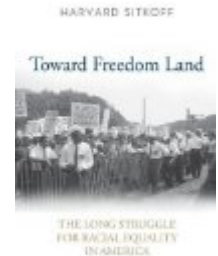


**Harvard Sitkoff.** *Toward Freedom Land: The Long Struggle for Racial Equality in America*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010. 232 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-7380-1.



**Reviewed by** Ann Short Chirhart

**Published on** H-Law (April, 2011)

**Commissioned by** Christopher R. Waldrep (San Francisco State University)

How does a twentieth-century historian write about subjects that engage passions rooted in childhood and early adult experiences? Interest in any period lies at the core of any historian's chosen field, yet twentieth-century historians face an additional dilemma because they lived during part of the time period they study. *Toward Freedom Land* provides a rare opportunity to read Harvard Sitkoff's key works, his comments on that scholarship, and his description of how he redirected a commitment for social justice to the historical profession. The collection does more than remind us of Sitkoff's remarkable contributions to American history. Sitkoff, an activist in the 1960s, urges scholars to "acknowledge our own biases" while noting perfect objectivity is impossible (p. 8). Sitkoff's work represents his own effort "to defy classification" and avoid writing history "to vindicate a preconceived judgment about the past or express a conclusion determined by today's political considerations" (pp. 7-8). This collection, then, represents his scholarship and commentary on the historiography

about race and the civil rights movement as he welcomes continuing debates about the long freedom struggle.

Most of the essays address the African American freedom struggle in the 1930s and 1940s, for here is where Sitkoff's scholarship made its greatest impact. His *A New Deal for Blacks*, published in 1978, noted an extraordinary number of organizations and individuals who worked for racial justice and equality during the New Deal. To Sitkoff, these accomplishments laid the groundwork for the later civil rights movement by including blacks in New Deal programs like the National Youth Administration, Works Progress Administration, and Public Works Administration, among others. Sitkoff agrees that the New Deal failed to abolish lynching or the poll tax and never significantly changed blacks' economic, social, or legal status. But for blacks, Sitkoff contends, the New Deal provided them with a public means in the federal government to address their concerns and include civil rights in the Democrat Party platform. More to the point, it offered them hope

because federal government no longer completely ignored them as it had for decades.

Here Sitkoff also reflects on how his scholarship has been used and criticized. Those who focused on the opportunities and hope the New Deal gave to blacks describe the interracial efforts from blacks and white liberals to enact a civil rights agenda. Other historians have questioned if the New Deal actually accomplished any tangible gains for blacks. Sitkoff challenges his critics by insisting that the context of the 1930s prevented more radical public policies. During the 1930s, Eleanor Roosevelt was virulently attacked for her support of civil rights, and southern Democrats, who chaired important congressional committees, blocked efforts to include blacks in New Deal programs like the Social Security Act. He could have added the growing hostility to the New Deal from many southern governors. In a broader sense, part of what Sitkoff hoped to accomplish has been realized. Since the publication of *A New Deal for Blacks*, historians have taken a broader view of the freedom struggle.[1]

Other essays address current efforts to date the civil rights movement in the 1940s rather than the 1950s. Sitkoff's stunning essay on the Detroit race riot in 1943 and racial militancy during World War II remind historians of a counterinterpretation of black activism. In 1941, black activists like A. Philip Randolph called for a massive March on Washington to demand employment in defense industries and better pay. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapters multiplied across the nation, notably in the South. But after the Detroit race riot left "34 dead, more than 700 injured, over \$2 million in property losses, and 100 million man-hours lost in war production," the Harlem riot, and numerous attacks on blacks in military camps, blacks and white liberals turned to interracial efforts and the legal system for social, political, and economic justice (p. 52). By 1944 and 1945, protests and militant action against racism

had declined, convincing organizations and white liberals that interracial work and legal challenges worked. World War II was not a watershed for blacks at all. Rather, it channeled their anger and frustrations into interracial organizations like the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) that accomplished little.

Well aware of his critics, Sitkoff welcomes the debate about black activism during World War II. Unlike many historians who contend that the growth of NAACP chapters, voter registration drives assisted by the SCHW, and black women's citizenship schools across the South indicate the early stages of the civil rights movement, Sitkoff's definition of activism focuses on militant direct action and organized public protests. But what he shares with some of these historians is the belief that no "long" civil rights movement existed through the twentieth century. Although his work provided grist for this narrative, Sitkoff contends that noting antecedents for the civil rights movement are quite different than positing "one long, continuous movement stretching back further and further in time" without distinguishing the changes between decades (pp. 93-94).[2] Instead, what continued was a long, black freedom struggle that manifested itself in multiple ways. The civil rights movement was different because of its tactics, numbers of participants, and militant confrontation with the white power structure.[3]

Essays about political leaders like Wendell Wilkie, an Indiana Republican, and Harry Truman as well as the Jews who came to support black citizenship underscore Sitkoff's efforts to address the problems black activists faced in the 1940s. More critical of Truman than Wilkie, Sitkoff presents stark reminders of the realities of political power. To Sitkoff, Wilkie embodied liberalism and race equality while Truman was forced to do so. Yet as political brokers in the 1940s, both men's future careers changed as a result of their positions. A defeated Wilkie vanished from the political stage and died in 1944. Truman shrewdly

revised his position on civil rights and was elected president in 1948. In these contemporary days of hard-core political positions, both essays reveal politicians willing to take risks and change positions.

The final excerpt is from Sitkoff's eloquent biography of Martin Luther King Jr. In this biography, Sitkoff reveals a complex individual whose radical and prophetic vision for America galvanized thousands of blacks during the civil rights movement. Rather than focusing on grassroots workers or community strategies, Sitkoff states that he deliberately chose to write about King, a man who clearly inspired Sitkoff as a young graduate student at Columbia University.

Sitkoff's introduction and commentary before each essay reveal a historian at work, an individual who respects his profession and encourages all of us to fulfill its real goals and promise. His work reminds us of the tangible barriers blacks faced in the 1940s, but taken in the context of the 1940s, something that Sitkoff insists all historians must do, some of blacks' actions surely count for radical activism. In court cases sponsored by the NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund beginning in the 1930s that challenged unequal black teacher salaries, inadequate schools for blacks beginning with *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada* (1938), and the Texas white primary in *Smith v. Alright* (1944), southern blacks lost their jobs, faced threats against their lives and families, and even moved North to protect themselves. Southern NAACP chapters roused blacks in voter registration campaigns and often helped elect moderate whites in local and state elections. Black women, whom Sitkoff pays short shrift, taught hundreds of blacks about citizenship and voter registration and led voter registration drives. Many blacks turned to these legal strategies not simply because militant protest was squashed but also because the NAACP won their cases. Successful legal challenges then forced many white southerners to rethink the means to enforce white

supremacy. In state after state, legislatures and governors suddenly found funds for black schools and teachers' salaries as they also passed new legislation to prevent blacks from voting and preserve segregated schools. Perhaps these actions were not necessarily militant, but they were certainly radical in most respects.

Still Sitkoff's point about the limits of these actions is well taken. When black soldiers returned to southern homes after World War II and tried to register to vote, some were shot. Others were forced to leave counties and states. Black leaders who organized NAACP chapters faced overwhelming opposition from many whites in Georgia and Mississippi after voter registration drives increased the number of black voters. Activists like Mississippi's Amzie Moore and Aaron Henry retreated. But they waited for the next generation to help them force radical social and political change.

Reading Sitkoff's work is a reminder of the hope and limitations of the black freedom struggle of the twentieth century. Challenging the current interpretation of the twentieth century as the "long" civil rights movement, his essays once again reveal the barriers and backlash against blacks as they sought to gain citizenship and equality. Beyond that, Sitkoff's brief autobiography reveals a man whose passion for individual rights and social justice led him to become a historian and tell the story of those who fought for equality. And yet throughout his career, he realized that while he could never be purely objective, he could and must write history that avoided "preconceived judgements" (p. 8). One of many historians who participated in the civil rights movement, he had much to avoid. His work demonstrates that he did so extraordinarily well.

#### Notes

[1]. For the 1930s as an era of hope, see Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). On the limits of the

New Deal, see Karen Ferguson, *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[2]. For the long civil rights movement, see, among many, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005): 1233-1263; Eric Arnesen, "Reconsidering the 'Long Civil Rights Movement,'" *Historically Speaking* 10 (April 2009): 31-34; Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*; and Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

[3]. For the emergence of the civil rights activism in the 1940s, see Robert J. Norrell, *The House I Live In: Race in the American Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); and Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

: *The Long Struggle of Racial Equality in America*&#160;

H

C

R

R

t

P

,

I

n

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

**Citation:** Ann Short Chirhart. Review of Sitkoff, Harvard. *Toward Freedom Land: The Long Struggle for Racial Equality in America*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. April, 2011.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31307>



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