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‘Broken Brotherhood: The Rise and Fall of the National Afro-American Council,’ by Benjamin R. Justesen

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Broken Brotherhood: The Rise and Fall of the National Afro-American Council.

By Benjamin R. Justesen. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, c. 2008. Pp. [xviii], 257. Paper, \$35.00, ISBN 978-0-8093-2843-7.)

The dominance of Booker T. Washington and the loyalty of most African Americans to the Republican Party are often mistaken as markers of black political unanimity at the turn of the twentieth century. Even worse, they are assumed to stand for the whole of African American political life. Benjamin R. Justesen's story of the struggles to establish and sustain the National Afro-American Council should serve as an important reminder of the tensions, diversity, and energy within black politics in this period. The reminder is so important, and so potentially productive, that one wishes that *Broken Brotherhood: The Rise and Fall of the National Afro-American Council* were a more broadly imagined work.

The National Afro-American Council was founded in 1898 by four of the best-known black men in the United States at the time: African Methodist Episcopal Zion bishop Alexander Walters, U.S. congressman George H. White, Tuskegee Institute founder Booker T. Washington, and journalist Timothy Thomas Fortune. All four were influential in black and white circles.

Within the council they inspired endless debate about the best ways to battle white supremacy, especially about how to deal with disenfranchisement and the increasingly unreliable Republican Party.

Justesen's book is an episodic telling of these debates, though they are in constant danger of being drowned out by the minutiae of Victorian-era committee meetings. Eleven council meetings over ten years are taken in turn. For a scholar seeking details about, say, the council's meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1902, this book is a great resource. Justesen relies on newspaper articles and supplements them occasionally with personal papers. He has also dug into a trove of older and too-often-ignored histories of black politics, but there is an absence of more recent—if not new—scholarship by historians like Jane Dailey, Kevin K. Gaines, Glenda E. Gilmore, Steven Hahn, and Michele Mitchell.

Thus, while the details of the annual meetings of the National Afro-American Council come through clearly in *Broken Brotherhood*, questions remain. Most important, what did the council mean to Americans other than its leadership? Newspaper reports suggest that ordinary people followed council actions, but these are only hints. Without connecting these black politicians to real constituencies, Justesen's work stands as a tale of a few (mostly male) "great leaders." The book's failure to consider how its characters fit into broader streams of contemporary political thought, such as Populism, Progressivism, or nationalism, presents another limitation. Council members openly discussed imperialism, but Justesen generally lets these pitches fly by as well.

To compensate for a story of quotidian and grinding failure, Justesen sometimes overreaches with sensational language or dramatic narrative strategies (like cliff-hangers and slow buildups). One wonders if an interrogation of the tediousness of turn-of-the-twentieth-century black politics might have yielded more insight into lived experience.

Broken Brotherhood is a useful collection of evidence about day-to-day black politics at the turn of the twentieth century. It should provide scholars with launching points for new research about the struggles of a group of brilliant men and women for political recognition.

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