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## Book Review: The Slow Undoing: The Federal Courts and the Long Struggle for Civil Rights in South Carolina

Sherry V. Neal

*David T. Howard Middle School*

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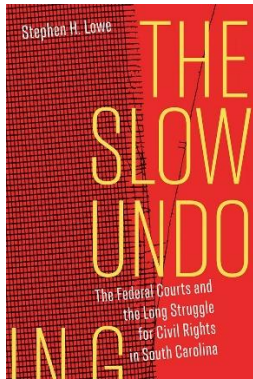
## Book Review: The Slow Undoing: The Federal Courts and the Long Struggle for Civil Rights in South Carolina

### Abstract

Sherry Neal reviews *The Slow Undoing: The Federal Courts and the Long Struggle for Civil Rights in South Carolina*, written by Stephen H. Lowe.

### Keywords

Civil Rights, Southern history, African American Studies, book review, South Carolina

***The Slow Undoing: The Federal Courts and the Long Struggle for Civil Rights in South Carolina***

Stephen H. Lowe

The University of South Carolina Press, 2021, \$29.99

ISBN: 9781643362052

In his 2017 book *The Color of Law*, Richard Rothstein compellingly outlined how segregation in America directly results from governmental decisions and policies. As a lawyer, I found Rothstein’s text to be a catalyst for learning more about the intersection of governmental action with White Supremacy, racism and discrimination, and the progress of civil rights in this country. While Rothstein painted a national picture with broad strokes, Stephen H. Lowe creates a portrait of the specific decisions of the South Carolina federal courts and their interplay with direct action by African Americans during the intense period from 1955-1965.

While Lowe’s goal is to “demonstrat[e] that both pre- and post-*Brown*, federal district courts were centrally important to achieving and solidifying civil rights gains,” he also effectively outlines how White South Carolinians used the federal courts to delay implementation of civil rights decisions from the higher courts and to impede the dismantling of White Supremacy in the state (p. 2). As he notes in Chapter Six, “In their use of the legal system, South Carolina’s White establishment was not merely trying to delay the inevitable; they were attempting to undo it” (p. 123).

Taking a chronological approach, Lowe discusses the major civil rights decisions in the South Carolina federal courts affecting primarily voting rights, access to public resources like parks, equal pay for educators, and integrated schools. He interweaves the backgrounds of the people behind the cases -

from unreliable plaintiffs who disappear to judges with White Supremacist personal views. These stories make the book compelling, and I wanted more of them. Lowe thoughtfully catalogs how taking legal action almost always had personal consequences: White-run school boards terminated the positions of African American teachers who dared to sue for equal pay; White parents threatened the livelihoods, homes, and lives of African American parents who sued to enroll their children in all-White schools. Beyond that, plaintiffs faced judges whose personal views were antithetical to their goals and who were willing to stretch the law as far as possible to preserve the status quo. While we may hear many stories of heroic White lawyers who advocated for the rights of others, Lowe reminds readers of the historical resistance of the Bar to civil rights for all and lawyers' roles in impeding social justice.

Lowe includes both legislative and local governmental responses to the victories of African Americans that may seem astonishing to readers decades later. Might African Americans win the right to access Edisto Beach State Park? No problem. Just close the park so no one has access. Black children attending school with white children? Perhaps amend the state constitution to eliminate the requirement to provide public education.

While it has a narrow focus, *The Slow Undoing* is a worthy read for anyone who wants to deepen their understanding of the systemic impediments to civil rights for African Americans. My fellow lawyers, in particular, will appreciate the nuances of the decisions Lowe discusses, but all readers can understand the legal gymnastics at play to preserve White Supremacy.

Sherry V. Neal has been a lawyer for over two decades, but she currently also works as a school librarian in Atlanta, Georgia, and is pursuing her MLIS at the University of South Carolina. She is passionate about social justice and active in the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiative at her school. Connecting tweens and teens with their inner readers and connecting herself with students, colleagues, and other readers on her @LibrarySherryATL Instagram account are some of Sherry's favorite activities.