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Remembering the March Against Fear

By Robert Weisbrot

James Meredith, an African-American Air Force veteran from Mississippi, did not perish during the civil rights protests of the 1960s, but it was not for lack of trying. On Oct. 1, 1962, Meredith became the first black student to attend the University of Mississippi at Oxford, a death-defying step that impelled President Kennedy to send federal marshals and the U.S. Army to keep racist mobs at bay. On June 5, 1966, following passage of a Voting Rights Act that promised federal protection to blacks seeking the ballot, Meredith began a solitary 220-mile March Against Fear from Memphis, Tenn., through Jackson, Miss., to inspire voter registration. Meredith advanced just inside Mississippi when a Klansman felled him with a shotgun blast. Remarkably, Meredith survived to give his blessing to Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders to continue his journey.

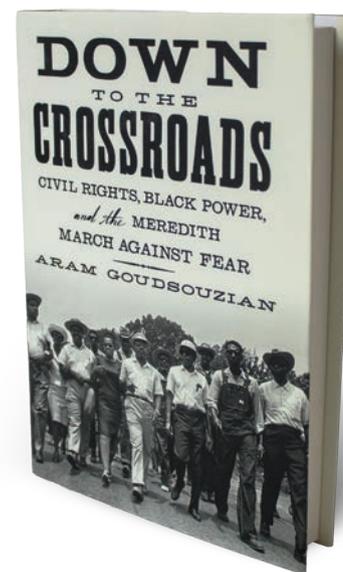
Aram Goudsouzian's recently published book, *Down to the Crossroads*, offers the first full account of Meredith's storied March Against Fear, which came as the nonviolent Southern civil rights movement was fading, having toppled segregation laws but leaving few clear markings on the path to further reform. A 25-year-old march leader, Stokely Carmichael, electrified crowds with speeches that renounced integration, castigated white liberals, and demanded "Black Power!" Many historians find the march memorable mainly for Carmichael's rhetorical rebellion against apostles of nonviolence and interracial harmony. King himself called the Meredith March "a terrible mistake," and he deplored Carmichael's riffs on Black Power for alienating whites by seeming to condone violence.

Goudsouzian nonetheless insists that King and Carmichael's common principles of black solidarity, dignity, and self-assertion belied their headline-making conflicts. Looking back, veterans of the Mississippi movement praised how the march mobilized voters, Goudsouzian explains, and, by spurring racial pride and political mobilization of black communities, "expressed both the depth of black grievances and the height of black possibilities."

The book is leavened with richly drawn portraits, ranging from unheralded marchers to the towering but tragic figure of President Lyndon B. Johnson. Once the civil rights movement's heroic ally, Johnson refused to protect or even endorse Meredith's march. Johnson felt "imprisoned ... between white segregationists and black separatists" and "could no longer sustain his brand of consensus politics."

As for Meredith, on courage alone he earned his place on the Mount Rushmore of modern black activists. Yet, according to Goudsouzian, his "intertwining penchants for self-determination, self-importance, and self-promotion" cast him down a bizarre path. Meredith later joined the staff of (arch-segregationist) North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, and he stumped for Louisiana State Representative David Duke, a former leader of the Ku Klux Klan. Still, as Goudsouzian acknowledges, movements do not always raise up the leaders we expect. At a time when blacks needed men and women to risk martyrdom by defying a repressive racial order, Meredith's "singular audacity" set in motion "a civil rights epic."

Robert Weisbrot is the Christian A. Johnson Distinguished Teaching Professor of History.



Aram Goudsouzian '94, *Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March Against Fear* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014)

On the tear-gassing of marchers in Canton, Miss.: "My whole body felt blistered; my scalp felt like every hair was being pulled out one by one, and my lungs as though I was inhaling molten steel."

—Jo Freeman, a white volunteer