

Aram Goudsouzian. *Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March against Fear.* New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2014. 368 pp. \$24.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-374-71076-7.

Reviewed by Andrea Johnson

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Commissioned by Zachary J. Lechner (Centenary College of Louisiana)

Aram Goudsouzian's work *Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March Against Fear* is a refreshing look at a civil rights event that has received an inadequate amount of attention. James Meredith is most often recognized for his attempts to integrate the University of Mississippi in 1962. Meredith maintained a level of independence from the better-known civil rights organizations, and, although he remained involved in the cause, after 1962 bigger names were in the media. In 1966, though, Meredith instigated the beginnings of another protest, his March Against Fear. This march, although notable in contemporary times, has faded somewhat from historical view, partly because after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 there was less response from the federal government in terms of legislation that would meet the demands of activists who now sought changes in economic inequality and an end to the war in Vietnam. These two issues could not be as easily addressed by the federal government in the way that segregation and voting access had been, and so no significant legislation resulted from the march. Furthermore, this march and the resulting controversies over the use of the term "Black Power" (popularized by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee [SNCC] chairman Stokely Carmichael during the march) represents the final

division of the major civil rights groups, who never again worked together on such a large-scale project.

Goudsouzian briefly addresses these shifts in the civil rights movement in his prologue by describing the leadership of major civil rights groups at the moment of the White House Conference on Civil Rights in June 1966. He succinctly establishes what men like Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Floyd McKissick of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Carmichael of SNCC, and Martin Luther King Jr. of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) wanted from this meeting and from the federal government. This prologue sets the reader up to see James Meredith as a contrasting figure, a man who without the same level of media attention decided that a march across Mississippi was needed to both challenge fear and increase black voter registration. Meredith was shot on the second day of the march and some of the media mistakenly reported that he had died. As the author demonstrates, the resulting attention brought major figures of the civil rights movement to Memphis, promising to continue Meredith's work.

The rest of this highly readable work is organized chronologically, with each chapter covering just a day or two of the march. The event becomes

an effective vehicle for Goudsouzian to explain the controversies dividing major groups of the civil rights movement and the internal struggles of some of those groups. Particularly strong is his discussion of changes in SNCC. In the spring of 1966, Carmichael had replaced John Lewis as chairman of SNCC in a disputed election. This change in leadership had occurred just weeks before Meredith's march, at a time when SNCC was still debating the roles of white staffers and the possibility of establishing an all-black political party in Mississippi. Goudsouzian repeatedly illustrates the ways in which Carmichael's adoption of the phrase "Black Power" during the march caused concern among other civil rights leaders. While this in and of itself is not new information and has been discussed by historians for decades, the author portrays Carmichael here as a politically astute individual who "wanted to chart new directions in black politics" rather than, as scholarly texts often suggest, abandon the political system altogether (p. 38). This is a different lens through which to view Carmichael, who is often portrayed as more of an anti-reactionary.

One of the additional strengths of this work is the author's ability to bring the local situation to the forefront. Works on civil rights history often focus on the leadership, largely because it is a familiar story and extant sources make telling the story of the leaders a bit easier. To relate the story of the locals living in the towns where these events occurred is a bit more of a challenge. Goudsouzian makes a significant contribution by incorporating stories of the people who were not in the headlines. His highlighting of locals registering during the voter registration rallies allows readers to see the specific impact of that march and to gain a greater comprehension of the problems still facing African Americans in post-Freedom Summer Mississippi. One can understand why locals might find Carmichael's shift to Black Power attractive even though they often turned out to see King, who preferred the "Freedom Now" theme. Goudsouzian also addresses the

views of local whites, the moderates as well as the segregationists. To do this, he has completed extensive primary source research. The author's table of abbreviations in the footnotes section contains approximately eighty archival collections, and he uses them extensively throughout the book.

Despite such important contributions, Goudsouzian falls short in his examination of gender issues pertaining to the march. He acknowledges these issues from the start, including Meredith's statement that no women or children should participate, but does not fully analyze the impact and meaning of such statements (p. 8). The controversial 1965 Moynihan Report, which argued that black family life, typically headed by a single mother, represented a "tangle of pathology," is briefly mentioned, but Goudsouzian dismisses it as a "political debacle" (p. 187).[1] While that might be an accurate bit of analysis in the long run, in the short term certain major civil rights leaders did buy into some of the report's arguments, made similar arguments themselves, and were worried about the existence of a female-centered movement. In addition, such criticisms of the black family as woman-centered can be seen in African American popular culture, including articles in *Ebony* in the early to mid-1950s, and they had not disappeared by 1966. The author is aware of underlying gender tensions and adroitly discusses the problems experienced by white female activists who experienced a growing feminist consciousness, but many times the reader is left anticipating a more sustained treatment of gender that never materializes. This work would have benefited, in particular, from a discussion of black masculinity, which would have placed Meredith's comments in context.

One also wonders if it would be possible to construct a more detailed picture of Meredith's philosophy on violence. While Meredith did consider taking a gun on the march and did later proclaim that he was not nonviolent, the reader is

still unclear about Meredith's exact views (pp. 21, 31). One wonders, did those views change over time, and how strong was his advocacy of violence when apparently he was unarmed upon his return to the march following his recovery? One might also ask how much Meredith was influenced by the views of such activists as SNCC workers, who were beginning to advocate the principle of self-defense and work with groups like the armed Deacons for Defense and Justice. The author does do a good job of delineating the different philosophies on the use of violence of major leaders of the march after Meredith was shot, but about Meredith's views, more is needed.

This last criticism, however, is a relatively minor point, and overall Goudsouzian has produced a work that should attract a wide audience. He has created a narrative, which although interrupted in a few chapters by efforts to offer historical background, is generally clear and compelling. His primary source research is superb. This impressive work is suitable for both students of civil rights history and the general public.

Note

[1]. Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, March 1965, ch. 4, <http://www.dol.gov/dol/aboutdol/history/moynchapter4.htm>.

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