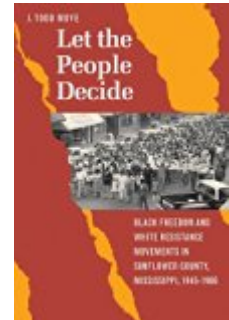


**J. Todd Moya.** *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 296 pp. \$22.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-5561-4.



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**Published on** H-South (August, 2005)

During the mid-1950s, U.S. Senator James O. Eastland of Mississippi traveled far and wide to denounce the public school desegregation decision handed down by the Earl Warren-led Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*. He generally phrased his denunciations in excessive rhetoric meant both to address and arouse "the people." On the floor of the Senate, he intoned, "The question is asked, will the South obey this decision? Who is obligated morally or legally to obey a decision whose authorities rest not upon the law but upon the writings and teachings of procommunist agitators and people who have a long record of affiliations with anti-American causes and with agitators who are part and parcel of the communist conspiracy to destroy our country?" Eastland replied to his own demagogic interrogation when speaking before Citizens' Councils and other segregationist groups across the South: "Southern people will not be violating the Constitution or the law when they defy this monstrous decision. They will be defying those who would destroy our system of government. You are not required to obey any court which passes out such a ruling. In fact, you are obligated to defy it. The

law is what the people make it, and a ruling is no more than [what] public sentiment makes it." [1]

Speechifying to the contrary, Eastland's brand of populism was very limited and cleverly crafted to preserve the status quo. He was a reactionary multimillionaire planter who owned a 5,800 acre plantation near Doddsville in Sunflower County. Located practically in the center of the Mississippi Delta, a region historian James Cobb has derisively described as "the most southern place on earth," [2] Sunflower County was Eastland's birthplace and the "postage stamp of native soil" he called home as an adult. The future senator, however, did not grow up in the "land where the blues began"; after his birth, his father and family moved to south-central Mississippi where small farmers predominated. [3] At thirty, the young man returned to the Delta to take control of the plantation bequeathed to him by his grandfather. Ironically, because of statewide animosity toward Delta planters, who were perceived as indolent elitists suffering from a voracious appetite for entitlement, Eastland's three-decade absence from the region undoubtedly assisted his successful en-

try into politics. Once ensconced in the United States Senate, he would remain there for thirty-five years. It was a reign that would parallel and seek to hinder (and destroy) what became known as the "Second Reconstruction."

Unapologetic in his opposition to the black freedom struggle, Eastland delighted in his obduracy. Thumping his chest, the senator often boasted how as chairman of the Civil Rights Subcommittee (a position gained through senate rules of seniority), he had refused to hold any meetings for three years despite laws that required weekly conferences. "I didn't permit them to meet. I had to protect the interest of the people of Mississippi." [4] Back home, in Sunflower County, African Americans comprised almost seventy percent of "the people." Handbills that usually accompanied his appearances before segregationist audiences, however, reflected Eastland's thoughts on those constituents who counted and those who did not: "When in the course of human events it becomes necessary to abolish the Negro race, proper methods should be used. Among these are guns, bow and arrows, sling shots and knives. We hold these truths to be self evident that all whites are created equal with certain rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of dead niggers." [5]

Such sentiments, as expressed at the time of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956, would have seemed unlikely, if not outlandish, coming from a Mississippi Delta planter a decade earlier. White planters seeking to maintain a lavish lifestyle associated with their perceptions of the Old South had historically depended upon African-American labor. Indeed, from the late nineteenth century onward, anxious land barons from the Delta constantly worried about the possible depletion, not the eradication or extermination, of their labor force. Cotton needed to be planted, cared for, and harvested. Unlike their white counterparts, black sharecroppers were dependable and could be controlled much more easily. In creating what can only be described as personal fiefdoms, delta

planters adhered to a perverted sense of paternalism that ministered to "their" people. Minimal care and assistance were provided, although never enough to encourage or generate physical or psychological independence. African Americans were always expected to behave and act in a subordinate manner. Failure to do so could result in violent reprisal. The perpetual presence of terror (along with the indignity accorded black lives by the Deltan version of Jim Crow) compelled many to leave, often surreptitiously, since out-migrations were viewed as a threat to the prosperity and power of planters. The economic structure that sustained such mutual dependency, however, began to crumble in the 1930s under the weight of New Deal agricultural programs that subsidized landowners for *not* growing cotton. Using federal monies to develop labor-saving technology that made human laborers obsolete, planters by the post World War II era had become independent. African Americans, on the other hand, had become a nuisance grown expendable. "Negroes," one planter declared, "went out with the mule." [6]

J. Todd Moyer's *Let the People Decide* picks up the story of this regional upheaval at the point following what C. Vann Woodward once labeled the "Bulldozer Revolution," an intense period of industrialization and urbanization that transformed the South in the early 1940s. [7] In the case of the Mississippi Delta, however, the renovation that eventually transpired was tied more to the tractor, mechanical cotton picker, and chemical pesticides. It reiterated rather than challenged the permanence and supremacy of large-scale plantation agriculture over industrial and urban growth. Thus the technical innovations that materialized, while dramatically altering economic relationships, nevertheless failed to produce a progressive or modern environment, and in fact, magnified the primitive conditions and poverty that inexplicably existed in a late twentieth-century developed nation. Moyer seeks to connect these harsh economic and social realities to the calls for racial reform that emerged after World War II. In

doing so, he skillfully contextualizes and localizes the developments associated with the civil rights and post-civil rights eras, thus helping to broaden our understanding of social change.

Moye chooses one locality, Sunflower County, to demonstrate that the civil rights movement inspired and encountered dissimilar experiences in different places. He seeks to show that the movement was not a monolithic entity, and that certain tensions evident on the national level may not have been so prominent on local ones. Likewise, he emphasizes that problems unique to one area may have helped modify the original meaning of the movement, at least as it was understood by those involved on a community level. More importantly, the author's choice of Sunflower County, a district comprised of isolated, dependent, unskilled, unneeded, and unwanted people, underscores that the black freedom movement involved issues of class as well as those of race.

In contrast to Eastland, whose concern lay solely with his planter brethren, Moye's narrative focuses primarily on the other, less-advantaged 70 percent of the county's residents. He appropriated his title, *Let the People Decide*, from a motto coined in the 1960s by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC had targeted Sunflower County as a site for civil rights activism because of Eastland's political prominence. Activists hoped to bring national attention to the deplorable conditions that literally existed in the senator's backyard. Moye, too, was drawn to such contrasts, noting that his appreciation for the region was heightened when he discovered that Eastland and civil rights heroine Fannie Lou Hamer had "lived within spitting distance of one another" (p. 269). That two individuals could inhabit virtually the same space yet live in two very dissimilar and separate worlds establishes the tone for Moye's book. For it addresses how one group, in seeking to become full citizens in a country renowned for freedom, met resistance from another group bent on denying civil rights

to neighbors whom a segregationist system (with a heavy assist from institutionalized sharecropping) had thoroughly dehumanized. This is the story that unfolds in *Let the People Decide*. It is one that goes beyond conventional civil rights timelines. It is an account in which happy endings are rare and relative.

Based on a vast array of primary sources, including archival material, manuscript collections, and oral history interviews, *Let the People Decide* is a well-written documentation of events that too many people today seem willing to forget. Yet the actions and activities that Moye describes are truly unforgettable and instructive in their tragedy and hopefulness. Within the book's pages are descriptions of the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of familiar individuals and groups seeking to change the existing system, such as Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer, Medgar Evers, Bob Moses, Stokely Carmichael, Diane Nash, the NAACP, SCLC, CORE, SNCC, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party; also included, however, are lesser-known figures and entities that worked tirelessly to bring political democracy, educational opportunity, and economic equality to Sunflower County and its working poor: the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union, COFO, Concerned Citizens, Freedom Schools, Charles McLaurin, Amzi Moore, Clinton Battle, Charles Cobb, Lawrence Guyot, Aaron Henry, Willie Spurlock, and Robert Merritt. As Moye suggests, all "had become agents in their community's destiny," a feat that would not have been possible half a century earlier (p. 203). They, and so many others like them, represent the authentic heroes of a region long infatuated with iconic symbols. Such fighters for freedom imparted an enduring and irrevocable testament that ordinary people, when given the opportunity to feel good about themselves, can make a difference. For Moye, the emphasis placed on fostering individual self-worth among a people long made to feel worthless indeed may be

the most important endowment bestowed by the civil rights movement in Sunflower County.

Yet Sunflower County did not only witness the heroic deeds of increasingly-confident black freedom fighters, it also gave birth to a distinctive version of "massive resistance." Moye details these activities as well. After all, Robert Patterson, a plantation manager and former Mississippi State University football player and World War II veteran, organized the Citizens' Council in Indianola, Sunflower's county seat. The Citizens' Council evolved into a so-called "respectable" southern institution of obstruction in the years following the *Brown* decision (and was disingenuously hailed as a "civilized" alternative to the disreputable Ku Klux Klan). It achieved notoriety for successfully utilizing economic intimidation to keep African Americans from integrating schools, registering to vote, joining organizations such as the NAACP, and engaging in other activities that were considered "subversive" and out of line with racial etiquette. Exceptionally effective, the Citizens' Councils generally comprised middle-class businessmen (such as bankers, lawyers, and storeowners) and upper-class planters, individuals who ensured the economic vulnerability of black clients, customers, employees, and sharecroppers. The author records and describes various incidents where "business" tactics were used against such individuals to keep them compliant. He also establishes that council members were totally interwoven into the county's political, administrative, and governmental infrastructure, thus making it virtually impossible for African-American interests to receive representation or the benefits of that representation. They were instrumental, for instance, in creating a private school system that allowed privileged whites to avoid the "trauma" of desegregation while simultaneously granting little in terms of necessary resources to the public schools that were "left behind." And of course, Moye also documents the many cases of physical violence used to frighten civil rights activists or those within the community who were providing

such dissidents with aid. Perhaps because of the nature of his study (one that focuses on individuals and groups seeking social change), however, Moye's depiction of those who were hostile to that change proves to be somewhat one dimensional. The people who trusted in the words of Eastland ("Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God.") may be more complex than the use of such tired and overused clichés might indicate.[8]

Moye is certainly correct in arguing that bringing closure to the civil rights era will necessarily require white natives to account for and take responsibility for their brutal oppression of a people simply seeking the rights promised to them as citizens of the United States. (As the author indicates, however, the many whites he interviewed seemed unwilling even to acknowledge their membership in the Citizens' Council, declarations that clearly contradicted the historical record. Most appeared ready simply to put the whole affair in the past.) Only when whites engage in the process of open and honest self-examination will there be a foundation for building the mutual trust necessary to create a space of peaceful and respectful coexistence, let alone the "beloved community" for which individuals such as Fannie Lou Hamer longed. Yet Moye must also offer a deeper analysis of white resistance. That wealthy planters terrorized black labor for direct economic gain is self-evident. That others less advantaged engaged in similar deeds cannot simply be ascribed to arrogant feelings of white supremacy. There also seemed to exist in Sunflower County whites an aura of insecurity that was tied to their own sense of economic uncertainty and marginalization. Thus true social harmony necessitates an acknowledgement that class inequality historically worked to frustrate both black and white in the Mississippi Delta.

In the end, Moye concludes that substantive civil rights advances in Sunflower County, when they finally arrived in the 1980s, were tied to the county's economic development and diversifica-

tion. This, he argues, helped create an African-American middle class that had more in common with their white counterparts, thus allowing for the two groups to find areas of agreement regarding governance of the place they lived. Yet in an interesting account that is presented almost as an aside to his larger story, Moye writes of the growing distance between the black middle and working classes. He recounts how new industries arriving in the county provided low-paying jobs to workers that resembled the stoop labor employed on plantations by their parents, grandparents, and a myriad of countless ancestors. When laborers struck to protest such familiar conditions, they fought alone and eventually accepted a new contract that was less than satisfying. The county's leadership (now consisting of both blacks and whites), in attempting to avoid any controversy that might have forced such exploitative industries to find greener (and more profitable) pastures elsewhere, ironically insisted that labor issues were not civil rights issues. Thanks to Moye, we now know that the many people who were veterans of the black freedom struggle in Sunflower County would have found such a statement to be incomprehensible.

*Let the People Decide* is a comprehensive work on the civil rights movement and Mississippi Delta that deserves a place on the shelf next to John Dittmer's *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (1995), Neil McMillan's *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-64* (1971), and his *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (1989), Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (1996), and James Cobb's *The Most Southern Place on Earth* (1992). Indeed, the story of Sunflower County is a reminder of an important lesson that Cobb provided in his book: "The economic and social polarization that is synonymous with the Mississippi Delta may be observed wherever and whenever the pursuit of wealth, pleasure, and power over-

whelms the ideals of equality, justice, and compassion and reduces the American Dream to a self-indulgent fantasy." [9] Obviously, the struggle begun by Hamer, McLaurin, and countless others is not over yet.

#### Notes

[1]. Both James Eastland quotations are in Robert Sherrill, *Gothic Politics in the Deep South* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969, rev. ed.), p. 229.

[2]. James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), especially pp. vii-xi.

[3]. The "postage stamp" phrase refers to William Faulkner's allusion to Yoknapatawpha County, a thinly-veiled reference to the writer's home in Lafayette County, Mississippi. For Faulkner's use of the phrase, see James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate, eds., *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926-1962* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 255. For the quoted phrase on the blues, see Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: The New Press, 2002).

[4]. Sherrill, p. 228.

[5]. Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: A Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994, 2nd ed.), pp. 91-92. Several recent publications, including Robert A. Caro's, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), p. 767, have misread Oates's use of the quotation, claiming that Eastland actually vocalized these words. Oates makes it clear, however, that the statement was printed on a handbill circulated at the Eastland rally. Michael J. Klarman claims that such printed propaganda were mainstays at appearances headlined by Mississippi's long-time U.S. Senator. See Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for*

*Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 427-428.

[6]. Sherrill, p. 207.

[7]. C. Vann Woodward, "The Search for Southern Identity," in *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993, 3rd ed.), pp. 6, 10.

[8]. Klarman, p. 427.

[9]. Cobb, p. 333.

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**Citation:** Michael T. Bertrand. Review of Moye, J. Todd. *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. August, 2005.

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