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Jan Bates Wheeler. *A Campaign of Quiet Persuasion: How the College Board Desegregated SAT® Test Centers in the Deep South, 1960-1965.* Making the Modern South Series. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013. 244 pp. $42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-5271-3.

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Working behind the Scenes for Racial Justice, After All

Not all quiet efforts to bring racial change in the civil rights era were successful, or in many cases, sincere. As a black attorney remarked to *New Yorker* writer Calvin Trillin in 1960, âât must be pretty crowded there behind the scenes,ââ if all the people claiming to be working quietly to speedup civil rights reforms were actually doing so.[1] In contrast to studies that address often alleged, and frequently misleading, claims of southern officials to have been involved in smoothing the way for local acceptance of racial change, Jan Bates Wheelerâs account reveals the successful and deliberately secretive work of a group of educational bureaucrats employed by the northern-based College Board in desegregating all Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) testing facilities in the early 1960s. Despite standardized testing being introduced in several southern states in the 1950s as an ostensibly race-neutral means for maintaining racial segregation in public educational facilities, the centers became the scene of a systematic campaign of desegregation between 1960 and 1965. The move to desegregate these testing sites, many of which were located in otherwise segregated public schools, in many cases came to southern communities in advance of the official desegregation of public schools and universities. Wheeler uses a great volume of letters, board minutes, reports, and memoranda from the College Entrance Examinations Board Archives and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) archives, in addition to a number of oral history sources to narrate and analyze the process of College Board employees, especially the racially liberal white southerners Ben Cameron and Ben Gibson. Though *A Campaign of Quiet Persuasion* is primarily relevant to the literature on educational desegregation in the Deep South, it contributes more generally to the understanding of both racial reforms and strategies of resistance to racial change on the local level across the post-World War II U.S. South.

Wheeler first examines the desegregation of test centers for the Law Schools Admissions Test (LSAT) by ETS. Though sister organizations, the College Board and ETS were separate entities. Typically, the College Board devised the tests used to examine students, while ETS was responsible for test administration. LSAT testing center desegregation predated and provided a blueprint for the desegregation of SAT testing centers. Following a number of complaints from black candidates who had experienced racial discrimination during the administration of the LSAT during the 1950s, and under scrutiny from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, an ETS committee studied the existence of test center segregation in 1960. Generally, black test candidates were taken to a separate room from white candidates, and tested in conditions that were not always as physically comfortable as those afforded whites, a contravention of ETSâs commitment to equitable testing conditions. In a later oral history, one of the black

examinees claimed that âthey were trying to put me in a broom closet [to take the SAT]!â (p. 23). Mirroring the approach taken later by the College Board toward SAT center segregation, ETS employees were directed to visit LSAT centers unannounced, and were to use their âdiscretionâ both to avoid publicity of the policy to desegregate the test and to prevent offending test center supervisors (p. 33). Having had no formal nondiscrimination policy previously, in April 1961 ETS adopted a policy for the LSAT that demanded testing on an âentirely nonsegregatedâ basis (p. 36). The move to desegregate LSAT centers was essentially finished by mid-1962.

The second chapter introduces Ben Cameron, the office director of the Southern Regional Office (SRO) for the College Board, a body established in 1959 to help the College Board to promote its tests to potential southern clients. A World War II veteran, and chemistry teacher by profession, the racially liberal Cameron took the largest role in the desegregation of SAT centers. In January 1960, he attended a meeting in Atlanta to examine âproblems encountered in testing Negro candidatesâ in Georgia, especially Atlanta (p. 44). Georgia, whose board of regents had made the SAT compulsory for entrance into the stateâs public colleges and universities in 1957 (arguably as a further protection against the possible entry of black students into white educational establishments), was by far the largest client of the College Board in the Deep South. Given the consequent increase in numbers of whites and blacks taking the SAT, and the impossibility of desegregating most test centers at the time, Cameron arranged for the establishment of test centers based in black schools, a decision that led to the creation of a dual system of about 120 test centers in Georgia, almost ten times as many as in any other Deep South state. At a December 1960 meeting of the College Board trustees, the ETS president suggested that all ETS-administered test centers should be racially integrated as soon as possible. Trustees voted for âa study of the facts in regard to segregation at centers for the Boardâs testâ to be reported at their March 1961 meeting, for which an ETS committee and Cameron submitted reports in advance (p. 53). The ETS report concluded that outside of the Deep South states (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina), the progress of public school desegregation would soon allow all SAT candidates to be tested in a desegregated setting. Only testing centers in the âfive hard core states,â then, needed special attention (p. 59). Though Cameron was initially âaghastâ at the suggestion of test center desegregation in the Deep South, his report urged the College Board trustees to push test center desegregation ahead of the progress of school desegregation wherever possible (p. 52). Cameronâs plan of implementation emphasized the avoidance of any publicity of the College Boardâs actions. Publicizing the desegregation policy would, he feared, leave supervisors who had cooperated in offering integrated testing open to local reprisals from irate segregationists, while it might also lead to colleges and universities embracing the rival ACT (American College Testing) examination in place of the SAT. Though ETSâs president had changed his mind on test center desegregation by the March 1961 meeting, citing financial concerns should the desegregation requirement cause a large loss of southern clients, the College Boardâs trustees adopted Cameronâs desegregation plan.

In implementing the desegregation plan, ETS procedure shifted to direct all inquiries from test centers in Deep South states to the SRO, headed by Cameron. Pivotal to the Cameron plan was the unannounced nature of visits by a College Board employee to each test center to assess testing conditions and discuss the need to desegregate with its supervisor. To help spread the burden of test center visits, two Georgia natives were hired by the SRO: L. H. Pitts, president of a small black college in Alabama, and Ben W. Gibson, an employee of the Atlanta Board of Education. In March 1962, the College Boardâs trustees established a âspecial committee on examining center policyâ (p. 88). The special committee defined the contravention of âstandardâ and âequitableâ testing as where âany discrimination against a candidate within a testing center is made on the basis of race, color, or national origin,â and condensed Cameronâs plan into four key points: to regularly check the testing conditions for black candidates at test centers, to refuse to establish new centers that would not meet the College Boardâs desegregation policy, to close centers where the policy was breached, and to establish new desegregated centers where dual centers existed in order to allow the closure of racially separate facilities (p. 101).

To find desegregated testing facilities in states that remained staunchly committed to segregation, federal military facilities and private religious foundations were approached to host the SAT examinations. Through special committee member and Fisk University president Stephen Wrightâs contact in the Defense Department, College Board officials persuaded the assistant secretary of Defense to issue a memorandum declaring the temporary use of military facilities for desegregated testing to be âin the national interestâ (p. 112). Getting top-down authorization for the use of military facilities as

testing centers before seeking out individual base commanders was, in Gibsonâs view, necessary to avoid âa messy situationâ in the event that local community leaders complained to their congressman about desegregated SAT testing (p. 110). Following visits by Gibson and Cameron to speak with numerous base commanders in the spring of 1963, ETS opened test centers at eight military facilities across the Deep South, in areas where the original centers had not agreed to operate on a desegregated basis.

The fall of 1963 marked the beginning of Cameron and Gibsonâs âmarch through Georgia,â a state that examined ten times as many SAT candidates as any other in the Deep South (p. 135). By October 1963, around 25 percent of test centers in Georgia had agreed to desegregated testing conditions. Between September 1963 and May 1964, Gibson visited almost all of the 158 testing centers in Georgia, and several in Mississippi, to discuss desegregated testing. His experiences varied greatly according to the attitudes of local officials and elites toward desegregation. In several recalcitrant areas, officials threatened to issue public statements on the College Boardâs desegregation policy, a course that would have likely reversed the unpublicized and tacitly accepted desegregation of numerous Deep South test centers, carried financial penalties for the College Board, and have left test center supervisors who had cooperated open to local reprisals. At other times, the fear of losing a test center, alongside the corresponding loss of prestige for a school, was enough to persuade otherwise committed segregationist school officials that test center desegregation was in fact practicable.

Though it placed financial pressures on public schools to desegregate their student bodies, in some areas the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act spurred renewed resistance to previously accepted desegregated testing conditions, a further variable for Cameron and Gibson to contend with. By December 1964, Cameron reported to the College Board trustees that âall centers ... were now desegregatedâ (p. 188). Despite the closure of some 54 of the original 218 test centers in Deep South states for noncompliance, between 1961 and 1964 the number of test takers increased, spurred by a major spike in black SAT candidates. The increase in enrollment disproved the fears held by several College Board and ETS officials that center desegregation would result in a major financial sacrifice by the College Board. By the 1963-64 academic year, the College Board was testing at least 2,500 black students in desegregated test conditions in the Deep South, at a time when only 583 blacks attended desegregated schools in the region. The campaign to desegregate test centers continued until 1967, with the phasing out of the technically desegregated dual system of test centers in Georgia, and the College Boardâs 1966 decision to bar from membership schools and colleges that retained segregation in their admissions. Desegregated testing was fully returned to civilian institutions in 1967, when the last military base used for testing was closed in Mississippi.

Wheeler concludes by placing the College Boardâs test center desegregation campaign in the broader context of enhanced minority access to educational opportunity. A decade after the desegregation campaign had ended, minority students still faced significant obstacles in securing information about SAT testing and accessing test centers in nonhostile environments. In her estimation, the College Boardâs campaign to eliminate racially segregated test centers before the collapse of public school desegregation benefited the cause of minority educational opportunity by inspiring school officials to work toward desegregation in their schools and by providing possibly âthe first integrated event in the lives of both black and white studentsâ (p. 204).

Wheeler offers a tremendously rich account, filled with vignettes of College Board employeesâ visits to Deep South communities in various stages of negotiation with racial change in the 1960s. Her narrative emphasizes the importance of individuals and their attitudes to the development of the desegregation process, from the racial liberalism of Cameron and Gibson, to Wrightâs personal connections in the Defense Department, to the array of responses of local southern officials to desegregation pressures in their communities. For scholars interested in the local reception of racial reforms during the civil rights era, especially in Georgia, this book offers a valuable resource.

Nevertheless, some areas of inquiry merit greater scrutiny in Wheelerâs account. This bona fide behind-the-scenes desegregation campaign could have been better contextualized into the literature of quiet racial change in southern communities, by including efforts to informally desegregate public facilities and change racial hiring policies. Though Wheeler provides a sensitive treatment of the views of the racially liberal protagonists, more nuance could have been used in relation to the segregationists. Perhaps tellingly, Wheeler writes of the singular segregationist, âit seems that to a segregationist the only thing worse than a Negro was an out-of-town Negroâ (p. 96). In describing Cameronâs father,

Judge Benjamin Cameron, as âan ardent segregationistâ but not, in his sonâs view, a racist, Wheeler seems to struggle for an adequate vocabulary to distinguish Judge Cameronâs legalistic defense of segregation from that of other committed segregationists whose methods were more immediately coercive (p. 107). Elsewhere, though Wheeler contends that the denominational affiliation of southern clergymen mattered little in comparison to the intensity of local segregationist sentiment in determining whether clergy acted to encourage desegregation, she could have paid further attention to the possible role of denomination in the responses of leaders of private religious schools and colleges to race-related issues. Likewise, during the narration of test center desegregation, Wheeler could perhaps have clarified the extent to which the process involved black students entering white institutions or vice versa, and the impact such a process might have had in the creation of âhostile environmentsâ for minority SAT entrants, a phenomenon later examined by an ETS staff member in 1970 (p. 203).

Such criticisms, however, are minor. *A Campaign of Quiet Persuasion* is an intricately narrated, carefully argued work with great value to those interested in educational desegregation and race relations generally in the U.S. South after World War II.

Note

[1]. Tony Badger, *New Deal/New South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007), 111.

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