

Unlikely Heroes

Professor Jack Bass

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JACK BASS

A vivid account of the
implementation of
the *Brown* decision
in the South by
southern federal
judges committed to
the rule of law.

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Professor Jack Bass : Unlikely Heroes before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Unlikely Heroes:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Essential American history...By John P. Jones IIIJack Bass fittingly selects a quote from Lillian Smith's 1949 book Killers of the Dream, an excellent book which I have read twice, some 40 years apart, which depicted and explained the Southern societal structure that was defined by legal racial

segregation. Smith says: "...had there been a few men in the South with enough strength...with enough integrity and energy to act out their own beliefs and with a strong belief in freedom and a clear vision of a new way of life, our people might have been swung around with their faces turned to the future." Roughly 10 to 15 years later, the men (and they were all men, hopefully inspired, in part, by a woman) did arise, and accepted the challenge that history provided. As Bass indicates, they were "unlikely" heroes, based on their background, and even their temperament. I'm not of the legal profession, and some have said that is a blessing, and although I have been dabbling in it far too long now, I found Bass' account gripping, even a "page turner." The author's account centers on the old Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, before it was split, and when it spanned most of the deep-south states of the Old Confederacy. Smith's sought-for men arose. Bass frequently refers to them as "The Four," a key voting bloc in a Court of nine, with a Chief Judge, in his '80's, often absent. The four were Richard T. Rives, Elbert P. Tuttle, John Minor Wisdom and John R. Brown. The four received key support from at least two District Judges: Frank M. Johnson in Alabama, and J. Skelly Wright in New Orleans. (Both were later elevated to the Court of Appeals level). Bass wrote this account around 1980, when many of the principals were still alive, and willing to be interviewed. If "Medals of Honor" were issued for heroic civilian service, each would deserve one. The drama is high, but of such a nature that it is extremely unlikely it would ever be made into a movie. Nonetheless, Bass commences his account with the most photogenic moment in the book, one that depicted, essentially, what the entire story is all about. He explains that a heavy off-white drapery now hangs across the mural, which is located on the fourth floor of the federal courthouse in Jackson, Mississippi. The 40 ft. by 20 ft. mural was painted by an artist of Czech extraction, under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1939. Bass says: "The tableau begins at the left where a black mammy is picking cotton in a green field. It moves to a poorly dressed, graying black man sitting on stone steps, happily strumming a banjo. As the plantation master moves to dismount, another deferential black reaches up to help. A hoopskirted white woman stands in front of the columned plantation house with her daughter. A stern-faced judge, dressed in black suit and string tie, dominates the foreground. He has a law book under his arm." Many of the famous incidents of the civil rights movement, as well as those less so, are covered in the book. There is the case of James Meredith, the first black admitted to "Ole Miss." He had to overcome, yes "overcome," a mountain of obstacles, including a ruling by Judge Mize that the evidence showed conclusively that Meredith "...was not denied admission because of his race." Though there were NO black students at Ole Miss, there was no "pattern and practice" to exclude them; the inference was always it was the Blacks fault, lacking initiative, etc. With a bit of flare for history in his decisions, Judge John Minor Wisdom wrote: "A full review of the record leads the Court inescapably to the conclusion that from the moment the defendants discovered Meredith was a Negro they engaged in a carefully calculated campaign of delay, harassment and masterly inactivity. It was a defense designed to discourage and to defeat by evasive tactics which would have been a credit to Quintus Fabius Maximus." (I too had to check the footnote to learn that Maximus was a Roman general who used evasive tactics to defend Rome from Hannibal in the Second Punic War.) Bass also describes how the Supreme Court, which did "get the ball going" with its "Brown" decision of 1954, often preferred to "remain above the fray" and let the 5th Circuit do the bulk of the yeomanry work, forcing school district after district to forsake their tactics of delay, and integrate. And many of the senior political leadership preferred to do the same thing. The actions of Bass' (as well as Smith's) "Heroes" helped create a vastly different American society, in which, for example, it would now be unthinkable to have an ad for Coke (or any other product) without very careful consideration for depicting a spectrum of equal ethnic types enjoying their products. Thanks for the great recommendations, Mike, and, as is my custom for great, essential books: 6-stars. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. An equal to "Profiles in Courage" in telling stories of great Americans. By Customer One of the best books I have ever read - the story of how Southern judges, most of them upper class Republicans, found the courage to move beyond the mores of their upbringings and their social class, and their friends, to enforce integration as the law of the land. They faced ostracism from the people they knew best and friends they cared about, but they cared more about principle. One of them, asked what had caused him to become a traitor to his class responded with simple dignity and power, "The evidence in my court". This book is fully equal to "Profiles in Courage" in telling the stories of people who are the finest examples of what has made America great. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. History of Civil Rights from The Bench By Don E. Black Siler Spring MD Jack Bass is an detailed Southern Historian. In Unlikely Heroes he provides a walk through the Civil Rights movement with a view from the Federal Judge's perspective who heard and decided the cases. This book focuses on several judges who was not a household name; judges who sat on the 5th Circuit in the Federal Court system who had a strong "fidelity to the law" approach. In my opinion this is a must read for law school students, historians, and Social Science high school teachers. President Eisenhower does not have a strong record on civil rights legislation but the Federal Judges he appointed, in the South, were on the front lines and at the time did more for civil rights than the U. S Congress. This is an outstanding book

A vivid account of the implementation of the Brown decision in the South by southern federal judges committed to the rule of law. Bass's unlikely heroes are the federal judges-primarily those on the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals-who vigorously and skillfully implemented Brown v. Board of Education in six southern states. The rich profiles show

the character of the men who gave up prosperous lives, popularity, and friends to see that the constitutional rights of all citizens were protected.

"I think there has been no more heroic episode in American law than the work of southern federal judges in ending racial discrimination in the South. Jack Bass has brought this recent history to life, telling us much that we had not known."