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UNH Historian's New Book Details Evolution of Civil Rights History
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DURHAM, N.H. – An African American woman is handcuffed after refusing to give a white passenger her seat on a bus. Four little girls are killed in the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, murdered while they prepare for their weekly Sunday school lessons. A quarter of a million Americans march in Washington for racial equality, culminating at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s historic “I Have a Dream” speech.

No other movement impacted the history of the 20th century America like the struggle for civil rights. Echoing the message of Billie Holiday's hit, "Strange Fruit," great numbers of Americans spoke out against racial injustice during this era, setting the United States on the slow road towards equality.

In Toward Freedom Land: The Long Struggle for Racial Equality in America, renowned civil rights historian Harvard Sitkoff, professor emeritus of the University of New Hampshire, compiles five decades of essays on the struggle for racial justice in the United States. Each essay, written between 1969 and 2008, reflects his ongoing efforts to grapple with changing times and shifts in historical scholarship on the topic of race relations during the civil rights movement. His writings reflect the evolution of his thoughts and philosophies as a student, citizen, and historian, as well as the changing perceptions of race throughout this turbulent time in history.

One essay, "A New Deal for Blacks," highlights the first seeds planted for equality, as well as the diversity of individuals fighting for racial justice. Sitkoff explains that social change was sought by all demographics — young and old, artist and athlete, trade unionist and communist alike. Included among the essays is "The Second Reconstruction," a reflection of the gains and setbacks in the twenty years following the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and "Martin Luther King Jr.: Seeing Lazarus" which emphasizes the relevance of King’s messages of peace and equality for future generations.

Sitkoff also explores the influence of World War II on the American civil rights movement. "African American Militancy in the World War II South" discusses the social transformations of the conflict and the foundation it provided for the civil rights movement. The piece underscores both the war’s constraints on combative protest and the discontinuity between wartime activism and the freedom struggle of the 1960s. Expanding the reflection of the war’s importance in civil rights, "African Americans, American Jews, and the Holocaust" explains how diverse groups can work together in organized alliance despite the prejudice of their followers.

Toward Freedom Land discusses the diverse layers of this complicated fight, though the collection is tied together by the same powerful message: hopefulness throughout all aspects of a movement is a vital determinant of success. Each piece was written at a different point in history and reflects a different concern. Presented in this collection as they originally appeared, the essays offer a sense of the changes throughout history while simultaneously providing an account of the evolution of a historian's mind. As Sitkoff offers reflections from several periods of scholarship, he confronts the changing attitudes central to civil rights history over the past five decades, encouraging further dialogue on the never-ending pursuit of equality in the United States.

A professor emeritus of history at the University of New Hampshire, Harvard Sitkoff is one of the most respected and influential historians of 20th century U.S. history. He is the author of numerous books, most recently King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship
public institution, enrolling more than 12,200 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.

PHOTO
Book cover: Toward Freedom Land

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Editors and Reporters: Review copies of "Toward Freedom Land: The Long Struggle for Racial Equality in America" may be obtained from Mack McCormick, publicity and rights manager, The University Press of Kentucky, 859-257-5200 or permissions@uky.edu.

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