

You're listening to *A People's Anthology*. Produced by Boston Review, this is a new podcast that highlights and explore key texts from US history, with our first six episodes surfacing a few important documents related to the urban rebellions of the 1960s and 70s.

This is episode two, on Jack O'Dell's 1967 essay, *The July Rebellions and the Military State*, introduced by Nikhil Pal Singh and read by Joshua Bennett.

Jack O'Dell is probably one of the most important if also unsung figures in the background of the civil rights movement he got his start in the National Maritime Union in the 1940s... one of the things he describes as having gotten radicalized when he was on the ships and the NMU you was it was a pretty progressive left Union. So Jack really got his education as a radical trade unionists in the 1940s and that's really where he started.

And when the right when the left trade unions were expelled from the CIO in 1950 at the beginning of the Red Scare Jack kind of went into the Communist Party... started underground organizing in Alabama and Louisiana. So he was organizing among sharecroppers and poor black service workers kind of across the states and he had to do it all in secret because the Communist Party was outlawed at the time. So he was already kind of under surveillance and being tracked by law enforcement.

This experience in early civil rights organizing in the south also leads him to be involved with Martin Luther King's SCLC—the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—in the 1960s... but after the FBI dug up dirt on him he was under pressure to leave, essentially being red baited out.

These experiences with state surveillance agencies ultimately led Jack O'Dell to undergo what Nikhil describes as a transition from being an organizer to being an intellectual, and so he goes

on to become the associate managing editor of the journal Freedomways—which was run by Esther Cooper Jackson, another black leftist.

and freedom ways becomes an extremely important periodical documenting every year of the civil rights movement... a lot of Jack's essays that he ended up writing first appeared in The Journal freedom ways and it's an amazing resource for people who want to kind of get a firsthand account of how movement history was being written at the time by participants and close observers.

It's also around this time that the Civil Rights Movement starts to shift: no longer do people believe that America's race problem is going to be resolved by simply overcoming legal Jim Crow in the South. Elsewhere across the country de facto segregation had become a feature of black life, with poverty, substandard housing, and underemployment affecting the more urban north.

So although there are landmark pieces of legislation in 1963 and 64, the passing of the civil rights act is really just the **beginning** of a struggle for substantive equal rights — which for many African-Americans meant economic equality: equal wages, equal access to employment opportunities, equal access to educational opportunities, and so on.

It was these beliefs that underpinned the riots of 1967.

1967 is the year in which all hell breaks loose in which there's the beginning of a series of urban uprisings across the United States. You know what the what the what the police and the kind of security establishment feared was going to be a long hot summer.

And of course those uprisings continue in 68 particularly in the aftermath of King's assassination and Bobby Kennedy's assassination. So there's a there's a rising level of unrest but the unrest is is building throughout the decade and it's building throughout the decade. For a number of different reasons.

I mean you see urban uprisings in in Harlem in in a number of other cities in the early part of the 1960s. And of course you have the very important uprising in Los Angeles in 1965 the Watts riot which is which is truly devastating. And part of what those urban

uprisings are indicating is that the race problem the problem of of of racism of inequality of unemployment of segregation of oppression of violence against black people particularly on the part of the police is not just a southern problem.

It's these events that Jack O'Dell is observing, and that lead him to write the essay "The July rebellions and the military state" that same year.

really is one of his most kind of kind of harsh and confrontational essays. He says i'm going to be paraphrasing here he says policeman ship as a style of government is no longer confined to a Southern way of life.

So when he says that one of the things he's he's sort of marking there is is that that again as I've already said we've needed to think up to that point in time that the struggle against racism racial inequality white supremacy is primarily a Southern question or a regional question confined to one part of the country.

And he's saying no no no no no what we're seeing is is that racism and white supremacy have actually shaped the nation as a whole. They're not regionally discrete. Not only they shape the nation of the whole but they have a wider global significance.

And in the 1960s, this global issue of white supremacy was at its height in the form of the Vietnam War

Jack was very clearly understanding the relationship between what I've called in my work the inner war and the outer war that the Vietnam War and the oppressive conditions under which African-Americans suffered in American cities were connected.

And James Baldwin wrote a very famous essay around that time where he refers to harlem as occupied territory. So this is part of a kind of black vernacular critical discourse that's kind of trying to say you know our conditions inside the United States and the kind of oppression we suffer under are not unlike the conditions that exist in areas of the world that have been struggling against colonialism

And there's one line in the essay that sums this up well:

...he says "the road which leads from the Indian massacres of the last century to the Pentagon and another from the oppressive slave plantation to the ghetto are the major conjuncture of highways running through the very center of American life and history."

It's a really amazing historical framing of state violence against people of color particularly the settler colonial project against indigenous people and the project of forced migration and stolen labor that defines enslavement of Africans.

The essay ends with a call for a new —quote— "Resistance Movement," to ensure the end of the tyranny of racism-militarism, and Jack O'Dell believed that the rioters were on their way to achieving this.

but if you just take the attitude that this needs to be put down this needs to be repressed. This needs to be crushed. You know you're basically just kind of aligning ourselves with the forces of reaction.... And i think he's very clear about that -- I think that's a very important part of this essay because I don't think you you find in this essay a kind of a romanticized version of the riots. He's not trying to kind of. He calls them rebellions and they and it's right to call them rebellions but he's not suggesting that that in and of itself that's something that should be celebrated. He's just saying that you actually have to understand something of those conditions and then what they suggest for the balance of forces and what we actually have to do going forward. That's a very very different kind of approach. So he's identifying how the Negro leaders of the moment are rushing to distance themselves from these events.

And he's sort of saying no we can't just distance ourselves from these men. This is actually our constituency. You know these are actually the people that we have to like to think about in terms of trying to recognize their needs and aspirations in this moment.

This essay is just one of many that Jack O'Dell—born Hunter Pitts O'Dell in 1923—left behind when he passed away last month.

And it's amazing given that long career that he's not a better known figure particularly since he left a lot of writing behind as well. I shouldn't speak about Jack in the past tense because he's still alive he's 96 this year..... but one of the reasons he's still not better known is is that that anti-communist hangover is still still kind of lives on. You know a figure like him would would I think under or under other circumstances be very much at the center of the pantheon of kind of kind of the this the history of of the movement that we we now know. But but but he was explicitly kind of pushed out of that frame in part because he represented such a such a radical sense of what needed to be done

NOTE: For copyright reasons, we cannot reproduce the text here, but it is available in [Climbin' Jacob's Ladder: The Black Freedom Movement Writings of Jack O'Dell](#)

You've been listening to episode two of A People's Anthology, featuring Jack O'Dell's essay "The July Rebellions and the Military State".

The text was read by Joshua Bennett, a poet and professor at Dartmouth College. It was introduced by Nikhil Pal Singh, professor of social and cultural analysis and history at NYU. Our theme music is by Marisa Anderson.

A People's Anthology is a production from Boston Review, a political and literary magazine both online and in print since 1975. Visit us at Bostonreview.net.