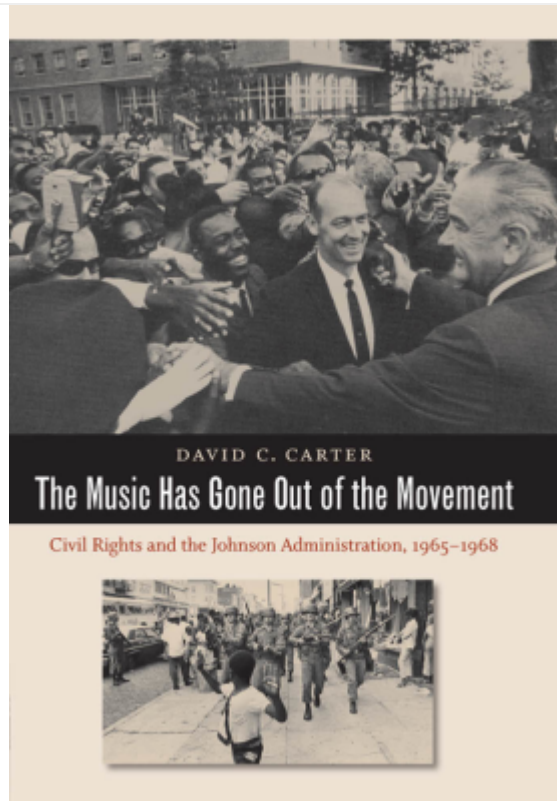


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The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

The Music Has Gone Out of the Movement: Civil Rights and the Johnson Administration, 1965-1968



Volume 43 (2010)

Reviewed Work(s)

The Music Has Gone Out of the Movement: Civil Rights and the Johnson Administration, 1965-1968. By David C. Carter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Pp. 384. Cloth, \$35.00.

David C. Carter's first published monograph, *The Music Has Gone Out of the Movement: Civil Rights and the Johnson Administration, 1965-1968*, intricately details what he considers a neglected story of the shifting and often discordant interactions between the Johnson White House and grassroots civil rights leaders. On June 4, 1965, in an address to the students and faculty of Howard University, President Johnson boldly evoked his administration's dedication to afford black Americans not only equal opportunity but equal results. "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him to the starting line of a race, and then say you are free to compete with all the others," Johnson asserted. "Thus it is not enough," he declared, "just to open the gates of opportunity." During the remainder of his presidency, however, Johnson would undergo a decisive reversal, largely reflected in his discounting of the findings of the 1968 Kerner Commission Report which warned that "white racism" was to blame for furthering the creation of "two societies...separate and unequal" (230). Yet Johnson's seeming disengagement from the civil rights agenda he presented at Howard was not preordained, argues Carter.

As the title implies, *The Music Has Gone Out of the Movement* primarily serves as a pointed critique of Johnson's "half-hearted commitment" to the black quest for equality after 1965. In fact, Carter's central premise is that there was a "lack of coherent policy approach" in the Johnson administration concerning civil rights. (xiii) He judges that Johnson's 'desire for order and desire for praise' (168) led him to enlist predominantly moderate civil rights workers in his White House Conference on Civil Rights of 1965 and 1966 and to encourage black leaders to look beyond employing the use of protest and demonstrations. According to Carter, these decisions stemmed in large part from the unfavorable publicity and criticism that plagued the president following the eruption of black-led riots in Watts, Detroit, Newark, and Harlem. To convince the nation that he was neither condoning nor responsible for the nationwide surge in black radicalism, Johnson would seek to refrain from what was commonly perceived as controversial people ("bomb

throwers”) and programs. Even the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) programs that Johnson had once praised in the early phases of the War on Poverty, such as the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM), would eventually face marginalization in his administration (121).

Carter reasons that Johnson’s move to a more moderate stance on civil rights displeased many of his black allies, including Martin Luther King, Jr., who had become frustrated with “the growing disconnect between White House words and deeds.” By 1967, females, militants, and working-class blacks, who were deliberately not included in Johnson’s discussions of national civil rights policy, frequently complained that their concerns had been made short shrift of and some “openly predicted more riots to come” (186). Carter ultimately finds that the administration’s “[extreme reluctance] to respond to the ongoing dramatic evolution and expansion of civil rights leadership” amid the rise of Black Power was to blame for driving the music, or the initial optimism, out of the movement (244).

One of the most fascinating and widely unknown stories of the Johnson administration is described in the chapter entitled “Scouting the Star-Spangled Jungles.” In that chapter, the reader learns that Johnson sent staff members on multiple scouting missions into black inner cities, dubbed “ghetto visits,” to study, monitor, and report back on the plight and grievances of the black poor. What is interesting about these visits is that they were performed undercover; the scouts regularly assumed false identities (such as reporters and OEO workers) in order to avoid drawing media attention. As Carter explains, Johnson hoped that if the scouting missions were kept secret he could avoid the embarrassment of seeming unable to understand and contain black urban violence as well as the accountability for its perpetuation. Due to Johnson’s “fears of political liabilities,” Carter concludes that “ghetto visits” were largely successful in gathering information rather than serving as impetuses to action. (194)

In a novel and provocative way, Carter’s work suggests that Johnson’s reliance on the viewpoints of moderate blacks, whom Carter maintains did not fully represent poor blacks, jeopardized his administration’s goals of eradicating racial inequality in America. “There can be little doubt,” states Carter, “that selective deafness greatly reduced Johnson’s attempts to understand the resentment fueling urban unrest during his tenure in the White House” (198). As a result, by 1966-despite the

vanguard legislation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights of 1965—Johnson and his policymakers were no longer setting the civil rights agenda; they were playing ‘duck and cover’ (191). In a similar vein, Carter seems to insinuate that Johnson’s policies unintentionally furthered the development of the two separate nations, one black and one white, which were referenced in the Kerner Commission. His work at least underscores that the Johnson administration eventually alienated black as well as white Americans through his “search for a national consensus on how to address the perceived ‘problem’ of race” (xiv).

While Carter contributes a good deal to the prevailing civil rights historiography by revealing a number of correlations between the internal fissures of the Johnson White House and the frustrations of inner-city blacks, his work is based upon several debatable assumptions. For one, Carter assumes that there were more differences than similarities in the overarching goals of moderate and radical black leaders and that moderate black leaders did not or could not properly represent the interests of poor blacks. Secondly, he assumes that if Johnson had willingly taken more advice from radical black leaders that the civil rights movement would have been more quickly or fully realized. Yet Carter underestimates the appeal and the practicality of moderation for a nation undergoing turbulent changes. He, himself, admits that “‘Militants’ in the nation’s cities posed a special dilemma” for Johnson (190). Practically speaking, then, could his administration associate with the rioters of the black cities and risk coming across as supportive of their violent tactics? In other words, if Johnson had condoned the methods of radical black leaders by granting them a greater say in his administration, might whites be more likely to question their sympathy with the aims of the black freedom movement? Arguably, it was partially because of the appearance of the Johnson administration’s connection to radical black activism that “Monthly public opinion polls tracked the dwindling support of white Americans for federal activism on behalf of civil rights and antipoverty initiatives” (130).

A final criticism of Carter’s work is that his central argument is bereft of discussions of two revolutionary programs of the Johnson years that explicitly targeted the issue of black poverty: Affirmative Action, which actively sought to improve the jobs available for blacks via preferential

hiring, and expanded welfare coverage, which primarily served to increase the available income for single black mothers. Although it does not afford a complete picture, *The Music Has Gone Out of the Movement* does offer an important window into the conflicts between the federal and local amid the civil rights movement. Its many strengths include the employment of a wide array of primary sources, most notably the use of more than 100 oral histories. Regardless of whether one believes the Johnson administration's policy decisions were inevitable or not, students of civil rights will find this work indispensable in enhancing their understanding of both the complex goals and reservations of the Johnson administration.

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