

Shocking the Conscience: A Reporter's Account of the Civil Rights Movement

Simeon Booker

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No magazine covered the bloody and turbulent events of the civil rights movement more faithfully than *Jet*. Years before the brutal treatment of blacks was acknowledged in the white mainstream press, *Jet*, according to comedian and activist Dick Gregory, “shocked the conscience of the nation and world.” And no one more than Simeon “the man from *Jet*” Booker covered so compellingly the 1955 Emmet Till murder, the 1961 Freedom Riders journey in Alabama, and the 1965 Bloody Sunday showdown in Selma, Alabama. The author’s you-are-there narratives transport the reader back to these chilling events.

Booker was the first black staff reporter for the *Washington Post*, a position he quit after two years because of ongoing racism. In 1956, he became *Jet*’s Washington bureau chief, a position he held until 2007. For more than a half-century, Booker’s influential “Ticker Tape USA” column was as eagerly read by presidents as by ordinary people for its timely and authoritative commentary. Booker, who will turn ninety-four in 2013, here shares his story and that of such civil rights luminaries as John and Robert Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., and, in what is the most compelling feature of this superb memoir, the tales of ordinary citizens, including Dr. T. R. M. Howard, Mamie Till, and martyrs Jimmy Lee and James Reeb, who lived and died for the cause of equal rights.

The author more than once found his own life in jeopardy as a black reporter in the South, where death was only a Klan or police bullet away. During the Till trial, Booker’s life was saved from an infuriated sheriff by a fellow reporter’s fast thinking. When he rode with the Freedom Riders, his Trailways bus was mobbed by racist thugs who severely beat the riders and almost mauled Booker. During his years with *Jet*, Booker covered ten presidents, including Eisenhower, who viewed black rights merely as a special interest; Kennedy, who inspired black citizens to believe in the cause of civil rights; and Nixon, who, although he promoted desegregation, never earned the trust of African Americans.

Booker concludes that the fight for equality is far from over and charges the current generation to continue the struggle. For all general readers as well as civil rights scholars, Booker’s remembrance provides a personal touch that enriches existing accounts of movement history and makes it essential reading in its own right.

KARL HELICHER (Spring 2013)

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