Judge Martha Mills (ret.) is an authentic lawyer-hero, a courageous trail-blazer, and an enduring source of inspiration for those who know her accomplishments during the tense years of the civil rights movement. She participated in the events that changed the fundamental character of Mississippi forever, and in the process, forever changed the fundamental character of these United States.

Martha sought to bring justice to a place where injustice thrived. This meant venturing into a world of bigotry, bias, and exclusion to create a way for equality and equal opportunity to take hold.

In 1967, Martha Mills left the sedate offices of a Wall Street law firm, where she made history as its first woman attorney, and joined the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. She was sent to Mississippi, and made history again, by confronting the injustices of racism in hundreds of cases involving civil and voting rights, social and economic rights, and constitutional rights. In these pages, she shares her compelling and fascinating story of those years and the years that followed in Cairo, Illinois.

At a time when few women lawyers and fewer women trial lawyers were in the profession, Martha boldly challenged the racial status quo and racial barriers in the South. Because she represented a threat to the established order, her personal safety was at risk. Yet, Martha would not be intimidated; she would not be silenced; she would not be distracted or discouraged from trying to secure for black Mississippians the same rights as white Mississippians and to strive for the restoration of the noble ideals that have historically given shape to America’s moral fabric.

Her rock-like integrity, quiet humility, and selflessness come through in every chapter. So too does the tumult and transformation taking place throughout the nation, especially in the seven States of the Deep South, as legal means were pursued to effectuate social change.
Martha writes that those years in Mississippi and Cairo instilled in her and like-minded attorneys “a sense of having done something vital. And it was more than a battle for civil rights; it was a battle to rescue the country we were all citizens of and the values in which we all believed.”

That battle continues, as does Martha’s lifelong commitment to protecting civil liberties and human rights. As Martha puts it, “Everyone should be willing, indeed feel obligated, to work on the concerns facing our communities, states, nation, and globe.” Knowing Martha, “everyone” refers not only to lawyers, but includes teens and young adults for whom this book is particularly well-suited. After all, they carry our hope for the future of our democratic institutions and individual and collective freedoms.

*Lawyer, Activist, Judge* is the kind of book that makes you want to do something that truly matters in the long run and, in turn, confers a higher purpose to your life and your career. I have no doubt that Judge Martha Mills would say, “What are you waiting for?”

Michael B. Hyman
Justice, Illinois Appellate Court
Chair, ABA Coalition for Racial and Ethnic Justice, 2012–2015