

1974

**CORE: A STUDY IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1942-1968. By August Meier and Elliott Rudwick. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. Pp. vii-563. Cloth, \$15.00.**

Maxwell Bloomfield

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.edu/lawreview>

---

## Recommended Citation

Maxwell Bloomfield, *CORE: A STUDY IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1942-1968. By August Meier and Elliott Rudwick. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. Pp. vii-563. Cloth, \$15.00.*, 23 Cath. U. L. Rev. 638 (1974).

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.edu/lawreview/vol23/iss3/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by CUA Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Catholic University Law Review by an authorized editor of CUA Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [edinger@law.edu](mailto:edinger@law.edu).

## BOOK REVIEW

**CORE: A STUDY IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1942-1968.** By August Meier and Elliott Rudwick. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. Pp. vii-563. Cloth, \$15.00.

Maxwell Bloomfield\*

Two major hazards confront the writers of institutional history. Some are tempted to concentrate almost exclusively upon problems of internal structure and bureaucratic decision-making, to the exclusion of human and irrational factors; while others tend to substitute anecdote for analysis, by overemphasizing the personality and influence of key organizational figures. To their credit, Professors Meier and Rudwick strike an admirable balance between these two extremes. Their richly detailed study of the rise and decline of a leading civil rights organization of the twentieth century slights neither the charismatic leadership of a James Farmer nor the larger social forces that contributed to CORE's changing membership and objectives. As collaborators in several previous volumes of black history, including the acclaimed *From Plantation to Ghetto* (1966), Meier and Rudwick bring to their subject a demonstrated familiarity with the broader reaches of the black experience in America, along with the combined insights of the historian (Meier) and the sociologist (Rudwick). The result is an unusually sophisticated and enlightening account that—within the limits imposed by source materials and the authors' staunchly liberal values—should stand as a permanently valuable addition to the literature of the civil rights movement.

Since CORE functioned, for the most part, as a loose federation of essentially autonomous chapters, no purported history could ignore the diverse problems and activities of its numerous affiliates across the country. In coping with this kaleidoscopic challenge, Meier and Rudwick draw

---

\* Ph.D., Tulane University; Associate Professor of History, The Catholic University of America.

upon a wealth of data from organizational archives, privately owned manuscript collections, black and white newspapers, published and unpublished studies by historians and behavioral scientists, and over two hundred personal interviews. If at times their painstaking enumeration of chapter projects reads somewhat like a laundry list, they never fail to relate local developments to bureaucratic and ideological tensions within the national office. Their encyclopedic treatment also documents in a compelling way the protean manifestations of racial injustice in contemporary American society.

Founded in Chicago in 1942, the Congress of Racial Equality (at first styled the "Committee of Racial Equality") was an outgrowth of the Christian-pacifist student movement of the 1930s. Its fifty charter members, including twenty-two women and twenty-eight men, were overwhelmingly middle-class Christians below the age of thirty. A majority were white university students, drawn in large part from the Federated Theological Seminary at the University of Chicago, while the black members tended to be college graduates employed in white-collar jobs. Although avowed pacifists made up less than half of the group, they formed a "creative nucleus" that dominated leadership positions in the early years and decisively influenced the organization's philosophy and style.

At the outset CORE adopted two guiding principles that remained viable for the next two decades: a commitment to nonviolent direct action on the Gandhian model, and an equally strong insistence upon interracial efforts to attain the goal of a fully integrated, equalitarian society. New members were required to be well versed in the philosophy of nonviolence, and to work actively on some CORE project, in accordance with the modified Gandhian methods set out in the group's official "Action Discipline." Those methods, which were regarded as "radical" in some quarters at the time, seem remarkably tame in perspective. Essentially, they involved sit-ins at places of public accommodation in various northern cities. Notions of civil disobedience played little role in these early demonstrations, which were directed against private businesses that refused to comply with state civil rights laws. Stressing the importance of a display of "good will and creative reconciliation" toward segregationists, protesters went out of their way to behave decorously and to avoid arrest. As James Farmer remarked in the 1960s, in reference to the first CORE sit-in at a Chicago restaurant:

When I look back at that first sit-in, I am amazed at our patience and good faith. No action group today would prolong the attempts at negotiation for more than a month before finally deciding to demonstrate. No militant Negro today would dream of

trying to persuade a manager to serve him on the grounds that Negro patronage would not be bad for business. We have grown too proud for that. But in those days we were childishly literal-minded . . . . We regarded the sit-in as the successful culmination of a long campaign to reach the heart of the restaurant owner with the truth. What we took to be his conversion was as important as the fact that the restaurant had indeed been desegregated. (p. 14)

Through their low-keyed tactics and limited range of targets, CORE members won a measure of public approval by midcentury and succeeded in desegregating a number of public facilities in the North and West. When local chapters tried to move beyond the public accommodations issue into more controversial areas, such as job and housing discrimination, however, they generally made little progress. One important source of frustration lay in their continuing inability to attract black working-class recruits or to establish solid ties with the black community at large. Until the appointment of James Farmer as national director in 1961, CORE remained overwhelmingly a middle-class organization whose highest offices were often filled by whites. Distrusted by the black masses and rent by factional quarrels over the choice of future projects and strategies, the group's fortunes reached their nadir around 1954, as many chapters closed and further recruitment efforts were stymied by the pervasive anti-communist and anti-radical hysteria of the McCarthy era.

Even in these years of defeat and retrenchment, however, some significant improvements were made in the structure and operational efficiency of the national office. Under the aggressive leadership of James R. Robinson, an enlarged full-time secretariat was created in New York along with a streamlined executive committee (the "National Action Committee"), entrusted with the formulation of general policy. A more professional approach to fund-raising and promotional activities brought a gratifying increase in the number of contributions from sympathetic white liberals, and facilitated the hiring of salaried field workers to organize new affiliates in the hitherto impregnable South. By 1960, when black college students began their lunch counter sit-ins in North Carolina and other southern states, CORE was thus prepared to lend them strong support and to adapt its pioneer tactics of nonviolent direct action to the new demands of the "civil rights revolution" of the sixties.

The celebrated "Freedom Ride" of 1961 catapulted the organization into national prominence, and for several years it remained at the "cutting edge" of black protest movement. Inspired by visions of an approaching millennium, CORE members stepped up their campaigns and turned to more militant tactics—"jail-ins," confrontations with police, for-

cible interference with the operations of target businesses or governmental agencies. Their efforts produced some significant victories for fair employment and housing in the North and opened up public accommodations and voter registration to Negroes in the South. But the pace of such social change could not satisfy millennial expectations. By the time that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were passed, much of CORE's traditional integrationist program had lost its appeal; and the group found itself increasingly upstaged by more militant black nationalists, such as Malcolm X. Unsuccessful in its attempts to aid ghetto residents through mammoth direct-action campaigns against the institutional racism of school boards, slum-lords, police departments, and discriminatory labor unions, CORE moved farther and farther to the right. After a period of bitter and protracted infighting reminiscent of its earlier decline in the 1950s, the organization jettisoned its nonviolent ideology along with its white members (and many dissident blacks), and proclaimed itself in 1968 "once and for all . . . a Black Nationalist Organization," with "separation" as its goal.

Meier and Rudwick do not minimize the virulent factionalism that plagued CORE through much of its existence; nor do they ignore the jealous feuding that characterized its relations with other civil rights groups, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). But their sympathy for Movement organizations and objectives leads them to dismiss far too cavalierly the social costs of some types of direct action. They are notably weak, for example, in analyzing the legal ramifications of CORE's activities, although they do make some use of the files of Carl Rachlin, the group's counsel. Adverse judicial decisions are routinely labeled "repressive," without regard for the specific issues presented by widely differing sets of facts. Yet it may well be, as Abe Fortas has suggested in his brief but incisive book, *Concerning Dissent and Civil Disobedience* (1968), that certain types of disruptive behavior cannot be tolerated by any society, whether racist or not. In any event, the shifting strategies and actions of CORE raise hard problems of a legal and philosophical nature that must be confronted by serious commentators. In failing to face up to this unpleasant task, Meier and Rudwick have done both their readers and their subject a disservice. Their account, for all its excellencies, comes down far too heavily on the side of hagiolatry. Despite its pretensions to scholarly objectivity, it remains an appealing and perhaps definitive insider's view of organizational tactics and personalities. What we need now is a hard-nosed look at CORE from the outside.

# MANUAL OF FEDERAL PRACTICE

and  
1973 SUPPLEMENT  
Two Volumes

BY RICHARD A. LAVINE  
Member California and Federal Bars  
Former Chief, Civil Division  
United States Attorney's Office  
Los Angeles, California

AND  
GEORGE D. HORNING, JR.

Professor of Law,  
The American University  
Washington College of Law  
Member District of Columbia  
and Maryland Bars  
Former Assistant District Attorney  
for the District of Columbia

*step-by-step guide to  
every key phase of  
federal practice*

**Concise . . . Complete**

- I JURISDICTION
- II VENUE AND TRANSFER
- III PLEADINGS AND PARTIES
- IV PRELIMINARY MOTIONS
- V DISCOVERY
- VI PRETRIAL
- VII TRIAL
- VIII TAKING AND  
PERFECTING FEDERAL  
APPEALS

*Appendix:*

GUIDE TO TIME LIMITS  
TABLE OF PRACTICE FORMS

- IX APPELLATE PRACTICE

"The book meets a growing need  
... it merits a place on the shelves  
of every active practitioner of  
the law"

*(Excerpt from Preface, writ-  
ten by a Senior Judge, United  
States Court of Appeals.)*

PRICE \$35.00 — AVAILABLE ON APPROVAL

**SHEPARD'S CITATIONS** (McGraw-Hill)

P. O. BOX 1235 • COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO • 80901