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Book Review - Portrait of an American Businessman: One Generation from Cotton Field to Boardroom

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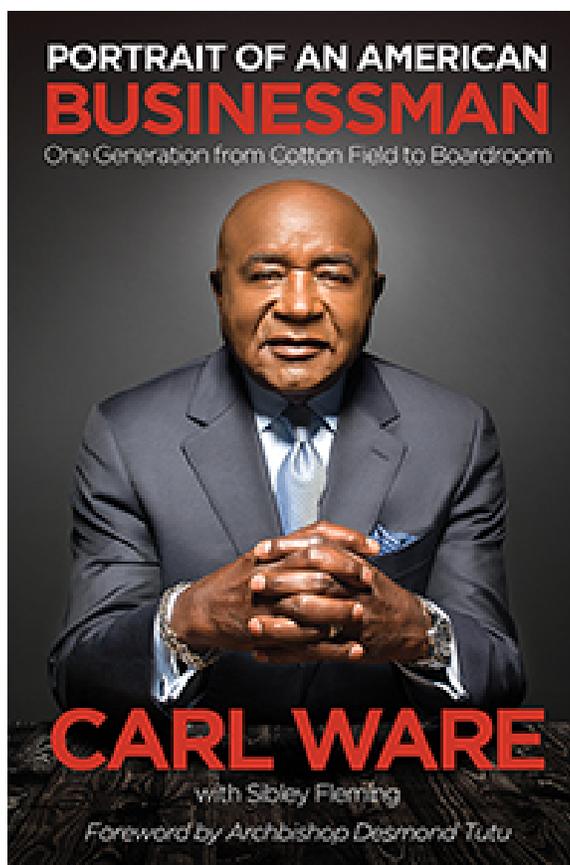
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Off the SHELF

Portrait of an American Businessman: One Generation from Cotton Field to Boardroom by Carl Ware with Sibley Fleming (Mercer University Press, 2019: ISBN 9780881467154, \$26.00)

Portrait of an American Businessman is Carl Ware's account of his life's journey to the position of highest-ranking African American executive at the Coca-Cola Company, his role in that company's disinvestment from apartheid South Africa, and his international corporate leadership in the following years. The book is also a much broader discussion of background political events in the United States, Georgia, and abroad. Nearly a quarter of the book is dedicated to Ware's early years, including stories about his grandparents, parents, siblings, and his own childhood growing up in Georgia under oppressive Jim Crow laws. Through very specific anecdotes, Ware tells a transgenerational story that emphasizes hard work and perseverance, a strong family that builds upon each generation's successes, an unwavering belief in God, and a life of humility and gratitude. By his own admission, however, the most difficult part of his journey was the writing of this book, which began in 2003, sixteen years prior to its publication.



Ware tells of his early days—when he and siblings worked beside their sharecropping parents—through his time as a community activist, politician, businessman, board member, and, ultimately, philanthropist. *Portrait of an American Businessman* is a detailed account of Ware's life and the events and circumstances that shaped his thinking, commitments, education, and life path. These formative circumstances include the Detroit

race riots, police brutality, racism, the 1967 film *Malcolm X: Struggle for Freedom*, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. These events caused him to struggle with his need to “assert a degree of militancy” while balancing his need to continue his education and professional development. Ware's educational path, combined with these life-shaping events, allowed him to bring not only acute business skills but also a commitment to equal rights to his work with the Coca-Cola Company.

The Coca-Cola Company's disinvestment in apartheid South Africa is the heart of this book, and the details of how that actually came about are fascinating. Carl Ware was instrumental in planning and executing Coca-Cola's South African disinvestment strategy and in helping the company fulfill its commitment to black South Africa and black economic inclusion.

Coca-Cola's plan after the fall of apartheid included building black business infrastructure, such as bottlers and distributors. Ware was involved in every level of the plan. For readers who were coming of age during the end years of South Africa's apartheid regime and were familiar with the names of the main South African players, this book fills enormous gaps concerning their roles. Ware describes the nuts and bolts of the dismantling of some of the world's most insidious race laws, enshrined in a country with a minority white population and government. Ware provides an alternate—and often insider—narrative of some of these historical events.

Beyond his work in South Africa, Ware has a lifetime of accomplishments that are detailed in *Portrait*, including using his clout as chair of the Coca-Cola Foundation to make a grant that enabled Clark College and Atlanta University to consolidate. This consolidation created a financially strong Clark Atlanta University,

whose calling is primarily service to African Americans. Ware made another important accomplishment in his role as chair of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber was able to convince Governor Sonny Perdue that if Atlanta wanted to build an international image and attract business, the official state of Georgia flag, which still had the Confederate battle emblem on it, had to go. Perdue commissioned a redesign of the flag to what is now the current state flag.

Portrait of an American Businessman is a highly detailed memoir in which the reader is privy to virtually every nuance of Ware's myriad business and philanthropic dealings. It illustrates what Ware calls a fundamental truth: "No matter where you come from, you can make a difference in your time on this earth."

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