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*The Strange Career of Jim Crow*

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## Summary

*The Strange Career of Jim Crow* begins by describing the situation of blacks during slavery and the contrast between blacks of the time in the north and the south. It goes on to talk about the fact that during reconstruction the South was fairly integrated with only a few segregation laws and a divide developed voluntarily between the races. Then during the redemption period blacks are allowed to vote, they become almost fully integrated, are able to hold public office, and according to some witnesses the south was, for the black, favorable to the north.

Three alternative plans to radical racism are then presented. The conservative philosophy involves the belief that whites are superior to blacks but that blacks should still be afforded many civil rights and be taken care of by the superior whites with no need for excessive humiliation. The populist philosophy was one of equality in which the blacks were in as much trouble as the lower class whites whom the populists targeted. And the third philosophy was that of the liberals whose philosophy was never tested; the liberals believed that blacks deserved the exact same treatment as whites, no better and no worse.

The book then moves into the period in which Jim Crowism really comes into being; the book cites the relax of all of the opposition against racism as the reason why Jim Crow is able to flourish. There was a progression of compromises on racial issues and court cases which led towards full segregation. The book then talks about the rise of the white supremacy movement as a method to heal old wounds between various factions of whites. As a result of this surge in white supremacy the blacks begin to be disfranchised and segregated in every imaginable way, including segregation by city block and neighborhood. It is then discussed that much segregation exceeded the mandate of the law, and that some believed that even if anti-segregation laws were to be passed they could not change the public mindset sufficiently to have an effect. The Jim Crow laws not only held blacks down but progressively lowered the status of blacks.

After WWI blacks gained hope for their prospects of freedom after seeing the US go over seas to defend the freedom and democracies of other peoples. In reaction to these new hopes race riots broke out across the country, during these riots blacks were tortured and killed, and lynchings began to become more prevalent. Through out the 20's the racial situation did not improve. Interracial tensions did however wane

during the great depression. At this point anti-racial organizations such as the NAACP and The National Urban League began to come into power, this latest anti-racist movement is lead primarily by blacks.

After WWII black rights gained a boost from the obvious hypocrisy of fighting a war against a severely racist nation (Germany) in the name of freedom and Democracy while on US soil racism was being practiced. Then during the Cold War the USSR pointed to the US as being a failure of its own mottos specifically in race relations. When the UN came to the US many non-Caucasian ambassadors saw the Jim Crow laws and began to question their relationships with the US, as a result a number of blacks got placed in high level foreign relations positions within the government. In 1946 president Truman appointed a Committee on Civil Rights, which called for the total elimination of segregation. Then in 1948 President Truman issued an executive order calling for the complete desegregation of the armed forces. In 1946 the Court began to throw out segregation laws in interstate transportation, however due to a lack of federal legislator, due to an Eisenhower administration which believed laws couldn't change the "Home Rule", segregation on interstates continued. Beginning in 1941 the Supreme Court began to make it unlawful to hold an all white primary, allowing some blacks to begin voting and holding office. By the early 1950's lynching had almost disappeared and some states had begun to regulate the Ku Klux Klan. A number of cities began to open public areas on an un-segregated basis, many colleges admitted blacks, and some societies of intellectuals began to admit blacks. The Supreme Court widened the definition of equal and began to make it apparent that separate but equal institutions would have to be truly equal; as a result several states began to attempt to equalize the black and white schools. On May 17<sup>th</sup> 1954 the ruling on *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* made segregation in schools unconstitutional. Although southern federal courts upheld the Supreme Courts decision, the legislatures of a number of southern states began to adopt pro-segregation measures. At this point blacks began to assert themselves; from 1955-56 blacks boycotted the Montgomery bus system, the bus boycott was repeated in other cities, then the first sit in occurred at Woolworth's lunch counter, and within a couple of weeks sit-ins were occurring across the south. Then in 1961 brutal attacks on freedom riders began a wave of pro-segregation violence. Then John F. Kennedy came into the presidency and threw his power behind desegregation and launched an effective campaign to achieve it. On November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1963 President Kennedy was assassinated, placing into office Lyndon B. Johnson. President

Johnson immediately took up the civil rights cause and pushed for the enactment of the Civil Rights bill which once signed by the president made segregation illegal in all places of public accommodation. The next victory for the civil rights movement came on August 6<sup>th</sup> 1965 in the form of the Voting Rights Act which abolished literacy tests and authorized federal examiners to begin registering blacks to vote.

Beginning in August 1965 hundreds of riots began to break out, the rioters were blacks and the areas where the riots occurred were black areas, the riots would continue through 1968. A change began to occur within some parts of the black community, a change toward a belief in separatism, this change was reflected in a number of civil rights organizations which changed their mission from integration to separation of races and in some cases to revolution in the name of Black Nationalism. In 1969 a Supreme Court ruling calling for the immediate end to school segregation caused a new found speed in desegregation in the south. A new area of segregation had now developed, segregation in the north which was caused by a migration of whites out of the city and blacks living together in inner-city neighborhoods. Many believed that there was nothing to be done about this type of segregation and that it just had to be accepted, while some believed the government should force racial mixing.

### Reaction

I learned a lot from this book. I went into the book knowing very little about the pre Montgomery bus boycott period of the Civil Rights Movement. I come out of it now having a much greater knowledge of the various freedoms and lacks of freedoms which blacks endured from the emancipation to the 1970's.

I learned of the freedoms which the blacks enjoyed during the redemption period. I cannot understand, even with the explanation presented in the book, why whites reverted back to poor treatment of blacks. The book says that the reason is that white supremacy was the only thing powerful enough to bring whites back together, but I would think enough people would be intelligent enough to realize that blacks were at the worst slightly below whites, and only because of their experience as slaves. The book mentions some people who seem to have to some extent believed this but they were deleted by political problems. I still can't believe however that after many whites saw blacks being perfectly functional parts of society more common people didn't feel that blacks were normal respectable people.

Another thing which I did not know was the fact that President Johnson had done so much for black rights. In fact pertaining to the political and legal aspects of the Civil Rights movement I knew only that Lincoln had signed the emancipation, that *Plessy v. Ferguson* started mass segregation, that *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* signaled the beginning of the end of segregation, that the governor of Arkansas was violently against integration, and that JFK had been a supporter of Civil Rights. I knew nothing of the actions of any other president or politician. I am still curious however as to what caused the dramatic change in the Supreme Court towards a pro-civil rights stance and what caused the Federal Judges to go against the beliefs of their areas.

I also did not know about the white exoduses from cities and the rather large Black Nationalism movement and the way it almost destroyed all the Civil Rights Movement had accomplished. I had heard and knew some about the Black Panthers but I was not aware that former Civil Rights Groups also had become Black Nationalist groups nor was I aware of the level of organization among the Black Nationalists.

I think that the Jim Crow laws shaped the way the country is today, the way that races are dispersed is a partial result of Jim Crow, the opportunities which blacks get is in some part due to Jim Crow, and the way that race relations are today is a partial result of Jim Crow. Overall I think that the lessons learned with Jim Crow have made America what it is today and has dictated how it operates within itself and towards the rest of the world.

### Evaluation

I personally greatly enjoyed *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*; however I found it to be rather difficult. I found the book to be very informing, but I felt as if I needed previous information (which I did not have) to fully understand all the book was saying. I believe that this book has two possible places in a history class, the first is right before a study on Civil Rights; the book could effectively introduce the subject and could be referred back to during the course of the study. The second is at the end of a study on Civil Rights; the book could serve to effectively tie up all that the student has learned. I do not however believe that the book has a place alone as a summer reading book as I believe its full value cannot be obtained without a full class study of the Civil Rights Movement.