

## "FREEDOM ROAD"—A WEAPON OF DEMOCRACY

*FREEDOM ROAD. By Howard Fast.  
Duell, Soan and Pearce, New  
York, 1944. 264 pp.*

**H**OWARD Fast's *Freedom Road* should do much to destroy that elaborate network of myths about the Reconstruction period which our culture has so zealously preserved as an ideological justification for the continued oppression of the white and Negro masses of the South. It is a swift and moving novel which dramatizes the brief triumph and ultimate defeat of Southern democracy following the Civil War, and it teaches a basic lesson which our country needs sorely to learn during this crucial period of national decision. Moreover, as is characteristic of Fast's historical novels, *Freedom Road* is written with superb literary craftsmanship.

Here is the story of a Negro slave, Gideon Jackson, who escaped from

the old Carwell plantation in South Carolina to join and fight with the Union Army, and who later returned to struggle for real freedom and security for his people. It is a story of how that struggle triumphed—through a new and rapidly growing unity between poor whites and Negroes, expressed no less in their cooperative efforts to obtain land and protect their homes and lives than in the unprecedented and vigorous people's democracies they built in the Southern states. It is also a story of how that struggle was defeated—through direct terror and violence, disruption of Negro-white unity by means of the organized "white supremacy" propaganda, and destruction of the new democratic state governments, all of which was made possible by the conscious collaboration of a newly elected Republican national government with the former slave-holders, who never ceased planning and fighting to restore their exploitative rule over the Southern masses.

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Here is an accurate interpretation of a crucial period of our history about which all but exceedingly few Americans are either quite ignorant or grossly misinformed. A few historians—such as W. E. B. DuBois (*Black Reconstruction in America*) and James S. Allen (*Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy*)—have written honest and correct analyses of the issues and forces in conflict during the Reconstruction period. But their interpretations have largely been smothered under the never-ending

avalanche of lies by which this bright and promising chapter of American democracy continues to be maligned. Demagogic politicians (such as Talmadge and Rankin and "Cotton Ed" Smith), school textbooks (even in the North), the commercial press, and the movies (such as the infamous and widely distributed "Birth of a Nation" and "Gone With the Wind")—all have conspired to perpetuate the myth that Reconstruction was an orgy of governmental extravagance and social chaos resulting from the political domination of ignorant Negroes and corrupt Northerners ("carpet-baggers"). In destroying Reconstruction—so the myth runs—the abused and "respectable" white leaders of the South (that is, the ruling oligarchy of plantation owners whose efforts to split the Union were defeated by the progressive forces around Lincoln) rendered a great service to the nation.

This monstrous lie has been aggressively propagated and entrenched in our culture, and the reason is by no means obscure; it was (and is) needed to bolster up and give some semblance of respectability to that flagrantly undemocratic economic and political system by which the masses are kept in subjection on the plantations of the Black Belt. Just why Americans have not been allowed to learn the truly progressive character and achievements of the Reconstruction period is effectively stated in "An Afterword" to *Freedom Road*. Says author Fast:

"Powerful forces did not hold it

to be a good thing for the American people to know that once there had been such an experiment—and that the experiment had worked. That the Negro had been given the right to exist in this nation as a free man, a man who stood on equal ground with his neighbor, that he had been given the right to work out his own destiny in conjunction with the southern poor whites, and that in an eight-year period of working out that destiny he had created a fine, a just, and a truly democratic civilization.”

Howard Fast tells this story of Reconstruction democracy with a fervor and power that none but a genuine people's artist could command. Around the lives and fortunes of Gideon Jackson's family and friends on the Carwell plantation, as well as his friendly associates and enemies in the state constitutional assembly and legislature and national Congress, there is here woven a gripping account of an entire era in American history. It is with deep understanding and respect that the author sketches the crude first attempts of these simple freedmen and poor whites to organize their lives—and their government—in accord with the new demands of political democracy. The reader lives with these characters, suffering their embarrassments and frustrations, exulting in their triumphs, and getting genuine happiness out of their comradeship and love for one another. Here and there are passages of beautiful imagery and a lyric quality of the highest order.

*Freedom Road* begins on that day in 1867 when the Carwell men re-

turn from “the voting” in Charleston—down that mysterious path which to Gideon's son is a “road that leads to nowhere”—to set their wives and associates to wonder, and also to begin initially timid experimentation with this new technique of group living. The story moves swiftly, and with remarkable economy of words. Only with extreme difficulty and regret can a reader lay it aside before that final and tragic scene at the plantation house when the Carwell folk fight and die heroically against the superior armed forces of political reaction which had regained control of the South by 1877.

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This novel is replete with urgent political lessons which are of the utmost importance for white and Negro Americans now confronted with the tasks of electing a President and Congress, and of actually achieving that enduring peace and security for all men which our coming victory in this people's war now raises as a new and realistic perspective before the world.

First, the original and basic ideological theses which “white supremacy” still claims as its “moral justification” is thoroughly demolished by this novel. For millions of Americans to read this story would mean further to undermine the tottering foundations of Bourbonism which is the implacable foe of the progressive Roosevelt policies and whose 1944 revival of the post-Reconstruction tie-up with reactionary Republicans presents one of the gravest home-front threats to American democracy.

Second, the carefully nurtured premise that an allegedly "eternal" anti-Negro prejudice will always prevent the white and Negro masses from uniting for common political goals, an assumption being rapidly shattered by the events of this period, is here revealed (as true scientists have long known) to be grossly contrary to historic fact. For example, the main "poor white" character, Abner Lait, initially greets Gideon Jackson with the words, "God damn you, nigger," expressing all the anti-Negro hatred which two centuries of slavery and its white chauvinist propaganda had built up in the sorely oppressed poor whites of the South. But in the concrete struggles for land and schools and life, Abner Lait, like many, many thousands of white Southerners similarly situated, learns that his own freedom and security are absolutely dependent upon unity with his black fellowmen. He comes to respect them, to accept Gideon Jackson's leadership, to send his children to the "mixed" school; and he finally dies in a vain effort to carry to the outside world some word of the tragic plight which K.K.K. terror finally brought to the heroic little band of white and Negro citizens who fought to the end against an emerging and dominant reaction.

The metamorphosis which Reconstruction brought about in the attitude of the Abner Lait sets forth one of the truly great lessons of this period; namely, the speed with which artificially bolstered racial prejudices dissolve among the masses of men when they are con-

fronted with a concrete social situation which allows (or impels) their uniting for security and survival.

Third, this novel correctly attributes the violent destruction of Reconstruction democracy to the deliberate calculations of "respectable gentlemen" who, themselves, never participate *openly* in the terroristic activities which their money and influence actually call into being. There are many Stephen Holmeses in our national life today, powerful men who have vested interests in the perpetuation of Jim-crow economic exploitation and oligarchic political rule. Their influence must be destroyed; and it can be accomplished only through the method used in the **Reconstruction South**—through fighting unity between the white and Negro masses who are their common victims.

These are but illustrative of many basic political insights which await the reader of *Freedom Road*. And it is important to emphasize their historic accuracy. Howard Fast, himself, presents a list of his original sources, which competent students of history immediately recognize as reliable and valid. In a recent conversation with a friend, I ran into further confirmation of the novel's accuracy from an unexpected source. My friend is a direct descendent of a long line of "free Negroes," the educated and refined Cardoza family of Charleston, which the novel portrays as coming to respect and admire Gideon Jackson, to seek his political advice, and to depend upon his strong and almost instinctively correct leadership. She told me that all of How-

ard Fast's details about the Cardoza family of the 1870's are amazingly accurate, with one minor exception—the complexion of Mrs. Cardoza is somewhat lighter than the novel suggests.

This novel is written with a simplicity that warrants its circulation by the millions. Indeed, it should be filmed and shown to scores of millions. And nothing could be more appropriate than for the role of Gideon Jackson, the main character of Howard Fast, to be played by that other great people's artist of our age, Paul Robeson.

There was never a time in recent history when the popularization of the message of *Freedom Road* was so urgent as it is today; for now, much as was true some sixty-eight years ago, our country is again on the verge of another major decision which is crucial for the freedom of the nation and the Negro people.

We now hasten to the climax of another great war of liberation which has propelled the Negro people forward toward their historic goal of freedom and has laid solid foundations for the building of enduring peace and security for all mankind. The happy and unprecedented outlook which emerges from the advances toward speedy victory by the armies of the Anglo-Soviet-American coalition is in our country primarily an expression of the national unity forces gathered around the Commander-in-Chief, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt's domestic and foreign policies must be continued if the progressive

goals now almost within our grasp are actually to be attained.

Again, as during Reconstruction, those who would oppress the people plot to destroy the gains which the Roosevelt Administration and this liberating war have brought to Negro and all other Americans. Again they see their opportunity in an electoral conspiracy not unlike that which brought a reactionary Republican Party to power in 1876 through the election of Rutherford B. Hayes. Again under the demagogic banner of "states' rights" and through the covert stimulation of anti-Negroism, the Republican candidate for President and his Congressional supporters have entered into a sinister alliance with the poll-tax Democrats of the South for the purpose of reversing the current progressive trend of history.

*"Freedom Road" is again in danger of being blocked for the Negro people and the nation!*

As we approach the crucial day of decision, November 7, 1944, it is absolutely imperative that we build the closest possible unity between the democratic white and Negro people of America—and the mass reading of Howard Fast's great book would contribute mightily to that end. Widespread dissemination of the lesson of Negro-white unity, the novel's main thesis, is urgently essential to *guarantee* that we not send a modern Rutherford B. Hayes to the White House in this year of people's victories again to obstruct our progress along "Freedom Road."

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