

# IT HAPPENED IN BATON ROUGE,

U \* S \* A



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*a real life drama  
of our  
DEEP SOUTH  
today*

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BY

MAJOR JOHNS  
AND  
RONNIE MOORE

*Southern University students*

*expelled*

*for their role in the  
Civil Rights struggle!*



## ACT I

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BY MAJOR JOHNS

*MARCH, 1960. Some Negro university and college administrations have supported their students' lunch counter sit-ins or, at least, have remained neutral. Others have taken a stand in opposition to the students. Southern University in Baton Rouge and its president, Dr. Felton G. Clark fall in this latter category.*

*Dr. Clark had the opportunity of taking a courageous position and becoming one of the world's most respected educational leaders. Instead, he chose to buckle-under to the all-white State Board of Education, which administers the university.*

*Early in March, 1960, the Board issued a warning that any student participating in a sit-in would be subject to "stern disciplinary action." The sit-in movement had not yet spread to Baton Rouge but, as one law student expressed it: "When the Board spoke, it became a challenge to us and we could not ignore it." A representative student committee then met with Dr. Clark and asked, specifically, what would happen to students who sat-in. He replied that the Board had left him no alternative but to expel them.*

## Scene 1: The Lunch Counters

On March 28, seven students sat-in at the Kress lunch counter. In less than 20 minutes they were arrested. Bond was set at the astronomical figure of \$1,500 each. However, the money was promptly raised by the Negro community and the students were released. A mass meeting was held on campus at which students pledged support to the jailed sit-inners. The following day, nine more students engaged in sit-ins at Sitman's drugstore and at the Greyhound bus station. They remained in jail six days pending a court hearing and were released on bond April 4.

The day after the second arrest, 3,500 students marched through the center of town to the State Capitol, where we held an hour-long prayer meeting.

As chief speaker, I attacked segregation and discrimination not only here in Baton Rouge but in other parts of the country.

I was unaware that this speech would sever my connections with the university before the day was over. That afternoon, Dr. Clark returned from a conference in Washington and immediately cast his lot against the students. He summoned faculty members who were known to oppose the sit-ins and were furthest removed from really knowing the students. Immediately following this meeting, he announced the expulsion of 17 students, the 16 who had participated in the two sit-ins and myself.

## Scene 2: The Campus

This suddenly shifted the focus of the Baton Rouge student protest from lunch counters to the university administration. As Marvin Robinson, participant in the first sit-in and president of the senior class told assembled students (see photo: Robinson is at center), we had a choice: "*Which is the more important; human dignity or the university? We feel it is human dignity.*"

The students voted to boycott all classes until the 17 of us were reinstated. Lines were tightly drawn: the students on one side, the administration, faculty, State Board of Education, and a group of hand-picked alumni on the other. We 17 were no longer permitted on campus. But twice daily, in the morning and afternoon, we would address the students from the balcony of a 2-story house across a railroad track from the campus. By using a loudspeaker we were able to make ourselves heard by the large groups of students assembled on the campus-side of the track. This went on for two days.

Unable to get the students back to class, administration officials started calling their parents and telling them that the student leaders were inciting to riot. This move boomeranged: it caused many parents to fear for their sons' and daughters' safety to the extent of summoning them home. The administration countered by announcing that any student who wanted to withdraw from the university and go home could do so. Such a sizeable number of students applied at the registrar's office for withdrawal slips that the administration amended its ruling to the effect that these slips would have to be co-signed by parents.

Meanwhile, certain persons in the community and on campus moved to negotiate a settlement. They initiated several meetings with administration officials. Dr. Clark admitted to friends that he had acted in haste, but remained adamant in refusing to re-admit the 17 expelled students. Finally, he agreed to meet with eight of the student leaders. The meeting started at 5 P.M. on April 2 and lasted until 11:30. Throughout the 6½ hour meeting over 3,000 students sat in front of the building where the meeting was held. When the eight emerged, announced their decision to leave the university, but urged the other students to stay on and return to classes, there was an outcry. Some burst into tears, others shouted that they wanted to quit also. The student leaders reaffirmed their decision and gave assurance that they had reached it on their own after the administration had agreed not to dismiss anyone else.

### Scene 3: The Following Morning

The administration broke its part of the agreement and expelled another student. The leaders thereupon called a meeting and urged that the students stay out of class. A local citizens' committee, which had raised bail bond money and had agreed to use some of it to help homegoing students pay their transportation, requested a meeting with Dr. Clark. The upshot was that the committee reversed itself and decided that money raised could be used only for bail bond and not for students' bus or rail fares home.

Jim McCain, CORE field secretary who had come to Baton Rouge to help us, tried to dissuade the committee from this decision, but without success.

*"I tried my best to show them that helping the students to leave Southern, even if the university should close as a result, would strike a real blow at segregation," McCain said.*

Withdrawal of the transportation funds was responsible for reducing considerably the total number of students who withdrew in protest. Nevertheless, the number who left on the weekend of April 2 was in the thousands. Of those, between 1,000 and 1,500 have not yet returned. As I write this, I do not know the exact number of students who permanently withdrew to protest an administration which serves segregation and discounts human dignity.

This protest action by students at Southern will long be remembered in Baton Rouge. One instructor died, another had a heart attack, and we are told that Dr. Clark is under medical care. It is reported by persons close to Dr. Clark that he has received several hundred letters and wires from all over the world — not one of them complimentary. Dr. Clark, I am sure, has lost many friends because of the position he has taken against his students. Until this protest, Southern University was an island unto itself. Dr. Clark was its president since 1938 and his father was its president from 1914 until 1938. Southern University will not be able to live by itself any longer. How far the community will proceed in continuing the movement which the students have started, only time will tell. But segregation in Baton Rouge has received a severe jolt.



## ACT 2

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BY RONNIE MOORE

*DECEMBER, 1961. A second severe jolt to segregation in Baton Rouge came on December 11, 1961 when the U. S. Supreme Court reversed the convictions of sit-inners who had been arrested the previous spring. In a precedent-setting decision, the court held that peacefully seeking service at a lunch counter cannot be construed as "disorderly conduct."*

*Unimpressed by the Supreme Court decision, local lunch counter operators continued refusing to serve Negroes. On the day of the Supreme Court decision, Baton Rouge CORE led sit-ins at Kress's and McCrory's. Three days later, we conducted a mass picket demonstration at the stores and 23 were arrested, including CORE Field Secretary Dave Dennis.*

### Scene 1: Outside The Courthouse

In protest over these arrests, some 4,000 persons, most of us students from Southern University, assembled at the parish courthouse the next day. (see photo: at left is a policeman with a tear gas grenade hooked to his gun belt.)

Tear gas bombs and German Shepherd dogs were used to break up our peaceful and orderly demonstration. More than 43 shells of tear gas were hurled by police during three successive charges. The students tried to hold their ground, but finally were forced to retreat. Fifty were arrested that day, including myself. I was originally charged with "annoyance" and my bond put at \$1,500.

Within minutes after my release, I was rearrested on a charge of *"conspiracy to commit criminal mischief,"* which raised my bond to a total of \$3,500. CORE Field Secretary B. Elton Cox, whose ankle had been badly injured by a tear gas shell, was not arrested until that evening — on charges of *"conspiracy."* Temporary restraining orders prohibiting any further CORE demonstrations in Baton Rouge were promptly issued in both federal and state courts.

The day's arrests brought the total to 73 students. The all-white State Board of Education announced that any student arrested or jailed would be dismissed from the university. To express their concern, students that evening marched to the residence of Dr. Felton G. Clark, the university president. Dr. Clark came out and pledged that he would submit his resignation before he would suspend any of the student-demonstrators. He, thereupon, closed the university for Christmas holiday—four days ahead of schedule. Had Dr. Clark learned a lesson from the events of 1960? Subsequent events indicate that he had not.

## Scene 2: Inside The Jail

Because of excessive bail, totaling \$116,000, the students had to spend the Christmas holiday in the overcrowded, poorly-ventilated East Baton Rouge parish jail. Worried over Cox's ankle injury, I requested to see him. He was in solitary and on a fast. A guard answered my request with: *"Hell, no! I wish that m. . . . f. . . . would die!"* I finally got to see the sheriff and was allowed to talk to Cox.

I was less fortunate in my attempt to see a doctor, after traces of blood appeared in my saliva. After my third request, a guard pulled me by the shirt and slapped me in the face.

CORE Field Secretary Jerome Smith was hit on the neck with a judo chop by a guard for merely inquiring about his lost property receipt. When Dave Dennis sought to inquire about these two incidents of brutality, he was yanked out of the cell block by a guard, hurled against the bars and placed in solitary. After protests reached the outside, the local FBI questioned the guards, who, of course, denied having practiced any violence. The investigation ended there, except that Warden Edwards called us together and said: *"Lemme tell you one goddam thing. I runs this jail and no one is going to tell me to reprimand an officer. Furthermore, there's going to be no more damn singing, no more damn hunger strikes, and no more damn beating on walls."*

We did not have a very "Merry Christmas." By the end of the

holidays, we were released. Assuming that Dr. Clark would keep his word about dismissals, we prepared to resume classes. However, following consultation between Dr. Clark, Superintendent Jackson of the State Board of Education and District Attorney Pitcher (who is chief legal advisor of the Louisiana Association of the White Citizens Councils), a compromise had, apparently, been reached. Instead of all 73 student-demonstrators being dismissed, in accordance with the edict of the State Board of Education, only 7 leaders would be so-penalized. Among these seven was the entire leadership of our Baton Rouge CORE group, including me, the chairman, and Weldon Rougeau, the vice chairman. Despite his pledge of December 15, Dr. Clark approved this compromise which, itself, was later violated.

### Scene 3: Dr. Clark's Residence

On January 17, about 1,000 students marched to his residence to ask for an explanation. For 12 long hours in freezing weather, we waited in vain, meditating and praying. At a special convocation the following day, Dr. Clark explained that he had not come out to address the students assembled at his residence because *"there can be no communication in a mob situation."* He officially announced dismissal of the seven student leaders whom he characterized as *"vandals and anarchists."* He also announced that the university was closing that same day, that each student would have to apply for re-admission and that none would be allowed to return to class until accepted by the university.

When I returned to campus with Rougeau that afternoon to get my dismissal letter and turn in my coupon book, we were both placed under arrest at the request of university officials for *"trespassing."*

### Scene 4: Inside The Jail

Our bail was set at \$3,000 apiece. We were locked up together in an isolated cell. For 30 days we were denied mail and visiting privileges. On February 12, as CORE prepared to put up the bail, the charge against us was changed from *"trespassing"* to *"criminal anarchy"* which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years at hard labor. Specifically each of us is accused of being *"a member of the Congress of Racial Equality, an organization known to the offender to advocate, teach and practice opposition to the government of the State of Louisiana."* My bail was increased to \$12,500 and Rougeau's to \$7,000. To raise this increased sum, it took CORE an additional month. We were released, finally on March 16, having served 56 days — which will not count on whatever prison sentence we may get.

Our trial is set, presently, for May 28. On one occasion District Attorney Pitcher told me he would accept a guilty plea on sedition, which carries a maximum of only five years instead of 10. Needless to say, I refused.

Cox, convicted of three misdemeanors, was sentenced on January 28 to 21 months in prison and a \$5,700 fine. Through technicalities, the state delayed CORE's attempt to get him out, pending appeal. He was imprisoned from February 2 until March 26.

On February 1, Dion Diamond, field secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was arrested on the University campus for "*vagrancy*." The charge was later changed to "*criminal anarchy*," as in our cases, and bail was set at \$13,000. Seventeen days later, SNCC Chairman Charles McDew and SNCC field secretary Robert Zellner were arrested and charged with "*criminal anarchy*" simply for seeking to visit Diamond in jail. That brought the total accused of "*criminal anarchy*" to five.

A week after Dr. Clark had closed the university—it reopened for the spring semester, January 25, under state police guard. Despite the compromise that only seven student leaders would be dismissed, 40 additional students discovered that they had been refused re-admission because of their desegregation activities.

They decided to remain in Baton Rouge and work on voter registration. They have been conducting a daily door-to-door campaign to get the city's 28,000 unregistered Negroes to register and vote. CORE, with the aid of local churches, is providing their minimum living expenses.

*"We regret the action which has been taken against Southern University students for their demonstrations,"* said a statement signed by 140 faculty members. *"We feel there is a need for constructive reappraisal of the present policy regarding student participation in such protest."*

However, no such "*constructive reappraisal*" is forthcoming from Dr. Clark. Just as in 1960, he has taken sides against his students and their efforts to make desegregation a reality. Right now, the university is quiet. Recently, a student led a protesting group to the dean's office. They were promised a juke box and a nationally known rock-and-roll singer for their dance. They dispersed and the student leader stood there with tears in his eyes. The final act of the Baton Rouge drama remains to be written.



## ACT 3

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Are Ronnie Moore, author of ACT 2, and the others accused of "criminal anarchy" going to spend long years in prison for merely advocating the principles of democracy for which we are supposed to stand? Or is Louisiana going to be made aware that it is part of a democratic country? The ending of this drama is, in a sense, up to all of us who are truly concerned. We must do all in our power to make the nation aware of what has happened in Baton Rouge. We must support CORE and other concerned organizations in their protest actions. (see photo: This protest took place March 17 in Washington, D.C.) Such actions already have brought results. As this pamphlet goes to press, the "criminal anarchy" charges have been dropped in the cases of two of the five students: Weldon Rougeau and Dion Diamond.

Regarding the accusations of "criminal anarchy," a March 16 New York Post editorial headed "Louisiana Lunacy," commented: "One has to search the repressive codes of the most loathsome Communist and Fascist tyrannies to match Louisiana's latest device for trying to curb the integrationist movement. This is to charge active advocates of civil rights who run afoul of the law with "criminal anarchy."

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