

H-Net Reviews

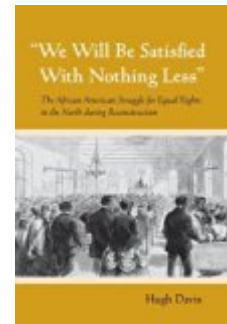
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Hugh Davis. *"We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less": The African American Struggle for Equal Rights in the North during Reconstruction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011. xvii + 209 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5009-9.

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Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson



After Emancipation: Tracing the Northern African American Campaign for Suffrage and Desegregation

Hugh Davis's book, *"We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less,"* is a short book that covers a big topic. In just 150 pages, excluding endnotes, Davis gives readers a broad picture of northern African American activism in the United States during the years after emancipation was achieved. Because of its brevity, the work is not comprehensive, but it is a wonderful start for those seeking to understand the intricacies of northern African American politics during Reconstruction. Its length, in fact, is an asset for college instructors looking for a good overview of this subject for use in the classroom and for readers who want a concise introduction to the topic.

Davis's main focus is on what he argues are the two most important aspects of northern black political activism during the 1860s and 1870s: the push for universal manhood suffrage and the effort to end school segregation in the northern states. He presents these struggles chronologically, beginning with African American organizing in the aftermath of emancipation. He then traces the pressure northern black leaders placed on the Republican Party to make the war about broader rights for African Americans, secured by the granting of black manhood suffrage. He discusses the culmination of this pressure with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment and then looks at the way African Americans used the vote to push for greater equality, especially in the realm of public education.

Throughout the book, Davis presents a unified nar-

rative that does not overlook the complexity of northern black organizing. He highlights the relationship that existed between black leaders and the Republican Party, showing both the dependence African American leaders had on the party in order to effect change and the frustration they felt when Republicans fell short in fulfilling the promise of equal rights. In addition, he provides a nice balance between discussion of national leaders and trends and local goals and organizations, giving numerous case studies that show the importance of local and state organizations. Although the book focuses on male activists, Davis also acknowledges the role that women played in the agitation for civil rights, and he discusses the ambivalence that black women felt about amendments that expanded rights for their race but not their gender.

Davis's book is an important entry in the growing body of literature that considers northern politics during Reconstruction, a historical period that traditionally has attracted more southern historians. In his introduction, Davis points out that while there have been some studies of postwar northern race relations, most of them have been local or specialized studies. His book is meant to provide a more thorough look at the black freedom struggle in the North and to emphasize that it was not just the South that needed reconstructing. Davis's work is not primarily a synthesis of other secondary works. His work is the product of research in black and white newspapers, government documents, the proceedings of black

conventions and meetings, petitions, and manuscript collections of various African American leaders.

Just as studies of black abolitionists have enriched our understanding of the free black contribution to the struggle against slavery, Davis's book enriches our understanding of the importance of northern black political or-

ganizing to the achievement of black manhood suffrage. It also emphasizes the continuity of the black freedom struggle, giving credit to early black civil rights workers for the legacy they provided for later activists to build on. For anyone interested in these themes, Davis's work is highly recommended.

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