

REVIEW ESSAY

T.R.M. HOWARD: DOCTOR, ENTREPRENEUR, CIVIL RIGHTS PIONEER

DAVID T. BEITO AND LINDA ROYSTER BEITO
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A frequently debated topic among African-Americans in the 20th century was the relative merits of the improvement strategies proposed by Booker T. Washington (c. 1856–1915) and W.E.B. DuBois (1868–1963). Washington, a former slave and later head of the Tuskegee Institute, urged a non-confrontational program of self-discipline and economic improvement within the black community during the era of Jim Crow. DuBois, a professor at Atlanta University and one of the founders of the NAACP, favored economic improvement, to be sure, but also alleged the need for political activism against policies of racial segregation and *de facto* inequality. Many, if not most, prominent African-Americans came down clearly in favor of the strategy of one intellectual or the other. By contrast, T.R.M. Howard (1908–1976),

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the subject of David and Linda Beito's biography, embodied both approaches at different times during his remarkable career.

David Beito, a professor of history at the University of Alabama, has published several books on classical liberal and libertarian themes since the 1980s, including *From Mutual Aid to Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890–1967* (2000), which describes the robust network of mutual aid in the United States a century ago and its gradual crowding out by the state. His wife, Linda Royster Beito, is a professor of social sciences at Stillman College. Together the Beitos have co-authored many articles and essays with a classical liberal flavor since the late 1990s. They originally published their biography of Howard in 2009 with the University of Illinois Press under the title *Black Maverick*. This new edition, published by the Independent Institute, includes an afterword by the authors as well as a foreword by Jerry Mitchell, the journalist whose investigative reporting in the 1980s and 1990s led to murder convictions in several "cold cases" from the Civil Rights Era in Mississippi. The subtitle of the 2018 edition stresses elements of Howard's life, especially his entrepreneurship, that will appeal to classical liberals and libertarians.

By any measure, T.R.M. Howard's life and career were dramatic, with many twists and turns along the way. Born into poverty in the "Black Patch" area of southwestern Kentucky and northwestern Tennessee, Howard in his youth converted to Seventh-Day Adventism and embraced its rigorous ethic of self-discipline and clean living. He found white patrons in the church who sponsored his education and eventual training to become a physician. Although Howard eventually drifted away from the SDA church, its influence on his life and early career was crucial. His move to southern California in the early 1930s to attend its College of Medical Evangelists was what brought him into contact with socialite Helen Boyd, whom he eventually married. Boyd's family in turn made introductions that led to Howard's writing regularly for the *California Eagle*, Los Angeles's largest black newspaper, helping to establish his reputation as a civil rights leader.

Upon completing his medical training, Howard spent several years at Riverside Sanitarium, an SDA hospital in Nashville, Tennessee, and also maintained a private practice while continuing to speak to churches and civic groups about civil rights. In 1941, he accepted

an invitation to become chief surgeon at a new hospital in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, an all-black town in the state's Delta region. It was in Mound Bayou that Howard became a wealthy man through both his medical practice and entrepreneurial activities in banking, insurance, and agriculture. In fact, the Beitos claim that Howard became one of the most prosperous black farmers in Mississippi, with over 1,000 acres to his name and dozens of tenant farmers who resided on his land. In Mound Bayou, Howard also built a recreational center, which included a restaurant managed by his wife.

During his early career, Howard took a stance on civil rights that could plausibly be called conservative. The Beitos provide a number of quotes demonstrating his admiration for Booker T. Washington's philosophy and willingness to work within a regime of racial segregation provided that the doctrine "separate but equal" actually resulted in equal public accommodation for blacks. Howard received considerable, favorable attention in the white press for his emphasis on black self-improvement and economic development. His early political activity in Mississippi, as seen in his organization of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership in 1951, did not directly challenge the status quo.

However, Howard eventually became more confrontational in his advocacy for civil rights. He publicly decried persistent inequalities in Mississippi such as the mismatch in publicly funded education for white and black children and the legal system's effective failure to prosecute crimes against black victims (whether the perpetrators were white or black). Whites in the Delta began to take more notice of Howard when he helped lead an effective economic campaign against gas stations that did not provide restrooms for black customers. Activities such as these helped expose the contradictions and weaknesses in a system that paid lip service to, but failed to deliver on, the "separate but equal" doctrine; the Beitos call it a "weaving together [of] pragmatism and radicalism." (p. 99)

Racial tensions in Mississippi continued to mount in the wake of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, and the Beitos ably document Howard's continued campaigns of economic and political pressure in opposition to the white "Citizens' Councils" that had formed in an effort to preserve the racial *status quo*. Howard gained national recognition even as a spate of murders of civil rights leaders in Mississippi made his life more dangerous.

Then the murder of Emmett Till and the subsequent trial put Howard into the spotlight. His home became a sort of “command center” for the prosecution’s allies, featuring armed guards and a security checkpoint. Till’s mother stayed there. Journalists and civil rights activists from around the country visited. Howard actively sought out witnesses for the prosecution, offering them protection and (if necessary) relocation to Chicago following the trial. The eventual acquittal of the two defendants by a prejudiced jury was no surprise to anyone, and a white backlash against Howard (including attention from the FBI, which Howard had publicly criticized) finally pressured him to leave Mississippi the following year. However, by that point he was very popular in the national black press and well positioned for his transition out of the region.

Howard joined the Second Great Migration of black Americans out of the South, relocating to Chicago, which was experiencing an explosion of its black population at that time. There he established a new medical practice and continued his efforts on behalf of civil rights, mounting an ultimately unsuccessful candidacy for Congress as a Republican in 1958. He also became one of Chicago’s most prominent providers of illegal abortions. According to the Beitos, by the early 1960s Howard was performing around six abortions per day on both black and white women in addition to the more licit activities of his medical practice. Howard’s success in bribing local law enforcement kept him out of trouble for the most part, and physicians in states where abortion was legal consulted with him on the practice. He lived to see abortion in Chicago legalized as a result of the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973. Howard died in 1976 with his final major project, the Friendship Medical Center, in serious financial trouble. Its pending failure meant that Howard left almost nothing to his surviving family members, despite his having made so much money over the course of his life.

A strength of the Beitos’ narrative is the soundness of the economic analysis at several points. (This feature should never be taken for granted when reading most historians’ writing.) For example, when discussing the socio-political context into which Howard was born, the Beitos provide a clear description of the attempt by large farmers in the Black Patch to cartelize tobacco production via the “Planter’s Protective Association” and the violence that eventually resulted from the plan. Later discussion of Howard’s entrepreneurial

activities is refreshingly free of the anticapitalist tone so commonly found in histories of business and businessmen.

T.R.M. Howard is well sourced, featuring frequent citations of interviews conducted by the authors along with archival evidence from newspapers, court documents, and private papers. In an age of hyper-partisanship, academic biographers are not always immune to the temptation to portray their favored subjects in a hagiographic manner. Commendably, the Beitos resist this urge with respect to Howard, giving the reader a “warts and all” portrait. While clearly admiring of Howard’s efforts on behalf of civil rights and entrepreneurial achievements, they do not shy away from a frank treatment of his severe character defects, most notably his frequent extramarital affairs and treatment of the women who bore his numerous out-of-wedlock children. (Helen Howard was unable to bear children.) Progressives drawn to Howard’s civil rights activism and heroics during the Till trial must contend with Howard’s Republican politics and penchant for big-game hunting. Conservatives who admire Howard’s entrepreneurship and disdain for government handouts must confront his gambling habit and willingness to perform illegal abortions for profit. In fact, the Beitos plausibly point to this impossibility of appropriating Howard wholly for partisan purposes as a likely reason for why he has received relatively little scholarly attention in recent decades.

T.R.M. Howard offers a corrective to overly simplistic narratives about the civil rights era and African-American history more generally. The Beitos convincingly show that figures like Howard could and did accumulate and deploy economic resources in significant ways to defend their communities’ interests against state-sponsored injustices and to bring about social change. The philosophies of both Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois found effective expression in the life and career of this remarkable entrepreneur.

REFERENCES

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