

Michael Klarman's book *Unfinished Business* provides an overview of African American history from the birth of the nation to the present. In doing so he presents a multifaceted thesis. He argues that we should not look at the progress of African American rights as a linear progression. If analyzed correctly we should see moments of improvement followed by reactionary backlashes that have at times led to a regression of rights. He also puts forth the argument that change has often come from extraneous sources rather than from some sense of moral obligation. Throughout his discussion, Klarman makes special note of the law and the actions of the Supreme Court, arguing that the Court has not so much been a catalyst for change; instead it has reflected the will of the majority of society. Throughout this book, Klarman provides a good deal of information, as well a very interesting and well supported thesis. Despite the fact that some aspects of his argument are stronger than others, his thoughtful positions and level of detail make this a book that should be read by any teacher interested in the progression of civil rights in America.

Klarman discusses several issues that are commonly left out of a broad analysis of civil rights progression. In particular, he focuses on the limited rights for Blacks in the North. In doing so, he discusses how slavery was prevalent throughout the colonies prior to the *Declaration of Independence*, and that even after manumission in the North, Northern Blacks were not quite free. During the early Republic, Northerners respected the institution of slavery and agreed that slaves were property (Klarman 23), and during the Antebellum period there were black indentured servants in the Northwest Territory. There were limitations for free Blacks throughout the North. During this period, Klarman demonstrates this when he states that deTocqueville observed that prejudice was worse in the North than it was in the South

(36). Another example the author provides is the fact that Northern blacks actually lost the right to vote during the Jacksonian Era, even though there is a common perception that this period was one of increased political participation. Showing how the North was not immune to racism during the Civil War period, the author highlights the Draft Riots in the North during the Civil War (46). He also points out that northern Blacks actually attended more segregated schools in 1920 than they did in 1890 (6). While the discussion of these topics is integral to this topic, these issues really should come as no surprise to a student of history, however.

Klarman successfully supports his idea that the history of Blacks in America was not a slow evolution; rather its progress was uneven and often there were setbacks. He explains how the common perception is that improvement in race relations was slow but inevitable. During the Seventeenth Century, slavery existed. In the eighteenth century, slavery ended in the North and after the Civil War slavery was put to rest. Legal segregation ended in the Twentieth Century and with the new millennium, blacks have become important societal and political figures. However, according to the author, this is not quite accurate (4). He argues that often the advancement of rights was followed by a contraction of rights. Some examples he cites include that the South became defensive of the institution of slavery after the Revolution, that the right to vote for African Americans was quickly limited after the Reconstruction Amendments were ratified, and even after the landmark Brown case, Blacks found it more difficult to vote. He explains how after the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment, Northerners demonstrated less and less interest in protecting the rights of African Americans (83). After being inspired to challenge the status quo after the First World War, Blacks were further setback by a significant increase in membership of the KKK and little to no

support from the federal government in the 1920s (115). Even after the civil rights successes of the mid 1960s there were setbacks; urban violence erupted, Vietnam took the nation's attention away and Nixon was successful with his Southern Strategy.

Klarman is fairly successful in arguing that progress did not come about due to moral suasion, rather it was somewhat forced onto society due to what might be considered extraneous factors. He discusses how the North was against allowing slavery into the territories, not because slavery was morally wrong, but rather because Northerners wanted the land to be open for white farmers. One example of this would be the Missouri Compromise which had Northerners wanting to restrict land for whites in territories (32). Later on, even Wilmot, who instigated the South with his anti slavery Proviso, stated that He "had no moral sympathy for the Slave" (39-40). The author also argues that Northern calls for abolition did not come from a moral stance, but rather, such calls were more a form of retribution stemming from the destruction of the Civil War (48). In later time periods, the author describes how it was pressure from people like Philip Randolph and civil rights leaders that led to political change during WWII, not simply a changing moral fabric that came to the realization that all of sudden change needed to occur. He also states that Truman desegregated the troops after World War Two, largely because he needed black votes to win his presidential election (134).

Despite putting forth a fairly well reasoned argument, Klarman does seem to downplay the impact of impassioned morality on the advancement of African American rights. As in his book on *Brown v Board of Education*, Klarman argues that the Civil Rights Movement was initiated by World War Two and the Cold War (128). However, despite this argument, he does demonstrate that it was moral outrage at the reactionary actions post *Brown* that led to

change. He also weakens his argument when he discusses the influence that some had on black positions in society. One example of this is when he addresses the influence of the Quaker's ending the institution of slavery in Pennsylvania (15). His position is also hindered by his acceptance that Garrison was a strong voice calling for change. Even though he did not have significant support even in the North (32), he did highlight the issue and bring about strong emotions in response to slavery. Despite the fact that Klarman downplays the moral forces that impacted change, his argument that other factors brought about change is still thought provoking.

Klarman also analyzes the impact of laws and the Supreme Court on the progression of Civil Rights. In his analysis he argues that laws have been both positive and negative forces for change. Laws early on supported slavery. During the Constitutional Convention he states that the argument was not whether or not to have slavery but rather how much power slave holders should have in this new government (20). Northern states created laws to segregate and to limit enfranchisement (7). Despite the assumed progress that would follow the 15th Amendment, the author argues that most Americans likely did not support enfranchisement for Blacks, thus it was possible for southern states to place legal limits on voting (57). However, the author argues that as the Twentieth Century progressed, laws were created to enhance the rights of African Americans. Most significant of which would be the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Overall, Klarman argues that the Supreme Court itself is not the catalyst for change; rather it has reflected the broader views of society and acted in response to its changing views. Similar to the nation's laws, the Supreme Court's decisions became more progressive with time.

Prior to the Civil War the Court protected the rights of slaveholders. This is best exhibited through the Dred Scott case that declared that Blacks were not citizens and invalidated the Missouri Compromise (45). During Reconstruction the court limited the rights that were expressed in the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments. By the late 1800s the Supreme Court had limited the scope of the federal government as it pertained to the rights of African Americans and it exhibited a lenient tendency with respect to racially motivated killings. The Supreme Court was not even willing to deal with race issues in a significant sense during the Progressive Era as seen in *Williams v Mississippi* and *Giles v Harris*; both of which allowed limits to voting. Even during the New Deal period, the court system reflected the discrimination of the time with its response to the incident involving the Scottsboro Boys (120). Just as he describes the social circumstances that led to the Brown decision in his Brown book, Klarman argues that WWII and the Cold War set-up the change in the Supreme Court. Bringing the issue closer to the present, he discusses how we still have problems regarding race in America, and that this manifests itself with more recent decisions regarding topics such as affirmative action and busing (192).

While there may not be a wealth of specific lesson plans that can be extracted from this book, the aforementioned ideas and information in the book will no doubt enhance a teacher's perspective of civil rights throughout the history of the United States. The book clarifies the ebbs and flows of the nation's progress as it pertains to civil rights, and even though the book is fairly short in length it is packed with details. Beyond a concise history, the author's complex thesis provides some interesting perspectives (see above) that would most certainly impact how a teacher presents material related to this topic.

Unfinished Business provides a provocative approach to a topic that is familiar to any student of history. Klarman's analysis and his ability to boil down the essentials of this broad topic into a relatively short book make this a must read for any history teacher.

Works Cited

Klarman, Michael. *Unfinished Business: Racial Equality in American History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. Print.