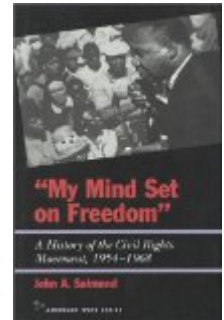


**John A. Salmond.** *"My Mind Set on Freedom": A History of the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1997. xi + 176 pp. \$22.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56663-140-2.



**Reviewed by** William Jordan

**Published on** H-Review (April, 1998)

John A. Salmond has written an engaging concise history of the Civil Rights Movement for students and teachers seeking a brief but informative introduction to a big topic. At well under two hundred pages, the book leaves out some significant details but still presents a readable and balanced overview and provides enough background to guide intelligent discussion of some of the more important historical questions. It also includes a brief bibliographical essay, which students can use as a starting point for further research.

Theme takes precedence over chronology in the book's organization, which is both a strength and a weakness. Chapter One, which explains the origins of the movement, strikes a sensible balance between the role of external historical causes in bringing about change and the role of African-Americans acting for themselves. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown* school desegregation decision, for which Salmond argues a central role, against "some scholars" who say its importance has been "exaggerated" (p. 25). The author covers the decision as well as can be expected in

under three pages, but teachers who agree with his judgment about the centrality of *Brown* will feel the need to supplement his treatment with primary documents from the case.

With the *Brown* decision as a jumping-off point, the next chapter follows the story of school desegregation into the early 1960s. The end of this story is told in the last two chapters, which also cover the demise of the Civil Rights Movement and evaluate its impact. Other chapters deal with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s rise from Montgomery to the March on Washington; sit-ins, freedom rides, and the voting rights campaign; and the federal government's response to the movement.

By arranging chapters thematically, Salmond is able to paint a coherent picture of school integration and compare the records of presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, as well as highlight the differences between King-affiliated and student-centered activists. On the other hand, the organization sometimes leads to repetition and obscures chronology. Students learning about the period for the first time may be confused by the non-chronological arrangement of events in

Chapters Two through Five. George Wallace stands in the schoolhouse door, for example, before the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Thematic organization also leads to some confusion in Salmond's treatment of President John F. Kennedy's civil rights record, which is divided among four chapters. In his chapter on school desegregation, Salmond blames Kennedy for allowing James Meredith's integration of the University of Mississippi to escalate into violence. Kennedy failed to act with resolve, Salmond says, because he was so concerned with "trying to make deals with Southern racist politicians" (p. 45). Only later, in Chapter Five, do we learn of the political realities which made Kennedy so cautious. Here Salmond's righteous criticism of Kennedy turns into inflated praise: the Ole Miss fiasco led the president to give up altogether on Southern votes, to recognize the moral dimension of the civil rights struggle, and to take decisive action in its behalf. This moral conversion led Kennedy to spend "the rest of his life ... engaged in achieving a legislative majority for the bill" (p. 117). Kennedy's moral conversion was neither as complete nor as sudden as Salmond suggests.

While presidents figure prominently in this account of the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King is clearly the hero—"the movement's embodiment" and its shrewdest leader (p. 163). Foot soldiers played their part, but King played the key role in the movement's greatest achievements. Salmond gives little sense of the dangers posed by King's high-profile leadership role. Nor does he give voice to critics, like Ella Baker, who saw these dangers and favored a more decentralized grass roots approach. As Baker put it, "strong people don't need strong leaders." Salmond generally accepts and defends King's leadership and his positions on the issues. He contrasts King's approach favorably with that of hot-headed radicals like Stokely Carmichael, who come across as politically naive or too radical. "Black freedom," Salmond seems to agree, "could best be won

through liberal politics" (p. 125). Salmond gives some attention to the legitimate concerns of black separatists and advocates of "black power," but little to their positive contributions to black consciousness.

In his final chapter, "The New South," Salmond convincingly shows how the movement succeeded, in spite of some important limitations, in dramatically transforming politics, education, the law, and public accommodations in the South. Some may quibble with the book's tidy periodization (the movement ends with King's assassination), disagree with some of the author's conclusions, or be disappointed by some of the book's omissions, but in all, *"My Mind Set on Freedom"* is an excellent brief summary of a complicated and important subject. It is a well written, balanced, and concise survey, which reflects the author's sensitivity and enthusiasm for what he rightly calls the "greatest social movement in twentieth-century American history" (p. 148).

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://www.h-net.org/reviews>

**Citation:** William Jordan. Review of Salmond, John A. *"My Mind Set on Freedom"; A History of the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968*. H-Review, H-Net Reviews. April, 1998.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1885>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.