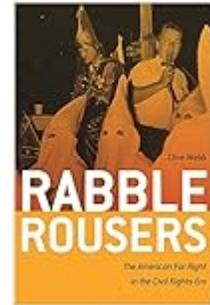




**Clive Webb.** *Rabble Rousers: The American Far Right in the Civil Rights Era.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010. xi + 301 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2764-8; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-3577-3.



**Reviewed by** William Hustwit

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## Renegades, not Rednecks

Clive Webb has written another good but unusual history of the civil rights era. Scholarship on the civil rights movement is extensive but uneven. Most work has focused on the mobilization of black activism, and some studies have explored the white South. Few historians have dared to understand the far right and hate groups that fought the black freedom struggle. Webb's *Rabble Rousers* examines a difficult subject and respectfully treats violent opponents of civil rights reform.

Focusing on only five far-right activists, Webb accomplishes much and rescues militant whites from the margins of massive resistance against civil rights. In seven well-written chapters, violent extremists in the Border States and Deep South receive attention through biographical sketches. In fall 1954, Bryant William Bowles Jr. organized a grassroots boycott that disrupted desegregation in Milford, Delaware. John Kasper, in August 1956, led an open revolt against the desegregation of the high school in Clinton, Tennessee. Alabama's John Crommelin sought a respectable defense of segregation through his many conspiracy theory-laden campaigns

for public office and acted as a bridge between various far-right groups. The zealot and former general Edwin Walker abhorred civil rights objectives, distributed John Birch Society material to his troops before his departure from the armed forces, and stirred the white mob into rebellion during the 1962 desegregation of the University of Mississippi. J. B. Stoner inflamed audiences with anti-Semitic and racist rhetoric that countered civil rights protests from Nashville to Birmingham to St. Augustine.

Careful not to state that the far right won in its struggle against racial reform, Webb pursues underlying themes that help scholars to appreciate segregationist successes and to better understand massive resistance. First, far-right figures opposed the white political establishment of the Jim Crow South. Militant whites often viewed their own actions as an insurgency against the local civic and business establishment they accused of weakness and betrayal on the race issue (p. 16). Second, Webb argues that segregationist political leaders used extremists as a fifth column that made other forms of segregation respectable. The *rabble rousers*

served, he writes, as a perfect foil for massive resistance leaders endeavoring to establish the political legitimacy of their cause (p. 40). Third, Webb dispels the stereotype that only working-class whites responded vulgarly, sometimes violently, to the civil rights movement. Walker, Crommelin, and Stoner came either from the upper-class South or the officer ranks of the military.

Readers will find few problems with the book. The first chapters, though, prove more intriguing than the conclusion. Webb seems unsure of how to finish *Rabble Rousers* and provides an inconclusive ending. He also dis-

misses explanations of far-right activists that label them pathologically ill, which is commendable. In his rejection of such interpretations, however, Webb perhaps misses an opportunity to explore people's thinking and motives in greater depth. Investigating the probable homosexuality, for example, of John Kasper, who confessed his love for poet Ezra Pound, and Edwin Walker could have furthered the more recent attempts by civil rights scholars to incorporate sexuality into their studies. Finally, perhaps Webb could have looked more at the rabble and not just the rousers. Minor complaints take nothing away from his fine history.

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