

## Book Review

Melissa Kean. *Desegregating Private Higher Education in the South: Duke, Emory, Rice, Tulane and Vanderbilt*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. 456 pp. Cloth \$55.00.

Throughout the 1950s, when Hollis Edens, President of Duke University, encouraged the Board of Trustees to take action on the pressing issue of racial integration, he was repeatedly greeted by stony silence until the Chairman would finally say, “Is there any *other* business to come before the Board?” (p. 235). In *Desegregating Private Higher Education*, Melissa Kean tells the story of how a group of highly influential white men of the South—including those that sat on the Board at Duke—lost their grip on power at southern private universities in the face of the many challenges posed by desegregation. While “no troops or marshals arrived to enforce desegregation” on these campuses, the move to desegregate was anything but voluntary (p. 1). The desegregation of private universities in the South, Kean maintains, was coerced by a powerful combination of diverse factors, including “northern foundations, professional academic associations, accrediting bodies, faculties that began to vote with their feet, divinity students and professors who felt compelled to oppose racial discrimination, alumni who withheld contributions and by new federal contracting rules” (p. 1). Drawing on a wealth of university records from presidential papers to alumni magazines, Kean’s account deftly weaves together the institutional histories of Duke, Emory, Rice, Tulane, and Vanderbilt in the decade and a half period from the late 1940s through the early 1960s. The presidents of each institution are the central figures in the narrative, with the trustees, faculty members, and students playing important supporting roles.

While Kean is attentive to significant variation across regions and institutions, the crux of her argument is that the five universities under consideration all responded to demands for desegregation according to the same basic template. Each and every president, Kean contends, faced the dilemma of pursuing two goals that were increasingly in conflict with one another—regional leadership and national prestige. These presidents, racial liberals in the gradualist vein, who were committed to the transformation of their sleepy colleges into major research universities, all favored opening campus gates to “exceptional” blacks on a case-by-case basis. Frequently opposed to the presidents in this regard were the staunch advocates of southern tradition, including some

older faculty members, many alumni and, most importantly, the overwhelming majority of trustees. From their perspective, blacks, no matter how capable, should stay put in their own segregated schools. Kean points out that there had always been blacks on “white” college campuses in the South. They worked on the sidelines as cooks, janitors, gardeners, and so on. The debate among the self-described “intelligent white men of the South” therefore focused on “new” kinds of blacks, those prospective students, faculty members, and other professionals who would threaten to become an integral part of campus life rather than simply serving in menial positions.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, academic associations and accrediting bodies captured the attention of the administrations at private universities in the South when they began to turn their attention to desegregation. The Association of American Law Schools, for example, ramped up administrative anxiety levels when it entertained a proposal to exclude segregated institutions from its membership rolls. And although “the vise that had been slowly squeezing around the South’s private universities ... tightened dramatically” in the wake of *Brown*, it was not until the early 1960s that foot-dragging on the issue of racial integration was no longer tenable (p. 96). In a chapter entitled “Push Comes to Shove,” Kean demonstrates that only the imminent threat of institutional decimation finally made the trustees give in to desegregation. The costs of maintaining segregation, in the form of disgruntled faculty members and the possible loss of millions of dollars in funding from philanthropies and federal agencies that would no longer support segregated institutions, were simply too dear. “In the clash between southern tradition and national prominence,” Kean says, “southern tradition had been abandoned” (p. 239).

The disappearance of a distinctive southern identity is the overarching framework for Kean’s monograph. In the decades following World War II, faculties in the South became less southern and more connected to their national professional colleagues than to their local communities. “With the demise of segregation,” Kean says, “these elite southern universities finally joined the mainstream of American higher education” (p. 239). If Kean draws too bright a line between the South and the so-called “American mainstream,” she also sometimes leans too heavily, at least implicitly, on facile distinctions between the backward South and the cosmopolitan North. Along these lines, her portrayal of the southern trustees, even if largely accurate, is too one-dimensional. According to Kean, these trustees believed that university admissions standards should mimic those of the local country club, that a good football team was far more important than academic excellence and that legal or moral arguments for black equality had absolutely no merit whatsoever (see p. 8, 236). These criticisms, however, are relatively

minor, as Kean has written a superb book, which makes a fine contribution to the historiography of school desegregation in the South by shifting the scene from the riotous campuses of the University of Alabama and Ole Miss to the board rooms and presidential offices of Duke, Emory, and company. What emerges from behind these closed doors is a striking portrait of prominent southern white men grappling not only with the race question but also with the erosion of their own power, influence, and authority.

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