

Judging Jehovah's Witnesses: Religious Persecution and the Dawn of the Rights Revolution

By Shawn Francis Peters

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While millions of Americans were defending liberty against the Nazis, liberty was under vicious attack at home. One of the worst outbreaks of religious persecution in U.S. history occurred during World War II when Jehovah's Witnesses were intimidated, beaten, and even imprisoned for refusing to salute the flag or serve in the armed forces.

Determined to claim their First Amendment rights, Jehovah's Witnesses waged a tenacious legal campaign that led to twenty-three Supreme Court rulings between 1938 and 1946. Now Shawn Peters has written the first complete account of the personalities, events, and institutions behind those cases, showing that they were more than vindication for unpopular beliefs-they were also a turning point in the nation's constitutional commitment to individual rights.

Peters begins with the story of William Gobitas, a Jehovah's Witness whose children refused to salute the flag at school. He follows this famous case to the Supreme Court, where he captures the intellectual sparring between Justices Frankfurter and Stone over individual liberties; then he describes the aftermath of the Court's ruling against Gobitas, when angry mobs savagely assaulted Jehovah's Witnesses in hundreds of communities across America.

Judging Jehovah's Witnesses tells how persecution much of it directed by members of patriotic organizations like the American Legion touched the lives of Witnesses of all ages; why the Justice Department and state officials ignored the Witnesses' pleas for relief; and how the ACLU and liberal clergymen finally stepped forward to help them. Drawing on interviews with Witnesses and extensive research in ACLU archives, he examines the strategies that beleaguered Witnesses used to combat discrimination and goes beyond the familiar Supreme Court rulings by analyzing more obscure lower court decisions as well.

By vigorously pursuing their cause, the Witnesses helped to inaugurate an era in which individual and minority rights emerged as matters of concern for the

Supreme Court and foreshadowed events in the civil rights movement. Like the classics *Gideon's Trumpet* and *Simple Justice*, *Judging Jehovah's Witnesses* vividly narrates a moving human drama while reminding us of the true meaning of our Constitution and the rights it protects.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal
With a journalistic eye, Peters (student service coordinator, Sch. of Journalism and Mass Communications, Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison) presents the convergence of nationalistic paranoia, the distrust that erupted into violence, and palpable religious bigotry against the Jehovah's Witnesses during the 1930s and 1940s. Their desire to avoid idolatry in any form--including refusing to salute the flag or serve in the armed forces--was perceived by many as treason. During the war years of the 1940s this belief marked them as cowards at best, Nazi subversives at worst, and led to persecution. Ironically, while they fought a very public battle for their Constitutional rights, in their interior organization, theirs is one of the most theologically rigid and ideologically inflexible traditions. This legal history, in the vein of Harold Berman's Law and Revolution, tells us as much about the intricacies of jurisprudence as it does our own shameful past. This engrossing study depends primarily on firsthand testimony, ACLU documents, and legal briefs. Light on analysis but chock-full of primary resources, this is recommended reading for American and religious historians as well as for those interested in the history of persecution.
-*Sandra Collins, Univ. of Pittsburgh*
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From Kirkus Reviews
A fast-paced study of a little-known episode in American religious history. Say Jehovahs Witnesses, and most Americans will conjure up pictures of door-to-door evangelists who want to give you tracts and pamphlets. But at mid-century the sectarian group was known for something elserefusing to salute the US flag. Jehovahs Witnesses insisted they were patriotic and meant no disrespect, but they could not saluteit was a violation, they said, of Exodus 5, which instructs believers to have no other Gods before Me. In the tense and suspicious atmosphere of WWII, however, many Americans were troubled by the Witnesses refusal to salute: was this a sign of some greater disloyalty? In sleepy towns like Richwood, West Virginia, and Litchfield, Illinois, anti-Witness violence became commonplace, with Witness houses of worship being looted and graffitied and Witnesses themselves stoned like characters from the Old Testamentby 1940 there were 236 such episodes. Workplace discrimination, Peters tells us, was especially pervasive: Witnesses were often fired or forced to resign. Daniel Morgans sons, high school students in Fort Lee, New Jersey, refused to salute the flag in 1939; Morgans boss at the Motor Vehicle Department urged Morgan to pressure his sons to capitulate, and when Morgan refused, he was fired. When he applied for a job at the Bergen County Board of Freeholders, he was told that his refusal to salute the flag disqualified [him] for a civil service position, even though he was a veteran. With the aid of the ACLU, Morgan sued, and in 1944 the state supreme court ruled in his favor. The story of Morgan v. Civil Service Commission highlights another theme of the book: the Witnesses willingness to sue when their civil liberties were abridged. Peterss attempt to position this litigation as an early manifestation of the civil rights revolution is a bit strained, however. History and religion buffs will relish this tale. -- *Copyright ©2000, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Review
"A vivid depiction of the hysterical and brutal suppression of the Witnesses during the 1930s and 1940s and how their legal resistance transformed the civil liberties of all Americans. A story of cowardice and courage, well told."—**Norman Dorsen**, Stokes Professor, NYU, and president, ACLU 1976–1991 "A marvelous and long-needed book."—**Nat Hentoff**, author of *Living the Bill of Rights* "An excellent and refreshing reminder that not a single legal doctrine matters at all except as it comes to bear on the lives of flesh-and-blood people."—**Kenneth Karst**, author of *Belonging to America* "A fine work. Thoroughly researched, smoothly

written, and a genuine pleasure to read."—**Tinsley Yarbrough**, author of *Judicial Enigma: The First Justice Harlan*

Users Review

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Christopher Levi:

Book is to be different for every grade. Book for children until adult are different content. As we know that book is very important for people. The book Judging Jehovah's Witnesses: Religious Persecution and the Dawn of the Rights Revolution seemed to be making you to know about other information and of course you can take more information. It is extremely advantages for you. The publication Judging Jehovah's Witnesses: Religious Persecution and the Dawn of the Rights Revolution is not only giving you more new information but also to become your friend when you sense bored. You can spend your spend time to read your reserve. Try to make relationship with the book Judging Jehovah's Witnesses: Religious Persecution and the Dawn of the Rights Revolution. You never sense lose out for everything in case you read some books.

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Colby Tapia:

Judging Jehovah's Witnesses: Religious Persecution and the Dawn of the Rights Revolution can be one of your beginning books that are good idea. We recommend that straight away because this book has good vocabulary that could increase your knowledge in vocabulary, easy to understand, bit entertaining but delivering the information. The author giving his/her effort that will put every word into satisfaction arrangement in writing Judging Jehovah's Witnesses: Religious Persecution and the Dawn of the Rights Revolution although doesn't forget the main position, giving the reader the hottest in addition to based confirm resource info that maybe you can be considered one of it. This great information could drawn you into fresh stage of crucial thinking.

Jennifer Newhouse:

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