



# Sidelines Activist: Charles S. Johnson and the Struggle for Civil Rights

*Richard Robbins*

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## **Sidelines Activist: Charles S. Johnson and the Struggle for Civil Rights** Richard Robbins

This is the first full-length biography of Charles S. Johnson (1893-1956). Although he called himself a "sidelines activist," his advocacy for racial equality was never watered-down or half-hearted. His strategy was to work indirectly, sometimes behind the scenes, to influence public policy and to mobilize groups with special concerns, especially black sharecroppers.

Together with W. E. B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier he has been named as a "founding father" among contemporary black sociologists. In a coalition with an embattled band of southern white liberals he pressed the federal government to end lynching, the poll tax, "separate but equal" schooling, and other racial inequalities of the Jim Crow era.

Throughout his career Johnson played the vital role of building bridges between the races, specifically in gaining white philanthropic support in a stimulating activism in the black community. For a quarter of a century he conducted research on the South's twin system of economic and racial exploitation. Two of his books-*Shadow of the Plantation* and *Growing up in the Black Belt* (a study of black youth and its problems in the 1930s)-are recognized today as classics.

In the last ten years of his life Johnson served as the first black president of Fisk University, one of the most important of the historically black colleges.

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