Author describes significance of civil rights prosecutions in ‘Racial Reckoning’

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Recommend

Review: 
“Racial Reckoning: Prosecuting America’s Civil Rights Murders” 
by Renee Romano. 
Harvard University Press. 
268 pp. $35.

BY DR. GLENN C. ALTSCHULER 
SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

On July 11, 1964, Ku Klux Klansmen shot and killed Lemuel Penn, a 49-year old assistant superintendent of schools in Washington D.C., as he and two companions were driving home after two weeks of Army reserve training in Fort Benning, Ga.

Noting their D.C. license plates, the Klansmen concluded that the “out of town niggers” were “President Johnson’s boys.” After their lawyer blasted federal intervention in the South – and used Penn’s request to use a “regular restroom” at a service station in Atlanta to imply that he was a radical “outside agitator” – the Klansmen were acquitted.

The murder of Lemuel Penn was not an isolated incident. Without any meaningful prospect that they would be brought to justice, hundreds of segregationist die-hards committed racially motivated acts of violence in the 1950s and 1960s. Only a few of them were brought to trial – and virtually none of them were convicted.

Cases reopened

During the last two decades, more than 100 of these cases have been reopened, with more than a dozen of them (including the indictment of Byron De La Beckwith for the murder of Medgar Evers) brought to trial.

In “Racial Reckoning,” Renee Romano, a professor of history and Africana Studies at Oberlin College, explains why these prosecutions occurred and assesses their significance. Romano argues, provocatively, that contemporary civil rights trials fit a narrative of racial progress that “has been widely accepted despite the fact that race so clearly continues to structure American society.”

A well-researched book, “Racial Reckoning” would have benefited from more careful copyediting. Romano claims, for example, that Penn’s killers were tried in Alabama, then indicates that it was Georgia, and seems unable to determine if two or three defendants were acquitted.

Civil rituals

Nonetheless, “Racial Reckoning” raises important questions about our “post-racial” society.

The long overdue convictions, Romano points out, support Martin Luther King Jr.’s claim that the arc of the moral universe “bends to justice.” But she also maintains that the trials have served as civil rituals, in which racism is defined narrowly as the hateful actions of individuals, local and state governments and the wider community are absolved of responsibility, and the punishment of “embarrassing relics” and “walking time capsules” of a bygone era are celebrated as proof of racial progress.

In some quarters, in fact, convictions were offered as a “final chapter,” offering the country “closure” on its racist past.
Call for a conversation
According to Romano, activists have sought to use the trials – and the publicity given to them in the mass media – as a first step in reframing the debate about justice delayed in terms of social responsibility rather than guilt.

They have attempted as well to remind Americans that they are not outside observers of their own history who have a right to close the door on it. Some of them have advocated the establishment of an American-style Truth and Reconciliation Commission that would prod “a national conversation on race.”

A conversation, that includes “stories of community complicity, political responsibility, and systemic racism,” however, hasn’t displaced the narratives of individual responsibility, closure, and redemption.

Dealing with reality
One White man, Romano writes, attended a trial in Greenville, Mississippi because he felt the crime “caused black people to feel bad about something the young generation had nothing to do with;” he hoped the verdict “would put all this behind us.”

In 2013, the Justice Department closed all but 20 of the 112 cases that had been opened for investigation under the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act. The legal process had offered some comfort to family members of the individuals who had been murdered, including Myrlie Evers.

Romano concludes, however, that it left largely untouched a society in which African-Americans are nearly three times more likely to live in poverty than Whites, drop out of high school at a much higher rate and attend college at a much lower rate than Whites, and are incarcerated at six times the national average.

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.