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Jason Sokol

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WHITE SOUTHERNERS IN THE AGE OF CIVIL RIGHTS, 1945-1975

JASON SOKOL

"Fascinating and remarkably empathetic." —*The Atlantic Monthly*

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Jason Sokol : **There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised **There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975**:

7 of 8 people found the following review helpful. "the white man's problem (but) the black man's burden"By doc

peterson Jason Sokol writes a remarkable history of the civil rights movement, looking at events primarily from 1955 - 1975 from the perspective of Southern Whites. As a born and bred Westerner (raised in "post-civil rights" America), the issue is fascinating, and is one that has perplexed me for years: how is it that Americans could so obviously (to my eyes) discriminate against other Americans for so long? What was "wrong" with these people? Sokol provides a number of satisfying answers, thoroughly researched and documented. The book begins by detailing the monumental social change that occurred in the United States after World War II - a conflict ostensibly for "freedom" that for many highlighted the double-standard that African-Americans had faced since before the nation's founding. For Blacks as well as Whites the hypocrisy began the civil rights movement. Yet for every White Southerner whose perspective was changed, there were those whose prejudices and assumptions remained - hence the 20 year struggle that resulted in the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The fundamental reasons behind the resistance of White Southerners to integration, Sokol shows, was complex and several fold. At its roots were fear and resentment: fear of change, of course, but also fear of self-reflection and of a realization (long over due, in my opinion), that the Civil War was over. Resentment that the South had lost and their "way of life" (the "paternalistic" relationship between Whites and Blacks that had existed since the Antebellum days) was over and that they had to finally face the implications of their defeat. To White Southerners, however, efforts at integration was an assault on the "Southern way of life" - and therefore was "anti-American", even "Communist." These competing visions of American freedom (freedom to be prejudiced, to treat other Americans with contempt and as second class citizens, to murder them at will, to deprive them of their Constitutional rights versus the civil rights movement) was at the heart of the conflict in Southern White's eyes. To Whites in the South, the federal government's mandated integration was nothing less than totalitarianism. Southern Whites had a romanticized view of the past and of racial relations: they "knew" their African-Americans; they were happy and content with the status quo, and Black silence on the issue of Jim Crow was understood to be a tacit acceptance of the way things were. That things could be otherwise - that the de facto and de jure racism of the South of that time was ugly and morally repugnant wasn't given a second thought; to bring this to their attention was unbearable. It was an irony, Sokol points out, that Southern Blacks were seen as both subservient and threatening. Once integration began, there was of course, token resistance - George Wallace and Jesse Helms are the most familiar names of those who initially talked good game about fighting integration, but soon changed their rhetoric once significant numbers of African-Americans finally had the right to vote - most White Southerners found that the change wasn't as unpalatable nor as dangerous as they had imagined. However, the power dynamics between the wealthy and the poor had not changed: race remained a divisive issue in union organizing, for example, and as the South began to industrialize and mechanize, land ownership became even more skewed towards wealthy Whites, who did not hesitate to "play the race card" in seeking economic and political scapegoats. A political legacy of civil rights in the South, Sokol points out, is the loss of the South to the Republican party. Johnson's pushing through of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act gave the Republicans the South, which they still hold. For the historian - or the merely curious - I highly recommend this book. It does much to explain the reasoning and rationales behind the violence, anger and resentment Southern Whites felt during those tumultuous years. Far from condemning the South, a nuanced view of the region is presented: there were White Southerners who supported (both actively as well as tacitly) civil rights, just as there were the Bull Connors', Orval Fabus' and George Wallaces. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Interesting perspective By Veronica Frantz I enjoyed this book. It came from a different perspective as most civil rights books. I still do not feel sorry for white people that the world finally caught on that African Americans are human, but I better understand their mindset at the time. Just for the record, I am white, but I like to think of all humanity as people, not colors, races, ethnicities, etc.... 5 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Somewhat disappointed By S. Taylor Well, I was a little disappointed. The book was basically a by-the-numbers account of the civil rights struggle in the South, and read more like a classroom narrative than I was led to believe when buying this book. I would have enjoyed more first-person interviews with white Southerners gaining their impressions as their world crumbled around them, and in fact I purchased this book expecting more of these sort of interviews, ala Studs Terkel. So the book was somewhat disappointing in that there simply weren't enough of these sort of interviews, which I think give a better sense of time and place than a dry recitation of historical fact. I expected better.

During the civil rights movement, epic battles for justice were fought in the streets, at lunch counters, and in the classrooms of the American South. Just as many battles were waged, however, in the hearts and minds of ordinary white southerners whose world became unrecognizable to them. Jason Sokol's vivid and unprecedented account of white southerners attitudes and actions, related in their own words, reveals in a new light the contradictory mixture of stubborn resistance and pragmatic acceptance as well as the startling and unexpected personal transformations with which they greeted the enforcement of legal equality.

From Publishers Weekly The experiences of white Southerners during the period of the Civil Rights movement have, until now, gone largely unexplored. Sokol, a doctoral candidate in history at UC-Berkeley, traces the process of

desegregation by drawing on public records and interviews conducted with white Southerners as they faced the tide of change brought by *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Sokol actively resists easy generalizations or stereotypes of the men and women whose rejection of equal rights created the central tension of the Civil Rights movement. Instead of stock characters, Sokol presents individuals such as Ollie McClung, whose opposition to integration stemmed, at least in part, from a belief in personal liberty as well as hundreds of voices for whom change meant "their world would never be the same." Sokol never apologizes or attempts to mitigate the often brutal and violent consequences of Southern racism. His eloquent presentation, with all of its complications, provides an invaluable and much-needed addition to our understanding of how the Civil Rights movement was actually lived.

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From Booklist

Historian Sokol examines how the civil rights movement challenged long-held notions among southern whites about the character and circumstances of their black neighbors and workers and their own place in society. The movement for racial equality changed race relations and altered attitudes, transformed institutions and towns, and upended tradition. It also caused profound changes in whites as individuals. Drawing on recorded interviews and published and unpublished articles chronicling the turbulent times between 1945 and 1975, Sokol presents a portrait of white people in the frontline southern towns, from Little Rock and Atlanta to Birmingham and rural North Carolina. Sokol illustrates the complexity of the human drama behind the civil rights movement from the perspective of those whose cherished way of life was gone forever, those who felt liberated, and those who found new, subtler ways to practice their hate. This is a fascinating look at a side of the civil rights movement that has not been a widely explored aspect of one of the greatest social transformations in U.S. history. Vanessa Bush Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved

Fascinating and remarkably empathetic. *The Atlantic Monthly* [There Goes My Everything is] on my personal list of the years best books. Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post* A richly documented, often compellingly dramatic narrative, whose strength is its absence of polemic. *Dallas Morning News* "As eye-opening a look at race relations in the Civil Rights Era as anything this side of Dr. King's own Letter From a Birmingham Jail." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* Simply stunning This is one of the few books about the civil rights movement that gets it right Deserves to be read by every American. *Tucson Citizen*