched and convincing argument. Finley illuminates the ideology of white opposition to civil rights legislation, their extreme methods and tactics, and the racial attitudes of white southerners during the mid-twentieth century by drawing from senators’ papers, the _Congressional Record_, and a wealth of secondary sources. In the conclusion, Finley expands his study by reflecting on how northern opinion turned against the black community once black violence crossed the Mason-Dixon Line, just as southern senators had predicted. In a closing argument, Finley states that as a result of continued racial unrest, Richard Nixon won the presidential election with the message of law, order, and constitutionalism pursued by southerners in their three decade opposition against civil rights. Thus, the southern view of politics had ironically become the American view. Finley’s work is a must read for serious scholars of political history and those interested in social movements in the American South during the twentieth century.

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