

Interracial Activism and the Civil Rights Movement in Postwar Miami

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The civil rights movement in America came to fruition in the 1960s, when important federal legislation guaranteed civil rights, voting rights, and fair housing. However, the immediate postwar era from 1945 to 1960 served as a critical staging ground for the movement's subsequent success. During this crucial period, civil rights activism at the local level challenged Jim Crow segregation, developed confrontational methods of non-violent protest, and led to the formation of militant civil rights organizations. Local people and local organizations provided the essential energy for bottom-up civil rights movements across the nation. In many cities, these local movements were marked by interracial activism on the left, as Blacks and Whites worked together for racial reform. These patterns prevailed in Miami, where activist Blacks and Whites, especially Jewish newcomers from the North, formed a notable alliance promoting the civil rights agenda.¹

Miami's Postwar Patterns

The postwar era was one of dynamic growth and pivotal change for the Florida metropolis. The war itself had a tremendous impact on the Miami area, stimulating its growth and moving the city's economy beyond its heavy reliance on the tourism and service industries. The subtropical climate and year-round good weather encouraged the Army and Navy to build dozens of military training facilities all over Florida, including several in Miami. The federal government pumped millions

of dollars into local infrastructure development, especially airports, and the enormous military payroll sustained the local economy. Tens of thousands servicemen, Black as well as White, trained at Miami air and naval bases, supported by a large contingent of civilian construction and service workers. Finally, the war stimulated Black activism in Miami, influenced by the Double-V campaign promoted by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the Black newspaper that campaigned for victory over totalitarianism abroad and victory over segregation in the United States. All of these wartime consequences set Miami on a new path in the postwar period.²

In the crucial decade and a half following World War II, powerful forces shaped and reshaped Miami, some promoting change and some resisting change. The revival of tourism and real estate development led the way, supported by air travel and air conditioning. In simpler times before Disney World and Las Vegas, Miami and the beaches remained the nation's top tourist destination. Miami was a hot destination again, new and bigger hotels were sprouting on Miami Beach, and tourism enjoyed a new vitality. Home air conditioning units, monthly social security checks, and an expanding economy attracted retirees and new residents who poured into South Florida's mushrooming subdivisions in unprecedented numbers. Metropolitan Miami's population surged dramatically during and after the war rising from 267,000 in 1940 to 495,000 in 1950 and 935,000 in 1960—an astonishing growth rate of 250 percent over two decades. After a taste of Florida sunshine, thousands of military veterans who trained in the area returned to live permanently in Miami in the postwar years. Many of Miami's wartime workers also became permanent residents, but new northern migration provided the great bulk of the population increase. Working-class Jews and Italians from New York and other northern cities predominated. Metropolitan Miami had 8,000 Jews in 1940 but about 140,000 in 1960 and 230,000 by 1970. The Black population was growing as well, accompanied by neighborhood racial transitions and more intensified housing segregation. By 1960, Blacks and Jews each made up about 15 percent of Dade County's residents. Many northern newcomers to Miami were uneasy about the southern racial practices that prevailed in Miami at the time—the segregated restaurants, theaters, buses, and drinking fountains. Thus, postwar Dade County experienced enormous population growth, sprawling residential development, and a rapidly rising level of

population diversity (even before the surge of Cuban and Caribbean migrations after 1960). These demographic changes had important implications for the civil rights movement in Miami, eventually providing a base for interracial activism.³

Postwar Miami was also shaped by the emergence of the Cold War, the new Red Scare, and the rise of McCarthyism, all of which had powerful political repercussions in the emerging Sunbelt metropolis. These political currents created a repressive atmosphere throughout the nation, in Florida, and in Dade County. Nationally, McCarthyism found a podium in U.S. House and Senate committees investigating domestic communism—the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security (SSIS). The surge of anti-communism also led to the establishment of a legal structure designed to intimidate the political left. These measures included: first, the Smith Act of 1940, which targeted immigrant radicals and outlawed seditious speech; second, the Internal Security Act of 1950, which required registration of communists and communist organizations or fronts; and third, several other federal laws such as the Communist Control Act of 1954 designed to harass leftists and curb radical labor union activity. All of these measures were used against civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP. Florida McCarthyites fiercely resisted racial change, harassed the political left, and made the work of civil rights activists difficult and dangerous.⁴

On the state level, in 1956, McCarthyite anti-communist hysteria led to the creation by Florida legislature of the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (FLIC), also called Johns Committee after its chairman, state Senator Charley Johns. The FLIC seemed mostly aimed at destroying the Miami NAACP, because of its early legal challenge to school segregation. Charging that the organization harbored communist members, the FLIC grilled numerous Miamians, Black and White, about their political convictions. Miami's major civil rights organization, and especially its leader, the Reverend Theodore Gibson, fought back effectively, frustrating the Florida red hunters. Consequently, the Johns Committee soon went after softer and less political targets, such as gay professors and students in the state universities.⁵

Dade County also had a serious encounter with McCarthyism. In the early 1950s, State Attorney George Brautigam embarked on a nasty campaign attacking left-wing activists in Miami, mostly Jewish, who

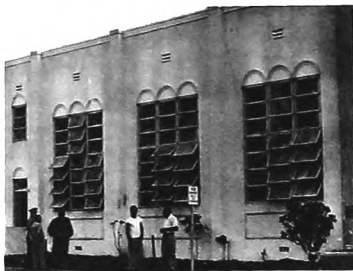
were fighting segregation and working for civil rights. Many ended up in jail for a time for refusing to answer questions about their political beliefs. Others left Miami for Mexico or Canada, driven out by the local McCarthyites and a hysterical red scare campaign unleashed by the Miami newspapers, especially the *Miami News*. These right-wing attacks on the activists left retarded the civil rights agenda, both nationally and locally.⁶

The power of White racism represented another dynamic force in postwar Miami, in this case a force for resisting change. Those behind Miami's mid-century red scare shared the racial politics of the White segregationists. As both groups saw it, Whites and Blacks pushing to end segregation were part of a communist plot to undermine White power and racial purity. It is not a coincidence that the McCarthy era witnessed not only the harassment of the political left in Miami, but also the repression of civil rights activism and any effort to breach the residential color line. For example, in the late 1940s, when Blacks began breaking out of the Overtown ghetto and buying houses in Brownsville, at that time a

working-class White neighborhood, the Ku Klux Klan came out in force. On numerous occasions, the Klan burned crosses and even houses in an effort to maintain established racial boundaries. In 1951, when White owners of the Carver Village apartment complex near Liberty City began renting to Blacks, the Klan protested, paraded, and set dynamite bombs on three separate occasions, destroying several of the units and once again challenging the breach of the color line. During this same period, Klansmen in Central Florida dynamited the home of Harry T. Moore, the statewide leader of the NAACP. The violent culture of White racism, many believed at the time, linked the Miami and Central Florida bombings. Also significant, Jewish schools and synagogues in Miami were bombed at the same time as Carver Village, suggesting that White supremacists blamed Jews as well as



Formerly a white housing community, Carver Village opened to Blacks in August, 1951. Dynamite was used to bomb the facility. No one, however was hurt. Courtesy of the Florida State Archives.



Miami Hebrew School, located in Miami's southwest section, after bomb damage, 1951. Courtesy of the Florida State Archives.

Blacks for unwanted racial change. Anti-Semitism remained powerful through the 1950s, especially after 1954, when the battle over school integration heated up. New Miami synagogue and Jewish school bombings took place in 1958. The Miami police were part of the problem and did little to investigate or prosecute racially motivated crimes. What happened in Miami during this period was a dangerous

linkage of anti-communism, anti-Semitism, and the defense of segregation. White supremacists jointly targeted Blacks and Jews who seemed to threaten the racial status quo, especially on the issues of school desegregation and neighborhood change. The repressive racial and political atmosphere in the nation, in Florida, and especially in postwar Miami had major consequences for Black and White civil rights activists, setting back the movement for racial equality by a decade or more.⁷

Miami's Civil Rights Movement

The emergence of Miami's civil rights movement in the postwar era became a powerful force for social and political change. Miami during this period was a Deep South city on anything and everything having to do with race. Jobs, housing, schooling, recreation, government services—all were completely segregated. Miami Blacks and some Whites worked together to eliminate these barriers, especially after World War II unleashed the aspirations of African Americans across the nation. Voter registration drives, legal challenges on schooling and public accommodations, lunch-counter sit-ins, beach wade-ins, theater stand-ins, economic boycotts, marches, and demonstrations—civil rights activists in Miami used all of these methods in creative ways to achieve the desegregation of the city. The activists also used the press, radio, and television to get their message across. They played especially on the fears of Miami's civic and business elite that bad news in the papers and civil rights demonstrations on television would have a negative impact on tourism, Miami's economic bread and butter.

In recent years, scholars have reshaped the way we think about the civil rights movement. Rather than focusing on the role of national civil rights leaders and national organizations—the old way of thinking—the emphasis has shifted to the local level where civil rights actions were taking place. Rather than one big civil rights movement, historians now see many civil rights movements. Throughout the nation, innumerable local groups confronted segregation and discrimination, energized by indigenous local leaders and moved to action by local conditions or events. These local action groups generally struggled on their own,

outside the national spotlight, and with little or no connection to national civil rights leaders or organizations. Occasionally, as in Montgomery, Selma, Birmingham, and elsewhere, when local movement action approached crisis stage and became newsworthy, national organizations and leaders might move in to provide assistance or even to take control, but this did not always happen. The national civil rights movement, in short, was a collection of mostly separate, mostly disconnected bottom-up movements. This new way of conceptualizing the civil rights era helps to explain what happened in Miami. Thus, the movement in Miami was one of these many local action movements bubbling up from below because of the racial conditions in Dade County and the work of local activists.⁸

Actually, the civil rights struggle in Miami has an extensive history—a history that begins long before the dramatic events of the 1950s and 1960s. The struggle goes back to the beginnings of the city in the 1890s. For Miami's first forty years, Bahamian immigrants made up half of the city's Black population. Unaccustomed to Jim Crow segregation in the British islands, Miami's Black Bahamians resisted White racism in a variety of ways, but especially by joining in large numbers Marcus Garvey's militant, Black nationalist organization, the Universal Negro



An editorial cartoon by Anne Mergen suggests the purposeful ineffectiveness of the Miami Police Department in curbing Ku Klux Klan violence to enforce the “color line” in Miami. *Miami Daily News*, May 8, 1938.

Improvement Association (UNIA). The UNIA promoted racial pride and Black solidarity. As in the later civil rights movement, religious institutions were key to the UNIA's wide popularity. Many of Miami's Black preachers were organizers of the local UNIA in 1920, and they used their churches to support its goals. Infiltrated by the FBI, the Miami UNIA reportedly encouraged such ideas as racial equality, interracial marriage, and forcible resistance to White authority—shocking ideas in early twentieth-century Miami. As in other cities, Miami's UNIA chapter organized a branch of the African Black Legion, a sort of militia group that often paraded through the Black community in ornate uniforms, accompanied by bands and floats. Viewed as dangerous and threatening to White Miamians, several of the UNIA's leaders were harassed, kidnapped, and forced to leave town or shipped back to the Bahamas by the local Ku Klux Klan. Nevertheless, the UNIA had over one thousand members in Miami, mostly born in the Bahamas and the West Indies, and some of their mass meetings in the late 1920s drew as many as three thousand people. The organization faded in the 1930s, but the racial pride and solidarity it encouraged never completely disappeared. Thus, the UNIA played a major organizational role in Black Miami in the 1920s, serving as a precursor to subsequent civil rights and Black power organizations.⁹

U.S.-born Blacks in Miami also organized groups with an early civil rights agenda. Black businessmen established Miami's Negro Uplift Association in the 1920s to fight for improved living conditions, and a few courageous activists organized a local NAACP chapter in the 1930s to fight for Black rights. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Black editor and activist Sam Solomon organized the Negro Citizens Service League, which carried out successful voter registration campaigns. Solomon himself ran unsuccessfully for a seat on the non-partisan Miami City Commission. Baptist minister Edward Graham, head of the Miami branch of the National Urban League, conducted a number of confrontational civil rights actions during the 1940s, including beach wade-ins that eventually gained access to the Atlantic Ocean for Blacks for the first time. The Urban League later facilitated the integration of the medical staff at Miami's Jackson Memorial Hospital, an important breakthrough for subsequent institutional employment. Under the leadership of the Reverend Theodore Gibson, an Episcopal minister from the Bahamas, local NAACP legal challenges on issues of police bru-

tality, schooling, public accommodations, and other issues became more frequent and more insistent after mid-century. The Miami NAACP also threatened a bus boycott in 1956, following a successful transit boycott in Tallahassee, but the organization eventually used legal challenges to end the Miami Transit Company's segregated bus system in 1957.

Throughout the postwar era, Miami's Black newspaper, *The Miami Times*, maintained a forceful and unyielding position on African American civil rights and racial justice. These confrontations with the rigid system of Southern segregation emerged spontaneously in the local community, without assistance from any national leaders or organizations. Blacks organized, struggled, challenged, and contested throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Driven by local issues, the civil rights movement in Miami had an important history prior to the mid 1950s, but few White people were involved in any of these activities.¹⁰

On racial issues, postwar Miami differed little from most of the Deep South. However, the massive northern migration to South Florida after World War II ultimately challenged the pattern and practice of racial segregation in Miami. The enormous postwar Jewish migration made Miami more liberal, less Southern, and more open to racial change. Most significantly, it also brought White people into the local civil rights movement for the first time. Liberal and left-wing Jews, and some other Whites as well, played a major role in enlarging Miami's civil rights organizational structure. They established Miami branches of national Jewish defense organizations, such as the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Congress, both of which got involved in liberal causes in Miami. They also created new organizations such as the American Veterans Committee, the Civil Rights Congress, and the Congress of Racial Equality that more directly took on civil rights issues. Many Whites participated actively in the affairs of the Miami branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). And a few political leaders—Jack Gordon and Jack Orr, for example—took strong stands against racism and discrimination at a time when few others were courageous enough to do so. In the 1960s, White civil rights activists worked as members of the Dade County Community Relations Board, an agency charged with mediating and resolving racial and ethnic conflict at a time when the Cuban immigration began reshaping Miami's cultural landscape.

Interracial Activism in Miami

The postwar Jewish migration to South Florida made an immediate impact on Miami's racial relations. Jewish veterans returning home or migrating to Miami after 1945 joined a new veterans organization that promoted civil rights issues and other liberal issues. The Jewish-dominated American Veterans Committee offered a progressive alternative to the conservative and racially exclusive American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars. The AVC welcomed Black veterans as members in the late 1940s, held interracial meetings and dinners, and actively challenged segregation in mid-century South Florida. Jewish AVC members such as businessman Jack Gordon subsequently took leading roles in numerous activist Miami organizations, including the Civil Rights Congress, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Florida Civil Liberties Union. According to Gordon, the Miami AVC represented the opening edge of White participation in Miami's civil rights struggle. Another Jewish veteran, attorney Burnett Roth, an Anti-Defamation League activist and Miami Beach city councilman, fought anti-Semitism through passage of a local ordinance banning discriminatory signs aimed at Jews, but he also pushed anti-Klan legislation in the Florida legislature that outlawed masks and cross-burning. Early in the postwar era, Jewish women in the Miami branch of the Emma Lazarus Federation, an ultra-leftist group linked to the communist-dominated International Workers Order, worked on civil rights issues as well. They worked with Black churchwomen and held rallies challenging the red-hunting activities of Florida officials. Similarly, the Miami branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, heavily Jewish, worked for world peace and racial justice throughout the postwar era.¹¹

By the late 1940s, a vibrant political left had emerged among mostly secular Jews in Miami and Miami Beach. The huge migration of Jews in the postwar period included socialists, communists, and assorted left-wingers, as well as mainstream liberals. They belonged to such groups as the socialist Workmen's Circle and the communist Jewish People's Fraternal Order. They gathered for political discussions, concerts, lectures, Yiddish language classes, and Jewish cultural activities at the secular Jewish Cultural Center on Miami Beach, which at its peak had more than 600 members. One of their members, Leah Adler Benemovsky, coordinated a visit to Miami in April 1948 by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a leading American communist figure, causing an uproar

in the Miami newspapers. Benemovsky was hauled before a grand jury, and although brilliantly defended by the progressive Pensacola attorney John M. Coe, she eventually served ninety days in jail for refusing to answer questions about her political beliefs. This early witch hunt outraged and mobilized the Jewish left in Miami. One outcome of this civil liberties battle was the formation of a Miami branch of the Civil Rights Congress, which pursued an important interracial program at the height of the postwar red scare. The Benemovsky case also coincided with the creation of the Florida Progressive Party.¹²

Heavily supported by Miami's Jewish left-liberals, the Florida Progressive Party provided a political vehicle for civil rights advocacy, at least for a few years into the 1950s. During the 1948 presidential election campaign, the Democratic Party platform for the first time included a strong civil rights plank. However, more congenial to many Miami liberals and radicals was the national Progressive Party candidacy of Henry A. Wallace.

A former vice president under Franklin D. Roosevelt in the early 1940s, Wallace advocated a program focused on civil rights, world peace, and a variety of progressive social programs. Black and Jewish activists, including many members of the newly-formed Civil Rights Congress (CRC), gravitated toward the Wallace movement, creating their own Florida Progressive Party, headed by attorney John M. Coe. The two organizations shared a Miami office for several years. CRC activists Bobbi Graff and Gail Gropper, along with former UNIA leader James Nimmo, became energetic campaign speakers for the Wallace campaign in Miami. They spoke to Black and White church groups, canvassed voters, and organized political rallies, including one that brought out twelve thousand people for a Wallace speech in Miami's downtown Bayfront Park. Florida Progressives hoped to appeal to Black voters and took strong stands on anti-lynching and



Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, one of the leading communists in the United States during the 1940s. Her appearance in the Miami area in 1948 provoked controversy. HMSF 1995-277-13935.

anti-Klan legislation, issues that the Democratic Party avoided. Wallace lost decisively, but Miami's Progressive activists persisted into the 1950s, publishing newsletters and a short-lived newspaper, *The Florida Progressive*. James Nimmo headed a Progressive Party club in the downtown Black community, while Black and White Progressive candidates sought local office, unsuccessfully, in Miami and Miami Beach. The Party's interracial meetings and campaign rallies challenged the Miami color line and brought police harassment and Klan threats. As the Florida Progressive Party began to fade after the 1948 election, the Civil Rights Congress became a more prominent interracial advocate for civil rights.¹³

The Miami chapter of the Civil Rights Congress was established in the late 1940s. It remained active into the early 1950s, when it was undermined and destroyed by the FBI and the Brautigam investigations. The CRC was a left-wing organization whose members came from socialist, communist, and trade-union backgrounds in Europe and northern cities such as New York and Detroit. Many members were older, retired, working-class Jews; others were younger, including housewives and professionals. Most were involved with the Jewish Cultural Center on Miami Beach, the home of several secular Jewish organizations. Some were involved in labor union organizing in Miami, such as Charles Smolikoff, the CIO's regional director for Florida for a time in the late 1940s. CRC leaders connected with some Blacks on the left, including former members of Garvey's UNIA such as James Nimmo. Through interracial organizations among shipyard workers, airline workers, and laundry workers, Smolikoff and Nimmo promoted not just unionized labor but also civil rights and civil liberties. CRC members worked hard for the election of Henry Wallace in the 1948 election, while also challenging the color line and protesting police brutality in the Black community. They also publicized the racial injustice of the infamous Groveland case in Central Florida.¹⁴

After some initial leadership uncertainty, Matilda "Bobbi" Graff became the head of Miami CRC. Born in Brooklyn, Graff moved to Detroit with her husband in 1940, and then to Miami in 1946. She was committed to social justice and racial equality and worked hard to achieve those goals. But it was not a good time for a political leftist to be advocating racial change in Deep South Miami. Graff and her colleagues were investigated, followed, and bugged by the FBI, harassed

by the Miami police, and threatened by the Klan. Under these multiple pressures, Miami CRC officially disbanded in the early 1950s. But Graff and other members joined the NAACP, where they worked on voter registration campaigns and other issues. When the Brautigam investigations geared up in 1954, Bobbi Graff and her husband Emanuel were subpoenaed to testify. She received her subpoena in a hospital bed after delivering a child. Terrified by these McCarthy scare tactics, she fled to Canada with her children. In the meantime, Emanuel Graff, along with a number of other CRC activists, went to jail for contempt of court. Miami's hostile racial politics cut short an early civil rights challenge to racial segregation.¹⁵

About the same time that the CRC disintegrated under attack from the right, the Miami NAACP was experiencing a rejuvenation under its new president, the Reverend Theodore Gibson. A powerful figure in Miami's Black history, Gibson inspired Black and White liberals with his civil rights message and his dynamic speaking ability. Gibson found essential support for the NAACP's program from Ruth Perry, a White Protestant librarian at the Miami Beach Public Library who had joined the organization in the late 1940s. Born in South Carolina but raised in upstate New York, Perry found Miami's racial discrimination and segregation distasteful and unacceptable. By the mid 1950s, she had become the NAACP's secretary and a visible symbol of the fact that the group was not just a Black organization. Perry conducted most of the correspondence with the national NAACP, and as keeper of the Miami branch records, she was targeted by the Johns Committee in its search for communists in the organization. On the advice of national NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall, Perry shipped the Miami membership records to New York, and then endured three separate grillings by Johns Committee members, denying allegations of communism and powerfully asserting her belief in a color-blind society. Like other White activists, she was harassed and threatened by the Klan and the White Citizens Council for her outspoken beliefs. An energetic and articulate activist, Perry wrote a weekly civil rights column, "Along Freedom's Road," for the *Miami Times*, the city's Black paper. She also got into radio journalism, broadcasting weekly for several years on Miami's African American station, WMBM. In both of these journalistic forums, Perry established a forceful presence as an interracial activist during dangerous times.¹⁶

In the late 1950s, another interracial organization took up the cause of civil rights in Miami. The Miami branch of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was founded in early 1959 by three progressive Jewish women, Thalia Stern, Barbara Gordon, and Shirley Zoloth. CORE was an interracial organization committed to confrontational, non-violent action such as demonstrations, picketing, and sit-ins. CORE originated the sit-in technique in the early 1940s when it was founded by students at the University of Chicago. Miami CORE was not a large organization, having only a few dozen White and Black members initially. Arriving in Miami in 1954 from Philadelphia, Shirley Zoloth became the unofficial chairman of Miami CORE after its foundation in 1959. Dr. John O. Brown, a Black physician and vice president of the Miami NAACP, represented the group to the press and the public. Zoloth and her friends had been outraged that the Dade County School Board, five years after the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the *Brown* case, was doing absolutely nothing to desegregate Dade schools. Instead, the school board had implemented numerous delaying tactics, such as the pupil assignment law. Seeking to buy more time, in 1958 the school board announced the integration of the Orchard Villa Elementary School, located in a racially changing neighborhood. Whites were already fleeing the neighborhood, and the exodus intensified after the school board announcement. Black and White integrationists denounced the decision as a phony integration plan—a ploy that suggested compliance with the court decision but in reality further delayed true school desegregation.¹⁷

Miami CORE's organizers hoped to promote school integration, but many of the Blacks in the organization were more interested in public accommodations issues, such as eating at Flagler Street lunch counters and restaurants. These stores had sit-down counters where Blacks traditionally had been denied service, but they could be served at stand-up counters or windows. Miami Blacks resented the daily indignities imposed by this Jim Crow eating system and wanted to do something about it. These concerns led to CORE's major downtown sit-in actions in 1959 and 1960. Beginning in March 1959, a year before the more famous student sit-ins in Greensboro, N.C., Miami CORE began six months of sit-ins in downtown Miami. CORE's action plan drew many from the Jewish left, including several dozen elderly Jewish women in the Emma Lazarus Federation. Black

Miamians also joined the sit-ins, making these events truly interracial. The sit-ins grabbed the media spotlight, but downtown businessmen and store owners stonewalled the demonstrators. Nevertheless, John Brown, a Black doctor and CORE leader, told reporters: "We'll keep coming again and again and staying longer and longer. Someone's going to have to give." After a hiatus, new CORE sit-ins in 1960, sit-ins that now included many of Miami's Black preachers, achieved positive results. The NAACP's Theodore Gibson, who demonstrated with CORE activists, told the newspapers what to expect: "We are going to eat at those lunch counters if we have to fill up the whole of the Dade County jail." Worried that bad publicity would damage Miami's national image as a tourist paradise, the downtown business and political elite agreed to integrate the lunch counters. But much of Miami still remained segregated, and CORE continued its interracial civil rights work into the 1960s.¹⁸

The Miami sit-ins initiated by CORE reflected something new in late fifties South Florida: an interracial and cross-class attack on segregation and White power. Sit-in participants included Miami's Jewish activists, such as the Zoloths and Gordons, a few University of Miami students, and a cross-section of the Miami Black community, ranging from professionals like Dr. Brown to working-class Blacks. Black insurance man Albert D. Moore, later president of Miami CORE, in a 2001 interview recalled his first encounter with the organization. Walking along an Overtown street one evening in 1959, he noticed an interracial crowd spilling out of a storefront meeting room and went in to see what it was all about. He found Barbara Gordon delivering a passionate speech about civil rights and CORE. He was impressed, he said, because he "had never met White people, some of whom were more interested in rights for Negroes than many Negroes." Moore joined up immediately. Later in the lunch-counter campaign, when CORE needed more people for a downtown sit-in, Barbara Gordon recruited Black men from bars, poolrooms, barber shops, and street corners in Miami's nearby Overtown district. It was a unique moment in Miami's interracial civil rights movement.¹⁹

Miami's Black and White civil rights activists continued the fight for school integration as well. In 1956, Jack Orr, a young Miami state legislator, advocated gradual school integration in a speech in the legislature. He alone stood for this position in the legislature at



Jack Orr, seated second from the left, was a courageous Civil Rights advocate and the lone voice for public school integration in the Florida State Legislature in the mid-1950s. HMSE, Miami News Collection 1989-011-22731.

the time. As an attorney, Orr had earlier defended Progressive Party and Civil Rights Congress members in various civil liberties cases. He was also a member of the NAACP and CORE. Florida's integrationists praised Orr, but Democratic Party loyalists and segregationists turned against him. He was defeated in a bitter re-election campaign in 1958, a campaign that served, however, as a catalyst among his left-liberal Jewish supporters in Miami who soon launched the CORE sit-ins.²⁰ In 1960, the Miami civil rights coalition supported local businessman and CORE member Jack Gordon in his run for a seat on the Dade County School Board. During two terms on the board, Gordon promoted the goals of integration. Later, in 1972, Gordon was elected to the Florida State Senate, where he had a distinguished career advocating progressive causes.²¹ In the 1960s, many of CORE's civil rights activists also played important roles in Dade County's anti-poverty agency, Equal Opportunity Program, Inc. (EOPI). Jack Gordon served on EOPI's board of directors, Shirley Zoloth became EOPI's associate director, Howard Dixon headed up EOPI's legal services, and Barbara Gordon and Thalia Stern worked with the Head Start program run by EOPI. All of these Jewish activists believed that working in the War on Poverty was an extension of the civil rights work they initiated with CORE.²² In the early 1960s, Jewish community leaders, especially some rabbis and the American Jewish Committee, also played an important behind-the-scenes role in the establishment of the Dade County Community Relations Board,

designed to mediate racial disputes before they got out of control.²³ The postwar civil rights movement in Miami involved a significant interracial component, contributing in important ways to the eventual termination of de jure segregation in metropolitan Miami. In the largest sense, the massive migration of politically progressive northerners to postwar Miami lay behind the shape and form of the movement for racial change and reform. Nurtured and led by liberal and progressive Whites, Jewish women prominent among them, the Civil Rights Congress, the Congress of Racial Equality, and other groups promoted an interracial agenda. They found common ground with African American organizations, ministers, and citizens in their confrontation with Miami's White segregationists. And like Ruth Perry, Jack Orr, and Bobbi Graff, many joined the NAACP, reaffirming its interracial stance as well. Yet it is important to remember that the actions of Graff, Zoloth, Gordon, Orr, and the other progressives were outside the White American mainstream at the time. The domestic cold war had a damaging impact on civil rights activism in the era of White power in the American South. Miami's civil rights activists faced an uphill battle against McCarthyite politicians, hostile law enforcement agencies, violent segregationists, and red-baiters in the press. They faced fear and apathy, but they never abandoned their social justice idealism or their commitment to racial equality.

Notes

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- ² Gary R. Mormino, "Midas Returns: Miami Goes to War, 1941-1945," *Tequesta* 57 (1997), 5-51; Marvin Dunn, *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 158-163; Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America Since 1941* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), 1-30.
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- ⁵ Steven F. Lawson, "The Florida Legislative Investigation Committee and the Constitutional Readjustment of Race Relations, 1956-1963," in *An Uncertain Tradition: Constitutionalism and the History of the South*, ed. Kermit L. Hall and James W. Ely, Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 296-325; Clarence Taylor, *Black Religious Intellectuals: The Fight for Equality from Jim Crow to the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 94-117; Sarah Hart Brown, *Standing Against Dragons: Three Southern Lawyers in an Era of Fear* (Baton Rouge; Louisiana State University Press, 1998); James T.

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