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COURAGE AND TERROR IN MISSISSIPPI

On March 20, 1963 the Greenwood, Mississippi *Commonwealth* carried side-by-side two editorials which graphically illustrate the inability of Southern whites to understand what is happening to their “way of life.” One editorial, entitled “A History Lesson,” chided Latin American oligarchs for failing to see that they could not preserve untouched their system of control over the wealth of their societies. Latin Americans were advised to distribute a slice of bread here and there, lest they lose the loaf. The other editorial, entitled “That’s a Lot of Free Food,” dealt in a quite jocular vein with the fact that upwards of 50 per cent of the people in several surrounding counties were recipients of federal surplus commodities. It pointed out that in the Mississippi Delta fully one-third of the people were receiving commodities and that the ratio would be higher had not some counties refused to distribute the federal surplus to any except those qualifying under state welfare regulations.

The editorial applauded the authorities of Leflore County (Greenwood is the county seat) for refusing to distribute commodities because “welfare cheating has turned public opinion against the dole.” The sense of the editorial was that Negroes who had no real need for the free food were taking it, presumably out of a desire

to do evil for its own sake. The editor could “think of nothing except flagrant abuse which would create a climate in which it is popular to turn hungry people away from available food.”

The editor could see that the oligarchs of Latin America can no longer ignore the needs of the people; he was blind to the same conditions in Mississippi.

II

In 1960 all the Delta counties had a majority of Negroes. The proportion of Negroes ranged from 52 per cent to 79 per cent. In Leflore County it is 65 per cent. The median family income in Leflore County was near the highest of any in the delta—\$2,285. Sixty per cent of Leflore County families had income under \$3,000.

The Delta is economically dominated by the production of cotton. Greenwood styles itself the “Long-Staple Cotton Capital of the World.” In the days of slavery Negroes were the basic “machinery” of cotton production and, though cotton production is rapidly changing to other forms of “machinery,” the attitudes of the white oligarchs toward Negroes remain much the same as in pre-Civil War days. As these human “machines” become obsolete in the production of cotton, the whites see them only as public charges burdensome to the

pocketbook and embarrassing to the "image" of prosperity it has become fashionable to create.

An unusually dry spring and summer severely limited the necessity for cotton chopping last year, and thereby considerably reduced the amount of employment for Negroes in the Delta. In November 1962 the Mississippi Employment Security Commission reported that "The farm worker [read Negro] who has traditionally looked toward cotton picking as a means of laying up some winter money has had an uncommonly thin season. Wage rates . . . have averaged lower than in recent years. Machines have picked a record portion of the crop." Unemployment among Delta Negroes was widespread during the summer and fall, and destitution during the winter months.

In late August a program of political education was begun among Delta Negroes by the Council of Federated Organizations, a group comprising the leadership of the major civil rights groups. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee supplied a director, Robert Moses, for the program, as well as most of the workers. Six Delta counties, including Leflore, were selected as target areas. The idea was to encourage Negroes to look upon registering and voting as a way of alleviating the deprivations with which Mississippi burdens them at birth.

The program faced two serious obstacles—the hostility of the whites and the despair of the Negroes. The whites had behind them the full power of local government, which carried out a continuing policy of harassment, intimidation and violence against the the SNCC workers. Time after time they were arrested on obviously specious charges; fines were outrageous,

jail sentences long, police handling rough. SNCC workers could not look to the authorities for protection from hostile whites; indeed the authorities were likely to encourage and participate in sporadic acts of violence.

Many of the Negroes resisted the idea that registering and voting were not exclusively "white man's business." It was even more difficult to convince them that it would do any good to brave the white man's wrath at the registrar's office.

Leflore was the most hostile of the six counties selected as target areas. For several weeks Sam Block, the worker assigned to Greenwood, was unable to find a place to live and had to commute back and forth from Cleveland, in neighboring Bolivar County. When he finally did find Negroes who were willing to take the risk of giving him shelter, Block had to keep moving from home to home in order not to bring too much "heat" upon any one family. In September, the office he had set up in Greenwood was raided by a gang of whites armed with guns, clubs and rope, and threatening a lynching. He and two co-workers were forced to flee from a second story window.

One of the greatest problems of the workers was the destitution of the Negroes and the fact that any Negro who had even a pittance of income from a white employer was afraid to jeopardize it. The workers were continually asked: "If I lose my job, will you help feed my family?" By late fall a number of Negro families identified with the program were evicted from farms and plantations where they had worked for years.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had, early in the fall, begun an appeal for food, clothing

and medicine in other parts of the country. By late fall thousands of pounds of supplies were beginning to pour in. As these were distributed, the workers urged Negroes to make the attempt to register.

In October, the Leflore County board of Supervisors voted to stop distributing federal surplus commodities. They said they saw no need for it. The registration workers argued that the authorities were penalizing Negroes who had tried to register. Whatever the motivation of the Leflore County authorities, it is simply a fact that there was great need among Leflore County Negroes.

On February 13, the registration workers in Greenwood made the first distribution of supplies and announced that there would be a weekly distribution thereafter. Negroes were urged publicly and privately by whites not to accept these supplies from "outsiders." Understandably, the Negroes ignored this advice.

On February 20 four Negro businesses in Greenwood just one block from the registration office were burned down. Sam Block told newsmen that he was convinced this was an effort to intimidate registration workers who had been taking more and more people to the registrar's office as availability of supplies bolstered confidence in the workers. On February 22, Block was arrested by Greenwood police and charged, because of this accusation, with "making statements calculated to incite breach of the peace." At Block's trial, February 25, 150 Negroes packed the Leflore County courthouse to hear him refuse to accept a suspended sentence on the condition he stop all civil rights activities. Two hundred Negroes for

whom there was no room gathered outside the courthouse.

On February 26 and 27 more than one hundred fifty Negroes went to the county courthouse to register. This show of determination on the part of the Negroes was unprecedented in the Mississippi Delta.

On February 28 three white gunmen sprayed gunfire into a car occupied by three registration workers on the highway just west of Greenwood. Jimmy Travis was wounded in the neck and shoulder.

The response of the registration workers to this violence was to announce that all resources would be committed to intensifying Negro registration in Leflore County.

III

The Kennedy Administration and the Department of Agriculture had been under continuing pressure from the registration workers and various other organizations to move into Leflore County and distribute surplus commodities if the county authorities continued to refuse to do so.

Early in March the U.S. Justice Department made a survey of Leflore County to determine the need for commodity distribution. As a result, representatives of the Department of Agriculture met with Leflore County authorities and on March 21, it was announced that commodity distribution would be resumed in April, with the Department supplying \$15,000 for the cost of distribution (this cost is ordinarily borne by the county—it appears to have been a sort of bribe to the county by the federal government).

Meanwhile, on March 6 another shooting attempt was made against registration workers in Greenwood; on March 24 the registration office was

burned down and on March 26 two shotgun blasts were fired into the home of one of the registration workers.

When the workers, accompanied by a large group of Greenwood Negroes, gathered at the City Hall on March 27 to ask for police protection as they went to the courthouse to register, they were threatened with a police dog. When they went to the courthouse ten of the registration workers were arrested.

What followed is by now familiar: the continued demonstrations, the arrests, the final intervention of the U.S. Justice Department and the compromise by which Justice agreed to withdraw its complaint if the arrested workers were released.

In March and early April more than 1,000 Negroes in Leflore County tried to register. It is difficult to say how deeply they realized the full implications of what they were doing. Certainly some did, and just as certainly some didn't. Nevertheless, it is clear that what Negroes of Greenwood, indeed of the South and the nation, want is full participation in the ben-

efits of an advanced industrial society. They want decent housing and clothing and food, adequate educational and job opportunities for themselves and their children, and relief from racial discrimination. And more and more they are coming to seek these things, as they demonstrated in Greenwood, through the use of the ballot.

This is the lesson of Greenwood. But the editor of the *Greenwood Commonwealth* and presumably most of his white readers were able to see only "lazy, shiftless" malcontents bent upon "cheating" the welfare program. This was the white attitude in a situation where the issues were crystal clear to anyone with a willingness to understand, however reluctantly, the dynamics of social change.

Does the political and economic elite of the United States understand any better than the *Commonwealth* that American Negroes are setting out to carve themselves a larger and more succulent piece of the great American pie? They will do their carving through the established, lawful, orderly political processes if they can. But, regardless, carve they will.