

APPENDIX C

REPORT ON LEFLORE COUNTY

Voter Registration in the Delta of Mississippi

The Mississippi Advisory Committee to the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights in their report of January, 1963, Administration of Justice in Mississippi, as quoted in The Congressional Record, Senate, 1963, pp. 2653-2557, states: (Aspects of discrimination) "include (s) the denial of the fundamental right to vote and have that vote counted in elections. Sixty-five sworn voting complaints from 13 Mississippi counties have been received by the Commission. This is the third highest in the Nation." The voting problem remains serious in the state of Mississippi. Activity by the Justice Department in Mississippi promises some slow relief in counties where suits have been initiated. (In 1961, the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights reported that voting suits were brought by the Federal Government in Clarke, Forrest, Walthall and Jefferson Davis Counties, Mississippi. None of these are in the Delta region.) "Yet the State government continues to erect all possible barriers to equal access to the franchise by our Negro citizens. In 1962, the Mississippi Legislature enacted a new law requiring the publication of the names and addresses of all new voting registrants for 2 weeks in a newspaper of general circulation. This law is ostensibly designed to facilitate challenges of registrants on moral grounds. In fact, it can be used to facilitate reprisals against Negroes who seek to register." This was consistent with the trend begun in 1954 when the Mississippi Constitution of 1890 was amended to impose more stringent registration qualifications. (See the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights report on Voting in 1961.)

A further difficulty encountered by the Commission was the lack of figures on voter registration. The Commission found that Mississippi compiles no official records by race on a statewide basis, although, since the registration process requires racial identification, these figures are available to the local officials having charge of voter registration. But local officials have been discouraged from releasing these figures to the Commission. In spite of this difficulty, the Civil Rights Commission revealed some very significant figures in its 1961 report. First, however, we present some general background, especially on Leflore County, the center of the current crisis. This information is also to be found in the 1961 Civil Rights Commission report on Voting.

In 1961, it was reported that there existed in Leflore an active white citizens council, a N. A. A. C. P. group and a Negro Voters League. These last two were, of course, part of the statewide vote promotion efforts of several organizations, later organized into the Council of Federated Organizations, with Aarom E. Henry as its president and Robert Moses, Director. The need seen by SNCC for a voter registration effort in Mississippi which prompted them to join the NAACP in August, 1961, will be easily understood after an examination of the facts presented below on Leflore County. Again, these figures are taken from the report on Voting issued by the U. S. Civil Rights Commission in 1961.

Mississippi is one of the states to retain the poll tax. Mississippi election laws provide for permanent registration, and require that an applicant "be able to read any section of the Constitution. . . (and) give a reasonable interpretation thereof." That such clauses can be flexibly applied by local registrars to deny the applications of Negro registrants, and have

been thus used, can be deduced from the evidence presented here.

Mississippi ranks third as a source of sworn complaints received by the Commission, 43 complaints from 10 counties (as of 1963 this figure had grown to 65 from 13 counties as reported earlier). Five of those counties are in the Delta (Bolivar, Hinds, Leflore, Sunflower and Tallahatchie). The Commission also found strong indications of disenfranchisement of Negroes in these Delta counties: Carroll, Desoto, Issaquena and Tate. There are at least 9 Mississippi counties where no Negroes are registered, although they are a large proportion of the population. In Mississippi as a whole, 36.1% of the total voting age population (1,170,522) is registered. However, only 6.1% of the Negro voting age population (25,921 out of 422,256) is registered. This is a slight, but not encouraging, increase over the 4.4% of voting age Negroes registered to vote reported in 1954 by the then Attorney General James P. Coleman.

In Leflore County 56.9% of the total voting age population is registered to vote, while only .9% of the Negro population of voting age is registered. This is even more disturbing when one notes that this figure represents a decrease of .7% from 1950, or in actual numbers of people, a drop from 297 Negroes registered in 1950 and only 163 registered in 1960. It must also be remembered that Negroes in Leflore represent 64.6% of the total county population. It must not be thought that Leflore is atypical in this respect. Looking at neighboring Sunflower County, the home of Mississippi Senator Eastland, we find a similar picture. 60.6% of the total voting age population is registered, while only 1.2% (161 out of 13,524) of the Negro population of voting age is registered.

Obviously something more than the oft-cited voter apathy must account for these extreme figures. The Commission has indeed found other causes. There is evidence of widespread fear in the Negro community of economic and physical reprisals for attempted registration. They can hardly be blamed for such an attitude, considering the history of lawless violence perpetrated against Negroes in Mississippi. Indeed, Leflore County itself was the locale of the brutal murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955 for alleged advances made to a white woman. Emmett Till's self-confessed murderers are still free in Mississippi. And in 1959, occurred the 538th lynching of a Negro in Mississippi since 1883. This was the infamous case of Mack Charles Parker, in Poplarville, Pearl River County, in Southern Mississippi. Mississippi holds the national record for lynchings.

In addition, there has been constant harrassment of voter-registration workers and participants. The form of such intimidation ranges from economic or physical reprisals, or threats of such reprisals, through arbitrary application of the literacy and constitutional interpretation requirements. The complete absence of local justice afforded these people is amply documented in both the Justice section of the U. S. Civil Rights Commission report of 1961 and the more recent report of the Mississippi Advisory Committee to the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights cited earlier.

Violence Stalks Voter-Registration Workers in Mississippi

The latest outbreak of violence came less than 12 hours after President Kennedy delivered his 6,000 word civil rights message to Congress calling for increased protection of Negro rights and less than two weeks after Samuel Block appealed to the Justice Department to send Federal marshals into the area to protect citizens trying to vote.

Staff members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), working on voter registration in Leflore County, Mississippi, have been the object of a new wave of violence in the past few weeks. The town of Greenwood has been the scene of these recent efforts to terrorize student workers who have also helped to secure food for Negro sharecroppers denied Federal surplus food relief.

On February 25th and 26th, over 150 Negroes attempted to register

to vote in Greenwood, Mississippi. This is the largest number of Negroes who have attempted to register in Greenwood or any Black Belt County. Hunger and violence are apparently being used to curtail voter-registration efforts.

Since February 20, 1963:

- Four Negro businesses destroyed by fire!
- SNCC Field Secretary sentenced to six months in jail!
- Student worker shot in the neck when attacked by a passing car!
- Second shooting injures four voter-registration workers!

Four small business places, located on the same street as the Greenwood office of SNCC, were destroyed by fire early Wednesday morning, February 20th.

The belief that the real target was the SNCC office finds support in the call reported by Mrs. Nancy Brand, worker in that office. She received an anonymous phone call the morning of the fire from a man who asked if she ever went to the office. When she answered "Yes", the caller said, "You won't be going there any more. That's been taken care of."

The destroyed businesses were Jackson's Garage, George's Cafe, Porter's Pressing Shop, and the Esquire Club.

On February 22, Samuel Block, SNCC field secretary, was arrested in front of his office in Greenwood, Mississippi. He was taken to an unknown jail and charged with "circulating breach of the peace." When tried on Monday, February 25th, the charge was changed to "issuing statements calculated to breach the peace," and Block was sentenced to six months in jail and fined \$500.00.

The Judge who pronounced sentence told Mr. Block that he would reduce the fine to \$250.00 and suspend sentence if he would leave Mississippi for good. Samuel Block was born and reared in Mississippi.

Samuel Block is one of the twenty young Mississippi Negroes working with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee voter-registration program.

Block has been arrested seven times, beaten twice, and was forced to jump from a second story window last August to flee a lynch mob of white men carrying chains, ropes and iron pipes.

James Travis, 20-year-old SNCC staff member, narrowly missed death when the car which he was driving was shot into by three white men, seven miles outside Greenwood on Thursday evening, February 28th.

Travis was accompanied by Robert Moses, director of SNCC's statewide Mississippi registration program, and Randolph Blackwell, field director of southwide Voter Education Project. An untagged 1962 white Buick passed Travis' car on the highway to Greenville, Mississippi and fired several blasts into his car. Both front windows were demolished, seven bullets pierced the side of the car, and a bullet passed through Travis' shoulder and lodged at the back of his head, behind the spine. He was operated on the next day at University Hospital in Jackson, Mississippi.

Four voter registration workers were cut by flying glass when the car in which they were sitting was fired into on Wednesday night, March 7th. This was the second such shooting in Greenwood in less than ten days.

Those cut by the shattered front window of their car were Sam Block, 23, Willie Peacock, 25, Miss Peggy Marye, 19, and Miss Essie Broome, 24. The four young people had just left a church meeting dealing with food

and clothing needs of the county.

Population and Economy

Leflore County is in the center of the Delta region of Mississippi. While the Negro population of the State as a whole represents more than 40% of the total and in the Delta more than 50%, in Leflore the white population is 16,699 and the Negro population 30,443, or 64.6%. It is primarily a rural area with a one-crop economy based on cotton, surviving on a tenant-sharecropper system. Like many such Black Belt counties, the population has been steadily dropping. The discrepancy between opportunities for the white and Negro segments of the population are glaring. An analysis of median family income follows:

	<u>MEDIAN FAMILY INCOME</u>		
	<u>total</u>	<u>white</u>	<u>non-white</u>
U. S.	\$2,619	\$3,135	\$1,569
Miss.	1,028	1,614	601
Leflore	918	2,784	595

It is clear from the foregoing that while the Negro population has a median family income not only lower than the national average, but even lower than the Mississippi average, while the white population has an average which exceeds the national overall median family income. In 1959, 310,080 acres of land were owned by whites and only 24,116 by Negroes, while it is reported that the only land available for building by Negroes is located on the outskirts of town.

Less than 50% of all accommodations in Leflore, occupied and vacant, were tallied by the Census as "sound with all plumbing facilities." Of the remaining livable dwellings, Negroes occupy 21.4%, while whites, who represent only 35.4% of the population, occupy 78.3% of these livable dwellings. 82.8% of all Negro housing has been classified as substandard, and it has been noted that only 13.4% of Negro dwellings are owner-occupied (a symptom of the tenant-sharecropping system mentioned above.)

Education

Another area where we find glaring inequalities is that of education. In Leflore County, of the 68 elementary schools for Negroes, 41 are run on the inadequate one or two teacher system. None of the 5 high schools for Negroes in the county are accredited by the regional association, whereas both the white high schools are. The teacher-pupil ratio is 1:28 in the Negro schools and 1:23 in the white schools. Informants report that the Negro schools were physically equal to or newer than the white schools, but the Commission points out that this is a pattern frequently found in communities which are attempting to avoid integration in education. Even in these new schools, it is reported that adequate library, recreation and laboratory facilities are sorely lacking. An analysis of median years of school completed by persons age 25 or over follows:

MEDIAN YEARS OF SCHOOL COMPLETED BY PERSONS AGE 25 OR OVER

	<u>total</u>	<u>white</u>	<u>non-white</u>
U. S.	9.3	9.7	6.9
Miss.	8.1	9.9	5.1
Leflore	6.4	11.9	4.3

Again we find, as in the case of median family income, that the white population exceeds the total U. S. average, and in this case even the white median for the U. S. as a whole, while the Negro population falls under both the U. S. and the Mississippi median for non-whites.

Public Facilities

Community facilities for Negroes in Leflore are totally inadequate. There is no library in Leflore for Negroes, public beaches and municipal pools are strictly for the use of whites, all theaters, restaurants, hotels and motels are segregated, and the facilities in both the bus terminal and the airport are separate.

On March 15th, a staff lawyer for the Civil Rights Commission was arrested for disobeying racial segregation rules at the bus depot.

There is no Negro clerk, bailiff or prosecutor in any court in Leflore County. No Negro judge sits on any bench and there is no local Negro attorney. There has never been a Negro juror in Leflore. No Negro holds a job in any portion of the law enforcement agency, and the quarters in the Negro parts of the jails are inferior. The Post Office has employed Negroes as letter carriers restricted to delivering in Negro neighborhoods. Through the State Employment Agencies Negroes are offered only unskilled jobs (these agencies are aided with Federal funds).

The Armed Forces Reserve Unit and the National Guard component in Leflore are both restricted to participation by whites only.

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

We heartily concur with the findings of the Mississippi Advisory Committee to the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, especially as outlined in items 4 and 5 quoted below:

"4. This committee finds that the Federal Government has not provided the citizens of Mississippi the protection due them as American citizens. The Department of Justice has acted in good faith, but the present interpretation of the function of the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department is unduly and unwisely narrow and limited. This may be due to the inadequacy of funds available to the Division for staff and the like, and it may be due to a reluctance to bring cases to trial under existing Civil Rights Acts in view of the prospect of facing an all-white jury likely to return a verdict in favor of a white law enforcement official accused by a Negro. Whatever the reason, the fact that police officers are rarely tried on civil rights charges has led the public to believe that few serious charges are ever made, and has reinforced the belief among offending peace officers that they may treat or mistreat Negroes as their whims direct them.

"5. We also find that the Commission on Civil Rights itself continues to have an unfulfilled obligation in regard to Mississippi. It is our opinion that a formal civil rights hearing, such as only the Commission can conduct, is more urgently needed in Mississippi than in practically

any other State in the Union. Yet the Commission has never met in this state in the course of its 5-year existence. "

We would like to add some recommendations of our own:

"Recommendations: That the President direct the Department of Justice to investigate every allegation of physical abuse of authority by state or local officials in Mississippi, and institute criminal proceedings in all cases in which such action appears to be warranted, regardless of the prospects for conviction; That the Commission on Civil Rights hold formal public hearings in Mississippi on charges of equal protection of the law on account of race, and that these hearings be held periodically so long as the present situation exists and the Commission remains in force; and that the Commission on Civil Rights make recommendations to the Congress for the passage of further legislation designed to protect American citizens from being physically abused by persons acting under the color of governmental authority at any level."

We also particularly emphasize the Recommendation of the Commission in 1961, #3: "That Congress amend subsection (b) of 42 USC 1971 to prohibit any arbitrary action or (where there is a duty to act) arbitrary inaction, which deprives or threatens to deprive any person of the right to register, vote, and have that vote counted in any federal election."

In addition, we would recommend that Government action be taken to insure the sharecroppers of Leflore County surplus food and that if present rules prevent distribution of government surplus food to the needy, that the rules be changed with a stroke of the Secretary of Agriculture's pen.