



Book Review

Joshua M. Myers. *We Are Worth Fighting For: A History of the Howard University Student Protest of 1989*. New York: New York University Press, 2019. 289 pp. \$30.00 (ISBN 9781479811755).

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The history of Black protest and activism since the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements is a story that still needs to be fleshed out among historians and practitioners of Black Studies. Joshua Myers' text, *We Are Worth Fighting For*, is an important, and necessary, addition to this growing body of work. For Myers, an Africana Studies professor at Howard University, the story of the Howard student protest in 1989 says much about the continuum of Black protest in American life and history. "If there has been a significant amount of conceptual work on the long Civil Rights/Black Power movement," Myers argues, "less work has been done on how the ethos of that era actually extends into the decades that lead up to the present" (p. 4). While those earlier eras continue to receive rich scholarly treatment—as they should—

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more work done on what writers and scholars, such as Nelson George, refer to as the “post-soul” era should follow the example set here by Myers.

We Are Worth Fighting For is a critical entry into a growing field of Black intellectual history that examines the latter half of the twentieth century. Already, works such as Cedric Johnson’s *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, sections of Ashley Farmer’s *Remaking Black Power*, and numerous other books have begun peeling the curtain back on this time period. At the same time, monographs such as Maurice Hobson’s *The Legend of the Black Mecca* or Zandria Robinson’s *This Ain’t Chicago* have worked to combine the intellectual, cultural, and social history of the recent past with groundbreaking analyses of the socio-cultural and class differences within Black America. While Myers works within, and with, this growing array of works, he also pushes readers and fellow academics beyond its boundaries. Noting the “consensus historiography” of earlier works on the civil rights campaigns, and newer “Long Civil Rights Movement” and “Black Power studies” historiographies, Myers maintains that to truly understand the movements for Black freedom in America, scholars must move beyond these schools of historical analysis. Myers argues for “an alternative narrative (that) would allow Black people to imagine how they might contribute to a living, breathing, actual movement for something larger and more grand” (p.6). In other words, what Myers puts across in *We Are Worth Fighting For* is a history grounded in the experiences of the Howard students themselves. Their struggle to imagine a world beyond the safe ideological contours of the Reagan era is at the heart of Myers’ book.

The book’s division into three broad sections further buttresses Myers’ arguments, as they allow for each critical component of his thesis to breathe. The first section is a masterful analysis of Black activism and radical intellectual history since the late 1960s. Here, Myers makes it clear that the Howard protest of 1989, which was a response to the installation of Republican Party operative Lee Atwater, was a much broader stance against the Reagan era in which the students came of age. The students at Howard were operating within what Myers calls “a larger tradition, one that saw fit to resist the external imposition on peoples of African ancestry and one that saw the cultivation of Black spaces that would protect and center their cultural identity” (p.12). In the first chapter of the book, “A Space for Black Ideas,” Myers interrogates both the history of HBCUs writ-large and the history of Howard University in particular. Both histories form the core of Myers’ reflections on the action of Howard students

during the fateful spring of 1989, but they also serve a deeper purpose: to remind readers that HBCUs have not only served as an intellectual, social, and cultural crucible for numerous Black leaders, but they have also been the site of ideological conflict among Black Americans.

As Myers recounts the long history of student protest at Howard University against their own administration in the 1920s, 1930s, and again during the Civil Rights/Black Power periods, it becomes clear that the story of the 1989 protest is both a story of national currents among Black Americans gaining voice at Howard, while also a story of a student body tapping into its long history of agitation to face the challenges of a new era. While chapter one lays out this history, chapter two, “Racist Etiquette,” makes clear the unique political and cultural context of the late 1980s, the world within which Howard students protested. The collapse of the New Deal coalition, the struggles of liberals within the Democratic Party to maintain power during the tumultuous 1960s, and the rise of “New Right” conservatism under Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan, presage the world in which Howard University students protested against Lee Atwater’s presence on the Howard Board of Trustees.

At the same time, Myers places the problems HBCUs faced in the post-Civil Rights era in conversation with the rise of the New Right. Ideas such as “color-blindness” that began to become dominant in American politics, on the one hand, and the transition in how universities were viewed, on the other, made it all the more difficult for students who imagined Howard and other HBCUs as true intellectual redoubts in an age of retreat from civil rights. Myers posed this question when asking, “What does an HBCU look like in a post-soul, post-Civil Rights era” (p. 47)? For upper administrators at Howard, the answer was adjusting to life during the Reagan-Bush years. For the students at Howard, however, the answer was something different.

A key strength of the book is Myers’ handling of the influence of hip hop on the students at Howard. The first generation to come of age listening to hip hop music, the students at Howard were already in the thick of debates about hip hop’s importance to Black America, along with the lingering question of whether hip hop had a place within activist circles. “Hip hop,” Myers argues, “became a powerful medium to express not only discontent but to imagine otherwise and to live it *now* (emphasis his)” (p. 55). In sum, hip hop, the growing anti-Apartheid movement, and Jesse Jackson’s campaigns for president in 1984 and 1988, all helped to ferment the

activism ready to explode at Howard in 1989. Again, these are all topics worthy of further scholarly study by historians and African American Studies scholars alike, and one hopes that *We Are Worth Fighting For* will prove to be an important touchstone for those scholars seeking to understand Black America in the 1980s.

Part II of the book explains the resurgent activist culture at Howard during the late 1980s, culminating with the campus protests against Lee Atwater's presence on the Board of Trustees in March 1989. Howard's proximity, Myers argues, plays a key role in the activism of college students at the university. As he points out in chapter four, "A Force," the city of Washington, D.C. was a hotbed of Black intellectual ferment and activism in the 1960s and 1970s. For Myers, this played an important role in 1980s activism, as "so many of the activists and ideologues had found homes on the faculty, staff, and even the administration of the university," making it a place where the past, present, and future of Black activism would inevitably collide (p. 77). Here, Myers also wants the reader to reconsider a common assumption when it comes to campus activism and its role in the wider world: "While it has become customary to create a hard-and-fast class line separating the elite college student from the larger masses, such if it were ever so, was certainly not true for the Howard student of the late 1980s" (p. 82). The traditional "town and gown" division often seen in studies of college protests were always too simplistic. But when it comes to HBCUs and their histories of activism, understanding the role of the school in the broader community life—and vice versa, the importance of the surrounding community in the intellectual life of the university—is paramount to a holistic study.

Myers' rendering of the physical occupation of administrative spaces on campus during the March 1989 is also telling. It mattered, for example, that Marion Barry—himself a Howard alum and activist—was mayor of Washington D.C. during the crisis. His calling off the police during a critical moment of the protest and sit-in, made it possible for the campus community to avoid the violence that the students, no doubt, had learned happened at places such as South Carolina State in 1968 or Jackson State in 1970. The relationship students cultivated with Black leaders and activists—who themselves fought for freedom in earlier decades—was also important. Activists in the 1989 campaign such as April Silver were able to build relationships with people such as Sonia Sanchez, who not only supported the movement but provided valuable ideas on tactics and strategy that steeled the Howard students for what was to come. Much of this is enhanced by the primary sources that Myers uses, which includes numerous

oral history interviews with participants in the protests. Such histories are critical, especially as the need to understand what was happening within Black America in the 1980s and 1990s helps us to understand Black America in the twenty-first century.

We Are Worth Fighting For would have been relevant, even if the previous decades of renewed protests, thanks to Black Lives Matter, and the presidency of Donald Trump, had not occurred. But Myers' message is crystal-clear: the pursuit of Black freedom in America is a struggle which continues now. For activists to continue the fight, they must have a clear and nuanced understanding of what the activists, intellectuals, and radicals before them did, and committed themselves to, fighting for. *We Are Worth Fighting For*, in that regard, proves to be an exemplary tool for just that purpose.