

JPH Editor's Note

Thirty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr., in his poignant "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (April 1963), called for the American people to support the militant nonviolent struggle for racial integration in America. In this letter King appealed to the nation to support a "constructive nonviolent" struggle to create an integrated society that would allow 20 million African Americans to live with dignity.

Today legal segregation has been outlawed. Yet America seems even more racially divided than in the early 1960s. The passage of civil rights legislation in 1964 made it illegal to discriminate on the basis of race, gender, religion, or age. Nevertheless, the issue of civil rights appears even more contentious than it was in the 1960s. The congressional authors of the Civil Rights Act (1964), as Hugh Graham tells us, explicitly stated that this legislation was not intended as a "quota bill," but the issue of affirmative action and quotas remains as politically charged as ever. While positive racial quotas were first employed in New Deal public works programs in the 1930s, Americans seem even more deeply undecided over the meaning of affirmative action. The extension of civil rights to "new" groups including the disabled has only created further dispute in American politics and the courts.

This collection of essays, edited by Professor Graham, places the issue of civil rights in America into a historical and comparative perspective. While American society remains uncertain, economically insecure, politically querulous, and profoundly divided over the justice of awarding benefits according to a schema of citizen attributes, Graham assures us, civil rights policy is not a "Pandora's box, which should never have been opened in the first place." He observes that progress has been made in the struggle for civil rights for ethnic minorities and women.

This collection, however, seeks more than simply to measure the success of civil rights policy in America. Instead, contributors to this volume assess the problems as well as the accomplishments of civil rights policy in America. This collection of essays, written from diverse disciplinary, topical, and cultural perspectives, offers the reader a broad and informed perspective of civil rights policy that should foster reasoned discussion, academic debate, and further research.