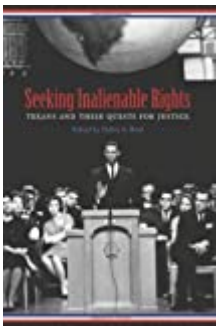
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Debra A. Reid, ed. *Seeking Inalienable Rights: Texans and Their Quests for Justice.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009. xxiii + 196 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60344-118-6; $22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-60344-123-0.

Reviewed by William Carrigan (Rowan University)

Published on H-Law (September, 2010)

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

The Complicated Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas after 1865

According to editor Debra A. Reid, *Seeking Inalienable Rights* explores how âselected Texans pursued their rights by contrasting the ideal of personal liberty in a capitalist society with the reality of the price others paid for that rights expansionâ (p. xiii). The volume, composed of eight chapters, challenges the traditional chronology of the Texas civil rights struggle by extending discussion of the movement to the late nineteenth century and by broadening the concept of organized movement to âinclude efforts of men and women who allied within classes and sought political and professional influence and economic opportunity, in addition to government protection of defined rightsâ (p. xiii). Reid goes on to argue that âTexas as a multiethnic state provides an important case study to explore the ways that competing definitions of rights and special interest legislation have affected rightsâ (p. xvii). As one of the volumeâs overarching themes, Reid notes, conservative constitutionalist opponents of the extension of rights for minorities saw this expansion as the loss of their freedoms and privileges and fought hard against them and the liberal interpretation of the constitutions upon which they were expounded. This is an important volume with a variety of important essays that will be of interest to a wide range of scholars, including historians of the Constitution, the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era, the labor movement, the struggle for womenâs suffrage, African American civil rights, Mexican American civil rights, and more. Some chapters will be of more interest than others depending on a readerâs interests, and this review will concentrate on providing short summaries of the various chapters to help guide interested scholars.

Eminent Texas historian Alwyn Barr begins the volume with a chapter that explores black conventions during the late nineteenth century. These conventions, primarily attended by middle-class blacks and successful artisans and members of the working class, allowed blacks to voice their concerns over the increasing difficulties of the era. They could not unify on a response to the loss of their political and economic opportunities, but they made a contribution regardless by exercising their freedom of speech and organizing in protest. They also provided a

direct rebuke to those contemporary criticisms that denied the ability of blacks to succeed in a free world. Barr is unsure of any direct influence of these conventions but does suggest tantalizingly that they may have had some indirect influence on the Democratic Texas legislatureâs decision to pass an antilynching law in 1897.

In chapter 2, former Texas State Historical Association president, George Green, studies the high tide, defeat, and transformation of the Knights of Labor in Texas. In 1886, the Knights peaked and were defeated in a dramatic strike. Over the next decade, the Knights transformed and fused with the Farmers Alliance, but the Populist Party failed in 1896 and the crash brought down the revised Knights of Labor as well. During the same decade, railroad brotherhoods formed, and these more narrow organizations pushed for the standard goals of craft unionists, namely, increased wages, more safety protections for workers, and expanded benefits. Their actions, less often newsworthy than the Knightsâ activities, included supporting small strikes, personal injury lawsuits, and legislative lobbying. The more ambitious plans of the Knights on behalf of railway workers were never realized, and the Knights collapsed. The brotherhoods also largely failed in their struggle against corporate power in the late nineteenth century, but they won some small successes and survived into the twentieth century, providing examples that later unions would heed during the Great Depression.

In the third chapter, Reid provides her own contribution. She explores the origins of the âNegro divisionâ and the home demonstration program of the Texas Agricultural Extension service, arguing that both emerged from efforts to define competent Texas farmers as white men, thus keeping cheap black labor on the farms and keeping white female labor in the home. James Seymourâs fourth chapter contends that the chief suffragist argument in Texas during World War I was that white female voters would offset the dangerous vote of German Texans in a time of war. This was a departure from the Texas suffragistsâ previous strategy, which rested on the âfairnessâ doctrine, that women should have the right to vote since they were citizens, paid taxes, and were subject to the laws.

In chapter 5, Patricia Gower studies the growth and transformation of city government in Dallas and San Antonio after the Civil War. She finds that Dallasâs reform was led by a white, unified business elite who used a series of progressive, legalistic changes to modernize the city government, eliminating old machine politics, while also limiting access of the poor and minorities to city services, thus keeping costs for their new modern government low. In San Antonio, such white unity did not exist as power was shared between Anglo and Mexicans in the city. One result was that the machine politics of the city were not eliminated with progressive reforms. Still, most of the cityâs poor remained bereft of city services because San Antonioâs tax revenues did not exist to cover everyone. Thus, certain niche groups received improved services because of their connection to the elites in power, but most of San Antonioâs poor, like Dallasâs poor, were without municipal services well into the twentieth century.

David Chrismanâs fascinating sixth chapter explores the Texas Christian Life Commission (TCLC) and its struggle over the place of African Americans in Baptist life and churches during the 1950s and 1960s. The inspiration for moderate Texas Baptists in the TCLC was Southwestern Seminaryâs T. B. Maston. After the publication of Gunnar Myrdalâs *An American Dilemma* (1944), Maston singled out race relations as the most pressing ethical issue facing Baptists in Texas. During the 1950s, moderates inspired by Maston won âlukewarm support for racial justiceâ by the Baptist General Convention of Texas, but these religious leaders began to lose their own congregations in the 1960s as the civil rights movement intensified (p. 117). Integration of Texas Baptist churches thus came late, with formal votes allowing blacks to join not until the 1970s in many cases.

One of the most interesting essays in the volume from my perspective was Brian Behnkenâs seventh chapter. Behnken explores Houstonâs civil rights movement in the 1960s, noting that blacks and Mexicans were unable to unify in a joint campaign against white supremacy. Examining the African American sit-in movement of the 1960s, Behnken notes that Houston responded to the protests by setting up a committee of thirty-seven city leaders to explore the issue of integration. Felix Tijerena, president of the League of United Latin America Citizens (LULAC), was the lone Mexican appointed to the committee. He joined the segregationist businessmenâs faction on the committee and wrote a pointed editorial criticizing the demonstrations. Moreover, Tijerena refused to integrate his restaurant until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Behnken, building off the work of Neil Foley and others, notes that Tijerenaâs position echoed that of many Mexicans in Houston during this period. Indeed, Tijerenaâs successor as LULAC president said that linking their fate with black protest would be an âunhealthy allianceâ for Mexicans (p. 129).

Behnken then explores the Chicano movementâs school boycott of the early 1970s. Seeking to have Mexican interests supported by new civil rights legislation, this movement emphasized not the âwhitenessâ of Mexicans but their âbrownness.â Houston Independent School District (HISD) found new utility in the white designation of Mexicans because HISD could not achieve court integration demands by merging Latino and black school districts, leaving other schools Anglo only. The Chicano struggle against this plan led to a small riot and boycotts of the public schools. African Americans were often supportive of the boycott but serious tensions between the two groups remained, preventing any serious alliance.

Chapter 8 by Steven Wilson pairs well with Behnkenâs chapter. Wilson explores *Chicanismo*, a radical evolution of the Mexican American civil rights struggle that was sparked in part by the mass demonstrations of African American youth in the early 1960s. Wilsonâs accessible chapter provides a nice overview of the movement before focusing on two court cases in Hidalgo County, Texas. He argues that the Chicano movement was a success even though the movement failed to achieve legal recognition as a separate group worthy of special protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. Instead, Wilson concludes that the success of the movement was in bridging a generational gap with an older cadre of middle-class âMexican Americanâ activists who at first rejected the protest tactics of the Chicano movement. By the start of the 1970s, due to this âmeeting of the minds,â the Mexican American community was poised for major breakthroughs on key civil rights issues, eventually succeeding in clarifying the inalienable rights of Mexicans in the United States (p. 160).

The length and detail of these summaries should convey this reviewerâs admiration for this volume, which is full of interesting and valuable essays. I strongly urge historians of civil rights in the United States to consider consulting this collection.

Citation: William Carrigan. Review of Reid, Debra A., ed., *Seeking Inalienable Rights: Texans and Their Quests for Justice*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. September, 2010.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=26456