



Standing Against Dragons: Three Southern Lawyers in an Era of Fear

Sarah Hart Brown

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Standing Against Dragons examines the careers of three exceptional lawyers who championed civil liberties and fought for civil rights in the two decades after World War II. John Coe of Pensacola, Florida, Clifford Durr of Montgomery, Alabama, and Benjamin Smith of New Orleans became southern dissenters, resisting both the excessive zeal of the anti-Communist right and southern segregation laws.

Coe, Durr, and Smith all appeared with their clients in the much-publicized 1954 investigation of the Southern Conference Educational Fund and defended persons subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Coe represented the ardent integrationist who was the last man indicted for contempt by the HUAC, and Smith's offices were raided in 1963 as a result of his civil rights work in Mississippi.

Despite personal and political differences, these men remained committed civil libertarians in this era of repression. While formally rejecting Communism -- defending freedom of expression and association in almost every instance -- these advocates, in practice, disavowed individualism in favor of the common good and feared the oppression of unbridled government. Consequently they faced professional scorn, personal ostracism, and official harassment.

Sarah Hart Brown's astute analysis reveals the wide range of southern political ideas and defines the positions of southern liberals and radicals in the broader stream of American liberalism during the postwar period.

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