

January 31, 1989

Letters to the Editor
THE DAILY FREEMAN
79 Hurley Ave.
Kingston, NY 12401

To the Editor:

In his January 22 column in the *Sunday Freeman*, Mike Royko defends the movie "Mississippi Burning" from "deep thinking pundits [and] civil rights activists" who are critical of its misrepresentation of history. He admits the movie "bends the facts" about the role of the FBI in solving the murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner during the 1964 Freedom Summer but claims this was necessary to keep the movie from "bombing at the box office." It's apparently become the American way to bomb the truth to make a buck.

I was a civil rights activist in Mississippi (for nine months in 1965-66, a year after the murders) and I found the movie does a lot more than "bend the facts." It is a travesty of history. Granted it's a Hollywood flick and we know better than to expect too much, but to mix fact with fiction in the way this film does dangerously distorts the essential truth of our history and insults the people who put their lives and livelihoods on the line and struggled with such great courage and intelligence for freedom and equality.

The movie captures fairly well the terrorism of the Klan and its connection to the local sheriff's office, but as the movie progresses, the historical context for the violence becomes less and less relevant and the viewer gets caught up in the good guys vs. bad guys fictional action, or as civil rights leader Julian Bond has called it, "Rambo vs. the Klan." In making heroes of the two FBI agents and presenting the Black population as paralyzed by their fear, it turns history on its head.

The role of the FBI in the civil Rights Movement, in addition to hounding its leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, was often to feed information to local law enforcement agencies with tight connections to the Klan and the White Citizen's Councils. At best it stood by and watched as civil rights activists got beaten or even killed. It was only when the nation was aroused by the deaths of the two *white* civil rights workers and demanded that their murderers be brought to justice that the FBI reluctantly pushed to solve the case. Shortly after I left Mississippi, a young co-worker of mine, Ben Brown, was shot in the back by police as he went to pick up a sandwich for his pregnant wife at a store in Jackson near the site of an demonstration. They refused to let any help near him and left him to die in the street. The FBI never bothered to solve that murder, despite some 20 years of efforts by his wife and mother to get justice in the case.

The reason it is so important to get it straight about the real role of the FBI is that its racism and dirty tricks did not die with J. Edgar Hoover as many would like to think. Freedom of Information Act files have revealed time and time again the continued spying on persons involved in social change and the disruption of social justice groups, the most recent being CISPES, an organization working for peace in Central America. And the FBI itself was recently scandalized when a Black agent brought to light racial harassment by his white co-workers.

And "Mississippi Burning" certainly doesn't "show the South as it was in 1964" as Royko claims in his justification of the film. Both the movie and Royko's column

make it look like racism was the domain of the lower "redneck" class when in fact it went—and still goes—right up the ladder with those on top benefiting the most.

By portraying the Black community as totally terrorized into passivity and pushing the Civil Rights Movement so far into the background as to be only a passing reference, the movie gets so far from reality that even the fear and terror which it often is able to evoke comes off out of kilter. I went to Mississippi as a very politically naive young woman who carried no small amount of racism in my own baggage. Living and working in the midst of the Black community, I got the education of my life. The Black people that I worked with filled me with utter awe. They worked so hard but were so poor, were so uneducated but so smart, so terrorized but so brave, so beaten but so determined to persevere, so oppressed but so full of life and humanity. In leaving this central aspect out of the movie, its makers missed not only an opportunity to present a historic moment truthfully, but to do it with the real and riveting drama that unfolded in the South of which "Mississippi Burning" is but a dim and rather sinister shadow.

Sincerely,

Carol Hanisch