
The press’s finest hour, according to authors Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, occurred during the civil rights movement when reporters exposed the struggle between the segregationist white South and the region’s African Americans who had been promised equality by the Supreme Court and later the Congress. While federal institutions in the nation’s capital laid down and tried to enforce the new policies, local authorities and bigoted citizens across the former Confederacy denied these rights and faced off with black leaders and demonstrators in an effort to thwart the new law. During this conflict, the national press came into its own taking up the responsibility to show the violent encounters and constitutional violations to a developing national audience. Reporters, editors, and broadcast journalists did so, Roberts and Klibanoff say in their book *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*, with bravery and a developing ethic that was essential to the fulfilling those promises of equality.

There is likely no better writer to present this story than lead author Gene Roberts. A North Carolina native and reporter during the era, Roberts went from covering the conflict in person to an exemplary career in journalism. He served as editor of both the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and more recently the *New York Times*, seeing a host of Pulitzer Prizes under his watch. Joining him is a former co-worker and now managing editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, Hank Klibanoff, who has also received noted awards for writing. Klibanoff, seventeen years younger than Roberts, brings a different perspective. He was working the lower echelons of the press as a fourteen-year-old newspaper delivery boy in Alabama when Martin Luther King delivered his “I Have a Dream Speech.” He found himself asking how the papers he delivered could overlook the confrontations in the streets of Montgomery and Birmingham.

*The Race Beat* begins with Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal’s 1940s study of the race question in America that provided some of the basis for the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and ends with the turbulent year of 1968, as Martin Luther King fell from an assassin’s bullet and the non-violent movement gave way to black power. In between is a dense, well-researched, front-seat account of how the media covered the movement. Where Robert’s years as a cub reporter allow for first person perspective, this is primarily a history with only a touch of memoir. The authors took several years to finish the book. With journalistic instinct, they wanted to get it right. They did so by exploring beyond the reporter’s usual sources of interviews and old news accounts and investigating the race beat through correspondence of past editors, oral histories, and a host of secondary works.
In addition to their primary thesis—the fourth estate brought a national consciousness to the race issue that ultimately resulted in breaking down color barriers—Roberts and Klibanoff emphasize the dangers that journalists faced while covering what had become the story and reveal how civil rights leaders relied on these professionals. Reporters, even with their efforts to expose resistance at Little Rock and Birmingham to their readers and viewers objectively, were soon viewed as much the enemy among southern segregationists as the Supreme Court and the Kennedys. The authors’ up-close-and-personal description of a correspondent’s point of view at school-front protests or at sit-ins is rather eye opening even to the civil rights historian. These journalists, the authors point out, were forced to conceal their notepads and dress down to blend in with the crowd. One broadcaster added a special steel handle to his television camera to double as a makeshift defense weapon. The dangers went beyond those in the field. Major newspapers and television networks faced advertising losses and lawsuits after opting to publish southern officials’ inaction toward lawless segregationists. It was during this era that news organizations explored and the courts further defined the First Amendment. The authors address these developments as well.

The movement would have been overlooked if not fully covered, and civil rights leaders relied on reporters and photographers to communicate it effectively. Revealing conversations that Reverend King and outspoken Birmingham leader Fred Shuttlesworth had with members of the media show their expectation. Without the descriptive accounts, and especially vivid images, the violence that peaceful demonstrators faced would have remained unknown to the nation. Black leaders scolded reporters, their necessary ally, if they did not do everything in their power to awaken the nation in order to obtain equal schools and access to public accommodations.

While Roberts and Klibanoff not only do a good job of telling the press’s role in the race story, they also explain the development of journalism during the era and how it related to covering the race beat. Most readers will not recall the method of news during the 1950s and 1960s. It was during this era that national newspapers opened southern regional bureaus. The live television reports that today’s viewers have seen for more than a generation had not yet developed. The struggle resulted in newspapers from both coasts establishing southern bureaus and in networks extending national broadcasts to thirty minutes and investing in live reports over the airwaves.

Evaluating the performance of their own industry is difficult to do objectively. Yet, these journalist-historians still present the story with boldness and authority and only a slight degree of bias. They never let the reader forget that the era’s reporter’s took the moral high ground in the conflict nor do they let you forget the bigoted Richmond News Leader editor and later syndicated columnist James J. Kilpatrick. The North gets scant attention—it was a sideline of the movement—outside of the offices of the New York Times, the Big Three networks, and black newspapers the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier. But the book is highly worthy for its contribution to both civil rights history and that of the development of journalism. It has deservedly gained Roberts and Klibanoff a Pulitzer, this time for history.