

Abstract

Title of Paper: TRANSCENDING THE 'EDITORIAL THUNDER': ATLANTA'S NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF THE 1960 STUDENT SIT-INS

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Perhaps the single most important news event to take place in the Atlanta civil rights movement was the student sit-in campaign launched on downtown department store lunch-counters in the fall of 1960. This essay will analyze coverage of the 1960 sit-ins in Atlanta's two most widely-read broadsheets, the white-owned *Constitution* and the black-owned *Daily World*. In doing so, it will seek to demonstrate that the *Constitution's* significant failures in reporting the movement have often been overshadowed within historical and popular memory by the progressive legacy of its two most prominent integrationist editors, Ralph McGill and Gene Patterson.

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Atlanta's Newspaper Coverage of the 1960 Student Sit-Ins

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Introduction and Scope

On the morning of February 26, 1979, a crowd of nearly 350 guests packed into the University of Georgia Chapel in Athens to attend the first annual “McGill Lecture” in honor of famed civil rights-era editor Ralph McGill of the *Atlanta Constitution*. Presiding over the inaugural lecture was McGill’s closest friend and editorial successor, Gene Patterson, who in the years leading up to McGill’s death in 1969 had carried on the torch of McGill’s integrationist crusades on an almost daily basis in the pages of the *Constitution*. “Ralph McGill’s legacy was the example he set for the rest of us in journalism,” Patterson remarked to the audience. “Perhaps never again in American life will one editor be thrust forward by destiny to take up so monumental an issue, so clearly-defined, and, starting nearly alone, to fight it to overwhelming victory”¹ As Patterson’s remarks serve to emphasize, McGill’s status as a civil rights hero had already become enshrined within cultural memory only a decade after his death, much in the same way Patterson’s own legacy eventually would. This process of memorialization has led *New York Times* editor Howell Raines to hail both McGill and Patterson in 2001 “as the South’s two most heroic voices on civil rights and race,” concluding that each man was to a great degree responsible for fashioning Atlanta’s image as “the city too busy to hate.”²

¹ Eugene Patterson, “Ralph McGill: Rock in a Weary Land,” *The McGill Lecture*, University of Georgia, Athens, 1979, p. 9.

² Howell Raines, “Gene Patterson: An Appreciation,” *The Changing South of Gene Patterson* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002). House

Past studies conducted on the mainstream civil rights-era press in Atlanta have often focused primarily upon the editorial opinions of McGill and Patterson, the city's two most influential integrationist editors. McGill alone has been the subject of at least three full-length biographies from scholars such as Harold H. Martin in 1973, Barbara Barksdale Clowse in 1998, and Leonard Ray Teel in 2001.³ Patterson has also recently earned his rightful spot in historical memory with the 2002 publication of Roy Peter Clark's *The Changing South of Gene Patterson: Journalism and Civil Rights, 1960-1968*, which triumphs Patterson's daily editorials for the *Constitution* as "one of the most impressive bodies of work in the journalism of the twentieth century."⁴

In acknowledging the progress brought about by Atlanta's two most well-known liberal editors, however, scholars have tended to overlook the significant failures on the part of the *Constitution* in covering the day-to-day events of the movement in its news pages. Since both the morning *Constitution* and its less popular evening edition the *Atlanta Journal* were owned by the same company, they each reflected similar influences from a corporate level to downplay the movement. As Klibanoff and Roberts assert in their 2006 book *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*, "The Atlanta newspaper business executives had never been as enthralled by the civil rights story, or as committed to its coverage, as were their editors, Ralph McGill and Gene Patterson, neither of whom were responsible for deploying coverage. The newspapers staffed some of the big race stories in the South but skipped

³ See Harold H. Martin, *Ralph McGill, Reporter* (1973), Barbara Barksdale Clowse, *Ralph McGill: A Biography* (1998), Leonard Ray Teel, *Ralph Emerson McGill: Voice of the Southern Conscience* (2001).

⁴ Roy Peter Clark, *The Changing South of Gene Patterson*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), p. 4.

enough that their commitment was questioned.”⁵ This failure of the two mainstream Atlanta papers in covering the movement has been noted earlier by Tom Junod in a scathing 1987 critique of newspaper company president Jack Tarver published in *Atlanta Magazine*. According to Junod’s account, Tarver often actively suppressed *Constitution* and *Journal* reporters from covering stories of racial unrest at the same time as he was seemingly permitting McGill to champion desegregation editorially:

The newspapers reflected the two sides of their president, and for every person who looks back at the *Atlanta Journal* and *Constitution* of the 1950s and ‘60s as organs of truth in a dark time, there seems to be another who regards them as journalistic frauds whose reputation was based solely on the efforts of one man, Ralph McGill, a great journalist on a bad newspaper.⁶

From these accounts, it appears evident that the *Constitution*’s coverage of the movement in its news pages did not always live up to the progressive editorial stances set forth by McGill and Patterson. What has yet to be examined fully, however, is precisely how the *Constitution*’s coverage reflected this failure, or if that failure had any substantial influence in the historical outcome of the Atlanta movement. Klibanoff and Roberts briefly mention in their book that the *Constitution* decided to curtail its coverage of national civil rights stories such as the Ole Miss and Birmingham, but offer little other evidence regarding how the paper fell short or whether its reporting had an impact in shaping local readers’ attitudes on the movement.⁷ Stacey Eugene Settle brilliantly fills in many of these gaps in her 1996 analysis of the *Constitution*’s coverage of

⁵ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (Knopf: New York, 2006), p. 284.

⁶ Tom Junod, “Bottom-Line News,” *Atlanta*, April 1989, p. 117.

⁷ Roberts and Klibanoff, p. 285.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s involvement in the Birmingham Campaign and the Selma Voting Rights March, but does not examine how the paper approached more sensitive local events happening in Atlanta at the time that might have more easily angered its white advertisers.⁸

This essay aims to bolster existing claims that the *Atlanta Constitution* downplayed civil rights stories in its news pages by analyzing how the paper reported the single most important struggle to take place in the Atlanta movement—the October 1960 student sit-ins of downtown lunch-counters. Given that the 1960 sit-ins were of such immediate local interest and visibility to the *Constitution's* estimated 200,000 daily metropolitan readers, the paper had little choice not to report them⁹. This study will conduct a medium-based rhetorical analysis of the *Constitution's* coverage of the 1960 Atlanta sit-in struggle in comparison with the same coverage offered by the city's conservative black-owned broadsheet, the *Atlanta Daily World*, a paper which at the time had approximately 50,000 readers.¹⁰ In doing so, it will demonstrate that the *Constitution's* news division approached the Atlanta movement in a less progressive manner than the popular memory of its editors McGill and Patterson typically reflects.

Methodology

Historical approaches to the subject of civil rights-era southern journalism have usually tended to hinge upon editorial content rather than news accounts out of the belief that editors alone have the ability to act as autonomous sources of meaning. Typical of this editorially-centric

⁸ Stacey Eugene Settle, "News Narratives on Martin Luther King, Jr., and the SCLC: *The Atlanta Constitution* and *The Atlanta Daily World Consider Civil Rights in Alabama*," Dissertation, Howard University, 1996.

⁹ *The Directory of Newspaper Periodicals*, 1965, p. 219, qtd. in Stephen Zeigler's "Conscience: The editorial rhetoric of Ralph McGill in the civil rights era," St. Louis University, 1989, p. 84.

¹⁰ Hugh Davis Graham has argued that the *World's* editorials reflected a "Washingtonian" approach to race relations that often fell in line with white mainstream views. See *Crisis in Print*, p. 254.

approach is John T. Kneebone's seminal 1985 work *Southern Liberal Journalists and the Issue of Race: 1920-1944*. Kneebone contends that "newspapermen, rather than newspapers, should be the focus of attention," and focuses on the writings of five leading southern liberal editors, including Virginius Dabney of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Hodding Carter of the *Greenville (Miss.) Delta Democrat-Times* and Ralph McGill of the *Atlanta Constitution*.¹¹ ¹² Looking at the issue of Civil Rights journalism from such a character-driven angle is not without its value, and it can certainly provide historians with a clearer method of comparison than a strict analysis of supposedly objective factual coverage can. But an editorially-centric approach often places too much emphasis on opinion while downplaying the very real impact that hard news stories had in shaping civil rights public opinion. As Hodding Carter of the *Delta Democrat Times* noted in 1969, editorial activism was often not enough to inspire real change:

Even for some of the best, good, hard depth reporting was more honored as a concept than a reality. The editorial thunder could roll, but the reader too often simply was not informed about much more than the surface froth of the deep wave of change which was, and is, engulfing our region. Those newspapers which did report events relating to the integration struggle (and there were a shamefully-large number which would not even do this) rarely went deeper than the events themselves.¹³

¹¹ John Kneebone, *Southern Liberal Journalists and the Issue of Race: 1920-1944* (UNC Press: Chapel Hill, 1985), p. xiii.

¹² For further examples of editorial-based studies of the southern civil rights press, see David Davies, *The Press and Race* (2002), Hugh David Graham, *Crisis in Print, Reporting Civil Rights* (2003), and *Reporting Civil Rights* (2003).

¹³ Hodding Carter, *Their Words Were Bullets: The Southern Press in War, Reconstruction and Peace*, Lamar Memorial Lecture Series, Mercer University, 1969, p. 69.

This limitation of “editorial thunder” as a tool of persuasion has its roots in the development of the professional norm of journalistic objectivity in the early twentieth century. The American Society of Newspaper Editors officially adopted the term “objectivity” into its Code of Ethics in 1923, and by the beginning of the long civil rights movement, the imperative of unbiased journalism had become thoroughly institutionalized within the American press.¹⁴ Moreover, media critic W.W. Wymack observed as early as 1942 that the public had grown savvy enough to understand the distinction between fact and opinion—what was printed in the news pages and what was printed in the editorial pages—and were consequently no longer likely to be swayed by an editor’s passionate rhetorical pleas alone. As Wymack writes, “The day of the slam-bam editorial is, as I see it, done. The value of the editorial page has been lessened, in some cases, by extreme bias.”¹⁵

The following comparison of the *Constitution* and the *Daily World* seeks to emphasize what contemporary media scholar Alex S. Jones has called the “persuasive power of objective journalism,” which often holds a “far greater power to change minds than journalism that is from a subjective point of view.”¹⁶ To do so, it will make use of the theoretical model of communication known as the agenda-setting function of the press. The agenda-setting model holds that the press play an active role in shaping readers’ views on current events by prioritizing certain stories over others and thus setting the public agenda. The agenda-setting function was perhaps most famously summed up by Bernard C. Cohen in 1963, who asserted that the press “may not be suc-

¹⁴ Denis McQuail (2010) notes that the code of objectivity was initially adopted by the ASNE as a way to enhance public perception of newspapers rather than an actual goal. See *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, p. 172.

¹⁵ Qtd. in Zeigler, p. 84.

¹⁶ Alex S. Jones, *Losing the News* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2009), p. 94.

successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*." ¹⁷

The agenda-setting model of the press has been applied in a 2005 study of civil rights coverage in the the *Atlanta Daily World* by Maria E. Odum-Hinmon, but it has yet to be equally extended to an analysis of the *Constitution*.¹⁸ As Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney point out, the press convey the importance of a story to readers in a variety of ways:

We get a sense of the importance of an issue in media by its prominence (Is it at the top of the front page, or buried somewhere inside? Is it the first item in the evening news, or near the end?), and by the extensiveness, both of stories in a given day and of the duration of coverage over time – Is there one story, or is there a main story and one or more related sidebar stories? How long and detailed are the stories? Does artwork – photos, charts, or graphs – accompany the story? Does the issue receive treatment over many days, weeks, months? ¹⁹

For the purposes of this analysis, agenda-setting will be measured in the *Constitution* and *World's* coverage of the October 1960 sit-in struggle using five primary criteria: (1) *Prominence*, or the positioning of sit-in stories within the two papers and the relative order in which facts were delivered; (2) *Extensiveness*, how long each paper's stories were and the duration of their coverage; (3) *Language*, the use of words with specific connotations to convey various meanings; (4) *Art*, the nature and size of the photographs running alongside stories; and (5) *Sourcing*, the types and

¹⁷ Bernard Cohen. *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1963), p. 13.

¹⁸ Maria Odum-Hinmon, "The Cautious Crusader: How The Atlanta Daily World Covered The Struggle for African American Rights from 1945 to 1985," University of Maryland, College Park, 2005.

¹⁹ Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney, *Media Making in a Popular Culture*, p. 347, qtd. in Odum-Hinmon, p. 23.

number of individuals quoted in news accounts. A total of nine news articles were analyzed in regards to these five attributes, with editorial opinions used to provide context.

The October 1960 Sit-In Struggle

The student sit-ins of downtown department store lunch-counters in the fall of 1960 received more local and national press coverage than perhaps any other event in the Atlanta movement. Over the course a three-day period between October 19 and October 22, police arrested more than 120 students from Atlanta's historically black colleges and universities for staging protests against the city's segregated dining conditions, among their number including prominent national leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Lonnie King. The arrests garnered national media attention, eventually leading Mayor Hartsfield to reach a truce with students on the condition that he would personally ensure the desegregation of the city's lunch counters if the students immediately halted demonstrations.²⁰

The white-owned *Constitution* and the black-owned *Daily World* both offered predictably haughty editorial condemnations of the protests, contending that the students should not have resorted to rabble-raising demonstrations merely in order to incite sympathy for their points of view.^{21 22} Gene Patterson had taken over McGill's editorial post at the *Constitution* four months earlier, and C.A. Scott was serving as editor of the *World*. But while Patterson and Scott espoused remarkably similar editorial opinions in opposition to the sit-ins, the two newspapers departed significantly in terms of how they actually covered the story as a breaking news event.

²⁰ "Atlanta Negroes Continue Sit-Ins at Lunch Counters," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 22, 1960, p. 7.

²¹ Gene Patterson, "We Urge an End to Atlanta Sit-Ins," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Thursday, October 20, 1960, p. 4; Lead editorial.

²² C.A. Scott, "An Issue Confronts the Community," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 20, 1960, p. 5; Lead editorial.

The *World* portrayed the student sit-ins in a much fuller, more fair-minded light than the *Constitution*, devoting increasing amounts of page space each day to the story's latest developments. As Odum-Inman has observed, "What [*The Daily World*] was not afraid to print, indeed, was the kind of news that was largely missing from the white-owned *Atlanta Journal* and *Atlanta Constitution*."²³ Ultimately, *The Atlanta Inquirer*, a niche liberal Negro publication with a smaller readership than the *Constitution* or the *World*, reported the sit-in story more exhaustively than either daily paper, and the nationally-circulated *Washington Post* provided a more accurate retelling of the events.²⁴ ²⁵ That is not to indict either the *Constitution* or the *World*, but rather to point out how each molded its supposedly objective reporting of events in response to the desires of its intended audience and advertisers.

Day One – Wednesday, October 19, 1960

Wednesday, October 19, marked first the first day of the lunch-counter sit-ins and the subsequent arrest of 52 protesters at Rich's Department Store on Peachtree Street. Both *The Constitution* and *The Daily World* gave the arrests top billing above the fold in the right-hand corner of the next day's paper, with jumplines running to the middle sections.²⁶ ²⁷ The *Constitution* even ran an Associated Press photo of Lonnie King and Martin Luther King, Jr. walking down the street outside of Rich's. The *Constitution*'s account emphasized the involvement of Martin Lu-

²³ Odum-Hinmon, p. 90.

²⁴ "The Inquirer's Diary: The First Year," *The Atlanta Inquirer*, Saturday, August 7, 2010, p. 5B.

²⁵ See George McMillan, "Problems Created by Success Beset Student Sitdown Drive," *The Washington Post*, October 19, 1960, p. A24; UPI, "Negroes Renew Campaign in Atlanta," *The Washington Post*, Friday, October 21, 1960, p. 1A.

²⁶ Bruce Galphin and Keeler McCartney, "King, 51 Others Arrested Here in New Sit-In Push," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Thursday, October 20, 1960, p. 1A; News article, top right.

²⁷ John Britton and Paul DeLaney, "36 Bound Over to Criminal Court Following Downtown 'Counter' Demonstrations," *The Atlanta Daily World*, Thursday, October 20, 1960, p. 1A; News article, top right.

ther King, Jr. in the sit-ins, running as its headline that “KING, 51 OTHERS ARRESTED HERE IN NEW SIT-IN PUSH” and making specific reference to King in both the lead and second graf of the account²⁸. The *World*, however, makes no mention of King at all until eight column inches deep into its story, and even then only refers to him in passing²⁹. This reduction on the part of the *Constitution* to celebratizing the sit-in’s notable figures, as well of the tendency of the *World* to downplay the involvement of mainstream black leaders, is not surprising given each paper’s efforts to re-represent the movement based on the perceived demands of its respective readership. While it made sense for the white-owned *Constitution* to emphasize the compliance of national civil rights leaders in an ostensibly illegal demonstration, it fundamentally conflicted with the dominant narrative of the *World*, which maintained that the push for racial justice was neither a radical nor an extralegal pursuit.³⁰ The *World*, therefore, sought principally to cast the sit-in as the irresponsible action of a radical youth fringe of the movement rather than a demonstration condoned by mainstream civil rights leaders.

This imperative becomes even more apparent when assessing the two papers’ different approaches to criminality. The *Constitution* focuses great attention on the fact that the demonstrators had been “arrested,” noting in the fourth graf of its story that the students had been asked to leave the Rich’s dining room and asserting that protesters had willfully broken Georgia’s recently passed anti-trespassing law by ignoring the store manager’s requests. But the *World* avoids using the word ‘arrested’ altogether, saying instead that the demonstrators had “been bound over

²⁸ The *lead* of a news story refers to the first *graf*, or paragraph, which sums up the most important aspects of an event (usually who, what, when, where and why).

²⁹ One column-inch in newsprint typically equals around 25 words.

³⁰ Settle has pointed to the concept of ‘youth’ in her study to explain the *World’s* attempts to distance movement leaders from lawbreaking actions. See “News Narratives,” p. 96.

to court” in its headline, and writing in a deck that the eight locations were “visited” instead of “protested,” as the *Constitution*’s account puts it. The *World* also highlights in its lead that the charges against 28 of the students had been swiftly dismissed, while the *Constitution* only casually mentions the dismissal of charges at the end of the third graf.

The *Constitution* and the the *World* also portray criminality differently through the way in which they recount the events leading up to the arrests. The *Constitution* takes pains to mention that the students had been asked to “leave the room but not the premises,” yet the *World* relays this fact with the exact opposite emphasis, suggesting that the students were not necessarily at fault because they “had not been commanded specifically to leave the premises.” *The Constitution*, moreover, states merely that the demonstrators carried “hastily made signs,” while the *World* spends a great deal of time describing the actual message contained on the signs: “ ‘We Want Equal Rights,’ ‘Jim Crow Must Go,’ ‘Make the World Safe for Democracy and Make Democracy Safe for the World,’ and ‘We Prefer Jail to Life. In Hell.’”

On the issue of sourcing, a large portion of the *Constitution*’s Friday story is devoted to recounting the official police version events of the morning’s sit-ins, observing that “Detective Capt. R. E. Little said that in each instance, store officials in the presence of police asked demonstrators to leave.” The paper’s account relies most of all, however, upon the testimony of segregationist Municipal Judge James Webb, who issues a stern condemnations both of the means and desired end of the protesters, saying “This was a planned demonstration for the purpose of obtaining publicity . . . my courtroom is not going to be used for that purpose.” In contrast, the *World* only makes two scant references to Webb in its story, pointing out how “Webb interrupted proceedings and had court officers go out and investigate the picketing.” The *Constitution* story

also includes a lengthy quotation from Rich's General Manager Ben Tuck, who claims that he urged two young demonstrators that "those upstairs 'had already made your point' and urged them to leave. The Negroes refused and were arrested." Perhaps most erratically, however, the *Constitution* itself asserts that "Tactics indicated the Negroes were deliberately forcing the issue of arrest," suggesting that the protesters were solely seeking publicity.³¹ But the reporter from *The World* includes no such observation, nor gives any credence whatsoever to the claims of Rich's employees. Instead, it quotes individual student demonstrators in an attempt to humanize the protesters.

Day Two - Thursday, October 20, 1960

As the Atlanta sit-in struggle flared up on Thursday with 26 more arrests, both *The Constitution* and the *World* continued to cover the story. But this time, the *World* chooses to devote half of its front page space the next day to two different stories on the demonstrations, running huge banner headlines with detailed subheads and summaries of the previous day's events.³² Meanwhile, the *Constitution* buries its coverage of the sit-ins within a tiny eight-inch text block at the corner of the front page, situated just below a prediction about wind patterns and a story about the upcoming British election of Prime Minister³³. Again, *The Constitution* overtly proclaims in its headline the fact that the demonstrators have been arrested for "disturbing the peace," while *The Daily World* states merely that the students have been "given ten days each for demonstrations."

³¹ Ibid, pg. 7, col. 1.

³² John Britton and Paul DeLaney, "Twenty Two Students Given Ten Days Each in 'Demonstrations'," *The Atlanta Daily World*, Friday, October 21, 1960; News article, p. 1A, top right.

³³ Bruce Galphin and Keeler McCartney, "26 More Arrested in Sit-Ins; Many Counters Closed Here," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Friday, October 21, 1960; News article, p. 1A, bottom right.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the *World* launches a clear, seemingly objective condemnation of the charges, criticizing Judge James Webb for rushing to judge the demonstrators' motives by repeating the arguments put forward by the students' attorney, Donald Hollowell. "[Judge Webb] ignored Defense Attorney Donald L. Hollowell's contention that the students were not disorderly nor loafing, since they had a purpose for being at the terminal restaurant — to eat." The *Constitution*, on the other hand, merely recites the charges filed against the students for loafing and disturbance, acting more as simple arbiter of official police events than a newspaper investigating the deeper truth. Once again, the *Constitution* goes out of its way to point out that the demonstrators have violated "Georgia's 1960 anti-trespass law." And once again, the city's white mainstream newspaper seems to suggest a subtle belief that the black protesters deliberately sought to cause the city trouble, saying "The Negroes broke into applause and a few shouted 'bravo' at the performance."

Additionally, the *Constitution* seems to downplay the protesters' encounters with white violence, making no mention of the race of the arrested white student Harold Sprayberry, and mentioning only offhand at the end of an unrelated paragraph that Sprayberry "strolled past the Negroes spraying room deodorant." This stands in sharp contrast to the fairly clear and vivid descriptions of Sprayberry's actions as relayed in the *World*: "At each of the stores closed, there was one white man who police later arrested and charged with disorderly conduct—inciting to riot, and disorderly conduct-disturbance . . . Woolworth's closed at approximately 1 p.m. after Sprayberry allegedly doused contents of an aerosol deodorant bomb over students seated at the closed lunch counter." ³⁴

³⁴ Ibid, pg. 6, col. 7.

The *World's* ratcheting up of sit-in coverage also compels the paper to run a separate story at the top of page one the same day focusing on the condemnation by Spellman College President Dr. Albert Manley of the student demonstrations. This story allows the the *World* further to distance itself from the ideological principles of the demonstrators, positing that “there has been no attempt to force the students’ decisions” and that administrators had “no knowledge of students’ involvement.”³⁵ At the same time, however, the *World* reflects a restrained but significant feeling of sympathy for the students’ plight. It acknowledges—as *The Constitution* does not—that student protesters were gathered up en masse and sent to jail. Furthermore, it criticizes white prison officials for not permitting black ministers to visit the students while they remain behind bars.

Day Three – Friday, October 21, 1960

On Friday, giving into weight of the sit-in protests’ coming under an increasingly national spotlight, Mayor William Hartsfield promises to intercede on the behalf of student protesters if they immediately agree to halt all demonstrations. The *World* once again boldly and accurately reports the sit-in developments above the fold in the next day’s paper, using a bold-type headline to provide the story with added emphasis from the rest of the page.³⁶ But the *Constitution* falters on the story, not only relegating it again to a blurb on page one, but failing to provide any mention of the Mayor’s compromise agreement until the sixth graf.³⁷ Instead, the *Constitu-*

³⁵ “Students Advised on ‘Implications’ of Demonstrations,” *The Atlanta Daily World*, Friday, October 21, 1960, p. 1A; News article, top left.

³⁶ John Britton, “Mayor Suggests ‘Truce’ in Demonstrations Here,” *The Atlanta Daily World*, Saturday, October 22, 1960, pg. 1A. News article; top right.

³⁷ Bruce Galphin and Keeler McCartney, “Negro Picketing Continues But Sit-Ins Decline Sharply,” *The Atlanta Constituion*, Saturday, October 22, 1960, pg. 1A. News article; bottom left corner box.

tion centers its report mainly on the persistence of protests, running the headline “Negro Picketing Continues But Sit-Ins Decline Sharply,” and including a comment from Judge Webb decrying the demonstrators “irresponsible mob action” and “defiance of the law.” Moreover, *The Constitution* seems to criticize the protesters for knowingly wasting law enforcement resources. The demonstrators knew they “would probably be arrested,” the *Constitution* asserts. “and it costs \$5 million a year to finance our police department and almost half of that department has been tied up all week to keep [protesters] from being hurt.”³⁸

The *World’s* Saturday story also includes a lengthy passage from a letter penned by black minister Rev. Samuel W. Williams of the city’s Friendship Baptist Church. In the letter, Williams urges Mayor Hartsfield “to provide now the moral leadership necessary to bring about a conversation between all affected to the end that justice shall reign in our city . . . The time has come when our city can no longer ignore the just and honest demands of the students of this city . . . Our city cannot continue to ignore the truth.”³⁹ In addition, after four devoting four paragraphs to Williams’ argument, *The Daily World* then offers up another two blocks of text to outlining a recent resolution passed by the Greater Atlanta Council on Human Relations, saying “We commend the students for the seriousness of purpose with which they have conducted themselves.” Such aspects of *The Daily World’s* story set it apart clearly from the account published in the *Constitution*, which neither offers nor leaves much room for any deeper moral justification of the students’ actions.

Day Four - Saturday, October 22, 1960

³⁸ Ibid, pg. 3, col. 4.

³⁹ Ibid, pg. 7, col. 3.

The next day, Mayor Hartsfield officially orders that the arrested students be immediately released from jail as part of his end of the compromise brokered with demonstrators Friday afternoon. On Sunday—for the fourth day in a row—the sit-in saga runs as the lead story in the *World*, but the *Constitution* for the first time fails to report the story at all.⁴⁰ The *World* publishes its most in-depth account of the sit-ins yet, outlining the basic tenets of the compromise, summarizing the challenges facing the city’s integrationist leaders, and informing its readers about sentiments within the African-American community. Moreover, in the face of the *Constitution*’s silence, the *World* reports the growing violence coming mounting in the city’s white community: “As negotiations were being made at city hall for a peaceful settlement of the issues, known members of the Ku Klux Klan paraded with pro-segregation signs in front of several of the same stores hit by students earlier this week in their anti-segregation protests.” Just as the paper reported the messages written on the signs of student protesters earlier in the week, it now provides the same treatment to the signs of white agitators: “The klansmen paraded with signs reading Support the Stores That Support Segregation” and “We Won’t Have Race Mixing in Georgia.”⁴¹

Summary of Findings

By Monday, the sit-in saga had grown stale in the news divisions of both papers, and was not reported on again in any substantive way. Yet within a mere four days of sit-in coverage, the *Constitution* and the *World* had created two noticeably different meanings for their readers, even as both papers condemned the students editorially for not embodying what C.A. Scott of the *World* called “that orderly and amiable sentiment which would promote goodwill and friendly

⁴⁰ John Britton, “Mayor Hartsfield Orders Release From Jail of 22 Students Arrested Here,” *The Atlanta Daily World*, Sunday, October 23, 1960, p. 1A; News article, top right.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 4.

relations a city like ours deserves”⁴² The *World* ultimately gave the October sit-in struggle a greater degree of prominence and extensiveness in its news pages—not only running the protests as its top story with banner headlines for two days after the *Constitution* had demoted it to a position below the fold, but also covering the events for a longer duration. Interestingly, the truce reached between demonstrators and Mayor Hartsfield Friday evening never received significant attention in the *Constitution*, while Hartsfield’s negotiation agreement warranted more than 1,625 words of coverage over the course of a two-day period in the *World’s* Saturday and Sunday editions. Additionally, as the preceding media-centered analysis has demonstrated, the two papers often employed different word choices, tone, and sourcing that conveyed meaning in ways often more subtle than blatant. The *Constitution’s* coverage cast the students in a criminal light and emphasized the complicity of mainstream civil rights leaders, while the *World* spent more time explaining the underlying meaning behind the protests and distancing civil rights leaders from the story. Throughout the entirety of the sit-in struggle, the *Constitution* consistently referred to the arrested individuals as “negroes” and “protesters,” while the *World* called them “students” and “demonstrators.”

The Long Sit-In Struggle

Although the October sit-in struggle may have been the most pivotal moment in the Atlanta student movement, it represents only one event in the broader year-long student-led campaign for racial integration in Atlanta’s public life. The arrests of student protesters at city-owned cafeterias that took place earlier that year, on March 15, seem to suggest similar differences in the *Constitution* and *World’s* longterm coverage of the movement. In the headlines on May 16,

⁴² Ibid, Scott, p. 5.

1960, the *World* refers to the demonstrations as “food service appeals,” while the *Constitution* labels them “sitdowns.”^{43 44} In addition, the *World* runs two front-page photos depicting the students being harassed by white police officers, while the *Constitution* runs a picture on page nine with a cutline reading “POLICE OFFICER MAINTAINS ORDER AT SPRAY-BERRY’S.”⁴⁵ All of this came the same time as the editors of the two papers offered roughly the same stance against the students’ actions. Ralph McGill of the *Constitution* concluded in his editorial that the sit-ins “need no repetition,” and editor C.A. Scott of the *World* likewise asserted that he “wondered if there is necessity here in Atlanta to continue demonstrations.”^{46 47} Further media-centered studies into how the *Constitution* and the *World* portrayed the broader student movement as a news event would likely yield even more differences in coverage.

The formation of the weekly *Atlanta Inquirer* in July 1960 suggests that neither the *Constitution* nor the *World* covered developments of the Atlanta student movement as extensively as many in the black community would have liked. As David L. Stanley observed in a 25th anniversary edition of the paper published in 1985, the *Inquirer* was “born out of necessity during the Student Movement” and “filled a void left by other media.”⁴⁸ One of the founding reporters of the *Inquirer*, John B. Smith, Sr., said that although the *World* covered the student movement more

⁴³ John Britton, “Students Bound Over to Court After Food Service Appeal,” *The Atlanta Daily World*, March 16, 1960, p. 1A; News article, top right.

⁴⁴ “77 Negroes Arrested in Student Sitdowns at 10 Eating Places Here,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 16, 1960, p. 1A; News article; top right.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Ralph McGill, “Protest Incidents Need No Repetition,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, Wednesday, March 16, 1960, p. 4; Lead editorial.

⁴⁷ C.A. Scott, “The Sit-Downs Here,” *The Atlanta Daily World*, Wednesday, March 16, 1960, p. 6; Lead editorial.

⁴⁸ David L. Stanley, “The Atlanta Inquirer: Still ‘A Loud Voice in Atlanta,’” *The Atlanta Inquirer*, August 31, 1985, p. 1A; News article, below fold.

prominently in its news pages than the *Constitution*, the *World* still reflected a hesitancy to give the movement full coverage because of its political ties and the fear of upsetting its white advertisers.⁴⁹ By Smith's account, the daily press in Atlanta consistently downplayed the student movement in their news pages:

The mere fact that we have been the only publication that has truthfully chronicled the Atlanta student movement for the last fifty years is what makes *The Inquirer* unique. It hasn't been just 1960—it's been continuous.

Within two months of its first edition, the *Inquirer* had attracted a weekly circulation of 15,000 readers.⁵⁰ Smith went on to say that what set the *Inquirer* apart during the movement was its commitment to reporting the hard news of the movement often missing from the *Constitution* and the *Journal*:

The white papers weren't covering the student movement enough, at least not on the front page, where the hard news took place. They could write lots of editorials about the movement, but the only time they actually spoke about the black community in the news pages was when a crime was committed.⁵¹

The overnight success of the *Inquirer* suggests that there was a demand within the Atlanta press for more extensive coverage of the local movement.

Conclusion

Coverage of the October sit-in struggle in Atlanta's two most widely read black and white newspapers illustrates the failures of the *Constitution* to report the local movement in its news

⁴⁹ An interview was conducted by the author with Smith on Feb. 2, 2011. See Appendix 1.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 2.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 3.

pages. Despite the fact that the *Constitution* was remarkably more progressive than many other white southern newspapers, it often shortchanged pro-integration stories and failed to understand the complexity of the issue. As Klibanoff and Roberts contend:

The newsrooms of the southern newspapers, where the stories of massive and passive resistance were playing out never got hold of the whole story in front of them. They had no sense of the depth of feeling on either side of the racial divide, had no ideas the leaders of the civil rights protests were, frequently misjudged the commitment and motives of the leaders on both sides, played fast and loose with the names and titles of anyone outside the white power stories, and sometimes served as adjunct investigative bodies for law enforcement in trying to squeeze out hoodunit information about the leadership of the civil rights protests.⁵²

Given that hard news coverage often fell “in line with prevailing sentiment” it is not surprising that the *Constitution* is known “better for its editorial pages than for its news pages”⁵³ But that does not mean it is not important to understand how the news was reported, or how it was often misrepresented or ignored. When viewed in regard to the coverage offered by *The Daily World*, the *Constitution's* coverage of the October 1960 sit-ins appears more unquestioning in its approach. Its deference to white authority, its simple relaying of official events, and its inability to recognize white violence all help point out the paper’s failure to live up to the progressive legacy of its editors Ralph McGill and Gene Patterson.

Three decades after the 1960 sit-ins, the *Constitution's* first black editor, Cynthia Tucker, inherited the post previously occupied by McGill and Patterson. Looking back on the movement

⁵² Klibanoff, p. 113

⁵³ Ibid, p. 112.

in 2001, Tucker credited the editorial crusades of her predecessors for making it possible for her to rise to a position of such influence:

I think the city of Atlanta, and I use that term broadly to reflect the close-in suburbs as well, has changed to become very close to what Ralph McGill and Gene Patterson would have liked. Atlanta is now finally past the pitched battles of race It is because they campaigned relentlessly to make Atlanta the city it is today that it is possible for me to do this. ⁵⁴

Tucker's redemptive portrait of the *Constitution* overlooks the numerous ways in which the paper failed to cover the struggle for racial equality in its news pages. As Stephen Zeigler has pointed out, McGill and Patterson's legacy has led "the rest of the *Constitution* to be overshadowed," with the paper ". . . building its institutional reputation on their individual names while the bulk of its news coverage was subpar." ⁵⁵ While the "editorial thunder could roll," the *Constitution* was by no means immune to the segregationist bias of southern journalism at large. ⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Cynthia Tucker, "The Legacy of Gene Patterson," *The Changing South of Gene Patterson*, p. 281-286.

⁵⁵ Zeigler, p. 9.

⁵⁶ Carter, p. 69.

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Appendix 1

Interview Transcript: John B. Smith, Sr.
Publisher, The Atlanta Inquirer
 Conducted by Carl V. Lewis, Mercer University

This is an interview with John B. Smith, Sr. taking place Wednesday, Feb. 2, 2011, in the The Atlanta Inquirer office on Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive in Atlanta, Ga. I am Carl V. Lewis.

Lewis: Hi, John. Today I'd like to talk to you about *The Atlanta Inquirer* and your recollections of the paper's early days covering the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta and the 1960 student sit-in movement specifically. First off, who exactly was responsible for starting *The Inquirer*?

Smith: It was a group of black students and graduates from Atlanta colleges and universities who started the paper in July 1960, namely Clarence Coleman, Johnny Johnson, Dr. Clinton Warner, Hilda Wilson, Herman Russell, Jesse Hill and Gladys Powell.

Lewis: What was your involvement back then?

Smith: I came on board with the paper in February 1961 just a few months after it began publishing, and I've been here ever since. I was a mathematics teacher at Price High School in southeast Atlanta at that time, and I reported at the paper in the evenings. I worked all night and sometimes didn't even come home. I had to be careful about people at the school knowing I was involved in the paper, though.

Lewis: I see here that *The Inquirer*'s 25th anniversary edition from 1985 says the paper was formed 'out of necessity.' Can you explain that a bit for me? How did *The Daily World* and *The Constitution* play into that necessity?

Smith: It'd probably be better if I stick to talking to you about what *The Inquirer* did.

Lewis: Well, let me tell you what I've gathered from looking at the archives, then you tell me if you think I'm headed on the right track. To me, it seems that *The Constitution* and *The Journal* often downplayed the sit-in story, and *The Daily World* treated the story more fairly in its news coverage, but editorially tried to shy away from appearing too involved in the movement.

Smith: That's absolutely the case.

Lewis: Why do you think that was?

Smith: Politics. The people in charge at *The World* were strong Republicans. If they had sided with the students in the first place, our paper wouldn't have had a reason to be formed, and we wouldn't be in existence today. But the community came together overnight to start *The Inquirer* so that the students of the movement in Atlanta could have some medium to express what was taking place.

Lewis: The paper was largely student-contributed, then?

Smith: Yeah, students contributed a good bit of the content. Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Julian Bond, Lonnie King, people like that.

Lewis: Was it the specifically the student movement that prompted the paper to be started?

Smith: Yeah, when the students marched from Atlanta University Center on March 15, 1960, that's what set it all off.

Lewis: What was the weekly circulation when the paper first got started?

Smith: When we started off in 1960, we had a circulation of around 15,000 almost overnight. We reached as much as 55,000 by the late '60s, but we've dropped down to around 40,000 today.

Lewis: Were you at any point competing with *The Daily World* for black readership?

Smith: The only paper we've ever considered ourselves to be in competition with has been the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. We've never considered *The World* to be our competitors. We may be their competition, but they're not ours.

Lewis: What, then, in your mind sets apart *The Inquirer* from the *The Constitution* and *The World*?

Smith: The mere fact that we have been the only publication that has truthfully chronicled the Atlanta student movement for the last fifty years is what makes *The Inquirer* unique. It hasn't been just 1960—it's been continuous.

Lewis: Would you say the movement has been the main focus of *The Inquirer's* coverage?

Smith: We've always had the standard newspaper sections such as sports, obituaries and community announcements, but, yes, the big focus has been the movement.

Lewis: What specific ways did *The Inquirer* help bring public support for the Atlanta movement?

Smith: Well, the people who supported the students' actions represented a surprisingly large cross-section of the Atlanta community, especially the African-American community. Many of them were behind the students' actions even though they themselves could not participate in the movement actively. Those people were the driving force of our circulation. They were the ones who bought our paper.

Lewis: What about advertising?

Smith: Initially, we did not accept advertising from anyone or any company who discriminated, so circulation revenue was all we had financially to keep us afloat. People every week would buy

the paper just to see what the students were saying. That's why we led a charge in late 1960 to get people to turn in their Macy's credit cards and put them in a safe-deposit box. People from all across Atlanta, white and black, were sending us in their credit cards to stores like Macy's and Woolworth's that were refusing service to African-Americans, even though many of them didn't outwardly support the movement for fear of retribution.

Lewis: Besides the student movement, what other ways do you think *The Inquirer* filled a gap in the Atlanta press?

Smith: We filled a gap by reporting the truthful, hard news as it affected the African-American community on issues such as education, transportation and health care. Atlanta Public Schools were not integrated at that time, and we played a key and pivotal role in the integration of not only the public high schools, but Georgia Tech, University of Georgia, Georgia State—all of those.

Lewis: Would you say that, before *The Inquirer*, those issues affecting the African-American community weren't being covered adequately in the Atlanta press?

Smith: The white papers weren't covering the student movement enough, at least not on the front page, where the hard news took place. They could write lots of editorials about the movement, but the only time they actually spoke about the black community in the news pages was when a crime was committed. They may have covered black events from a sports perspective or a music perspective, but hardcore news regarding African-American health, education and transportation was what got ignored. And it's still like that to a great degree today.

Lewis: Well, that's about all I have to ask you today. Thank you for talking to me.

Smith: It's been a pleasure meeting you, Carl.