

Enlightened Oppressors

CIVILITIES AND CIVIL RIGHTS

Greensboro, North Carolina,
and the Black Struggle for Freedom.

By William H. Chafe.

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By JAMES RESTON Jr.

ON February 1 this year in Greensboro, N.C., a remarkable celebration took place. Four middle-aged men, a chemist, a stockbroker and two social workers, were reunited at a downtown fast-food establishment for breakfast. Three of the four had grown a bit stout with the years. The fourth wore a splendid white robe and turban, as if he had just been to Mecca. He had come all the way home from Boston to order a simple fare of a banana and warm water. But so great was the crush of people and so overbearing the questions from reporters, searching for an eloquent quote about historical progress, that none of the four got to eat — again.

From the restaurant, the assemblage moved two blocks away where a silver state historical marker was unveiled, and then on to a Greensboro agricultural and technical school, where among others, a former ambassador to the United Nations gave a rousing speech, full of religious analogies, before he flew to Nigeria to help dedicate a large business enterprise. Also among the dignitaries were a former Undersecretary of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare and an ex-convict, wearing a clerical collar, who had just received his doctorate of divinity from Duke University while serving a 37-year prison sentence for his participation in a Wilmington, N.C., civil disturbance. The paroled preacher had recently received a governor's commutation, shortening his term by several weeks so he could be home for Christmas.

The Governor of North Carolina was, of course, not present for this celebration of confrontation politics, nor was any significant state official. The liberal newspaper of Greensboro, however, editorialized with some sentimentality that the event was a reminder of "what the force of an idea and the courage of a conviction can achieve," but it cautioned that the problems of the 1980's could not be solved by "frontal attack" of the sort the festivities were celebrating. The plaque on the downtown street read blandly:

SIT-INS

Launched the national
drive for integrated
lunch counters, Feb. 1, 1960,
in Woolworth
store 2 blocks south.

The conviviality of that day demonstrated the theme of William Chafe's splendid new book, "Civilities and Civil Rights," about the struggle for racial equality in Greensboro during the 1950's and 1960's. For North Carolina, and Greensboro in particular, has enjoyed a reputation for progressive, enlightened leadership that set it apart in the nation's mind from the barba-

James Reston Jr.'s first play, "Sherman, the Peacemaker," premiered in Chapel Hill, N.C., last fall. He has finished a book on Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple.

risms of points farther South. Indeed, its reputation developed the proportions of a mystique that lasted until the 1970's — the decade of the Joan Little case, the H.E.W. attack on de facto segregation in the state's university system, the Wilmington Ten case, the unionization struggle against the J. P. Stevens Company, the E.R.A. defeats and the state's death penalty statutes.

While there was a great deal of turbulence in the state in the 1960's, its liberal image survived that decade. North Carolina never had a set of racist villains to catch the country's imagination, like Jim Clark and Bull Connor in Alabama, or Gov. Ross Barnett in Mississippi. While Jesse Jackson once wrote a "Letter From a Greensboro Jail," people never heard of it as they had Martin Luther King's earlier letter from the dungeons of Albany, Ga. Civil Rights workers on their Freedom Rides sped right through, so North Carolina never received the notoriety of Philadelphia, Miss. And it never occurred to civil rights leaders to march from Durham to Raleigh. Selma to Montgomery made much more sense.

The unattractiveness of the state as a target in the 1960's, stems mainly from the tone of civility, the rhetoric of good intentions, the emphasis on good manners that pervades the social and political climate. But what Professor Chafe, a Duke University historian, demonstrates so well is that good manners can be a clever ruse to frustrate significant change, and was so throughout the 1960's. Politicians hate confrontation in North Carolina and shudder at nothing so much as the label "racist" or "redneck." Government operates on an elaborate system of friendship, developed early at the state universities into something of an exclusive club. When this enlightened leadership is presented with social grievances, the response must appear receptive and reasonable. The populace expects it. Impassioned ideological conflict is virtually non-existent.

From the view across the tracks — which still divide the few medium-sized cities and many more rural villages as dramatically as ever — the open countenance, the ready handshake, the sincerity and understanding of the powers-that-be has always been the most formidable block to real social inventiveness. Other Southern states which had in the 1960's far more vicious racial practices have begun to pass North Carolina by. With leadership so agreeable to enlightened, genteel intelligentsia, the state will generally tag along later on social issues, after the hard fight over principle has taken place elsewhere.

"Civilities and Civil Rights" shows how deep and powerful the paternalism is in North Carolina. It is social history at its best, portraying the events that lead up to the sit-ins and the disappointments that came after, and arguing that these confrontations were vital for any real change. North Carolina was crying 'Never' every bit as much as Alabama, Professor Chafe argues; it just did so with more grace and subtlety, and, in the end, with greater effectiveness. The story of Greensboro is largely one of continuous disappointments. The revolution touched off in Greensboro had to be won elsewhere, and once certified on the outside, North Carolina could accept it. "By renouncing the harsh language of massive resistance," Professor Chafe writes, "white leaders believed they could reinforce the progressive image of their city and state, and at the same time, alter only minimally the racial status quo."

It would work out that way until the 1970's. One of the author's sources calls Greensboro a "nice-nasty town," the nasty part of the equation being that moderation destroyed real communication between the races. An Arkansas school official wrote to a North Carolina associate: "You North Carolinians have de-

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vised one of the cleverest techniques of perpetuating segregation we have seen." As long as the "amenities" were observed (and they were expected to be) there was no possibility that the full extent of black grievances could be heard or acted upon.

Twenty years is not a long time, but it can be made to seem that way. I remember as a student picketing a movie theater in Chapel Hill that would not allow a few black students to see "Porgy and Bess" with its all black cast. Three months of picketing finally forced that theater owner to desegregate, and then he brought "Gone With

the Wind" to town. Declared segregationists were often stupid. All that seems ages ago, a different epoch. But in 1980, North Carolina has only eight black judges. In the State Legislature, there are three black state representatives out of 120 seats, and one black senator out of 50 seats. There are no black mayors of a town of any size, and only one black sheriff in the state. Paternalism and tokenism still reign. So while William Chafe's book is history, it fulfills history's highest value by speaking to the present and to the future.

Are civility and civil rights compatible, Professor Chafe asks at the end of his study, and concludes that they are not, for "civility within a context of oppression simply provides a veneer for more oppression." ■

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