

ESSAYS ON MISSISSIPPI: AMERICA'S ONLY POLICE STATE

LIFE FOR THE MISSISSIPPI NEGRO

MY FRIEND, OFFICER REX BELL

PERSONAL REASONS FOR GOING SOUTH

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MISSISSIPPI WILL NEVER BE THE SAME

AS A HAWAIIAN-ORIENTAL-AMERICAN IN THE MOVEMENT

NATIONAL REACTION AND RESPONSIBILITY

- Carl Young
Dec. 1964

ESSAY #1: LIFE FOR THE MISSISSIPPI NEGRO

One of the major reasons, perhaps the decisive one, why we went to Mississippi was because the Negroes who make up half of the state's population wanted us to come down. Their leaders realized that the power structure in the state and the Federal government would not in the near future change the status quo significantly.

The Mississippi Negro is the most cruelly subjugated of all American Negroes. Throughout the state, except for non-feudal Jackson, the state capital, regardless of his socio-economic rank he is treated alike, that is like an animal. There are countless examples. If he wants to urinate he has to use the side alley or a broken down, unlighted, bathroom in the back which smells to high heaven. He is relegated all manual work just as in the pre-Civil War days. If he is next in line for the position of foreman due to seniority he is killed rather than promoted because such things just are not done. No Negro is going to tell a white how to do this or that. This is what happened to Clifton Walker. His head was blown off with a shotgun only several months ago. The state officials have refused to investigate this cold-blooded murder. Due to this actual reign of terror the Negro has been forced to accept this inferior way of life. Those who have fought against it have been killed or run out of the state. The 1954 Court decision and the Freedom Rides of 1959 rekindled the hopes of the Negroes. In reaction the whites stepped up their terrorism. They used such tactics, now well publicized, as land eviction, loss of credit, debt foreclosure, and even beatings, bombings, burnings and murder. The Delta Citizens Council has a blacklist of condemned persons. Herbert Lee and Louis Allan were on the list and they have been murdered. On the list for the past three years is Bob Noses, the state project leader. Needless to say, democracy, justice, and law are nonexistent in Mississippi.

It is here in the realm of justice and equal economic opportunity that most hurts the Negro. Mississippi has the lowest crime rate in the nation because of two reasons: either the sheriff and his deputies are illiterate or many a case is

purposely left off the record. A Negro plaintiff does not appeal a case because he knows he does not have even the slimmest chance of a fair decision. Traffic fines are slapped on Negroes on the whim of the white roadside justice of the peace. FBI investigations have verified the longstanding accusation that the KKK, State Highway Patrol, and local police are one of the same breed of cats. Even Mississippi Governor Paul Johnston in a national TV broadcast acknowledged that justice is unequally administered when he said this summer that "Despite the agitation of these young, misguided idealists law and order will be maintained Mississippi style." However, human values in this area of our nation have deteriorated to the point where a human life is worthless and where law and justice are such alien concepts that when an old Negro man is beaten to death by a redneck policeman or where a Negro man is arrested and fined \$150 for looking at a white woman or where a near-starving family is evicted from their sharecropping homestead and their only breadwinner is fired from his \$2 a day job for his civil rights activity, the white people would turn their heads and say it served him right, or the Negro would say, as long as it did not happen to me or my family it is none of my business.

It is the economic sphere where the system is really felt. In a closed, simple, agricultural society the economics comes to the forefront. Eighty percent of the citizens are still tied to the land. Cotton still is king in the areas of the Delta. Through reasons already partially discussed the Negro due to forces beyond his control has become a virtual slave of the white, i.e., economically dependent on his white landowner or friend. In Holly Springs this is especially evident where the aristocratic background of the town gave rise to paternalism over the Negro. The wealthy whites "took good care" of their cotton pickers and sharecroppers by paying off their debts, loaning them money, etc. Eventually most of the Negroes found themselves in an economic stranglehold. Significantly this is one reason why we encountered so much non-cooperation and hostility throughout the

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state from Negroes. We had to constantly be aware of what we said among large groups of Negroes, as there would certainly be among them an informer, or Tom or Uncle Charlie's Boys, who was under economic coercion. There is case after case of documented evidence revealing economic reprisals against those who attempted to achieve some measure of human dignity, or as a Southerner would have it, rise above his place.

Because they are denied participation in the political processes, the Negroes are ruled by the whites who have created and maintain an economic structure in which every Negro, and many poor whites get the raw end of things. The quality of education is the poorest in the nation. Graduates of Negro colleges compare in ability to that of ninth graders in the north. It is not unusual for a youngster to miss 56 out of 180 school days to harvest a late crop of cotton. There are no guidance and counseling services available anywhere for the colored student. There are no Physical education classes in Negro schools. Roads are the worst in the nation. During the three-day stretch one of our cars used to canvass a remote county had seven flat tires. There are no labor unions, consequently there is often no overtime compensation despite its stipulation in the contract. All of the federal programs from welfare to manpower retraining are discriminately administered. A poor family earning \$2 to \$4 per day cannot afford to pay the \$2 to \$3 poll tax. If we in the north had to pay the same proportion, perhaps \$40, to vote and produce the receipt at every election there would be far fewer registered.

The system is evil and there are no two ways about it. Both whites and Negroes suffer terribly from it. It has to go. It will not go too fast, but who is to say how fast or how hard we should push. Such a phenomenon as this is unprecedented. The progress of the past two years was never felt possible. Human nature is more flexible than we realize. We cannot sit back while a person in our nation is stepped on, kicked, spat at from every blatant degree of brutality to ever half tone of subtlety, solely because of his color.

ESSAY #2: MY "FRIEND", OFFICER REX BELL

One night another worker and I had a tense, unsettling, one-way talk for two hours with a local policeman. It was midnight. It was pitch black and we talked in his police car. I sat close to the open door instantly prepared to jump out on the slightest sign of danger. We all had learned from training and experience never to trust a southern cop. He was nervous and so were we. He had come to investigate a near-incident a few hours before when a white man had slowly driven by our office several times with a pistol in his lap. Rex told us that it was the old, dying father of two white racists renowned for terrorism against Negroes and who had taken rifles to the University of Mississippi riots in 1962 where one of them was shot in the neck. Rex told us he admired us for doing what we believed in, but in his opinion we were wasting our time because the Negro was inherently inferior. Immediately, he subconsciously himself saying that the only way the Negro was going to get equality was through education. This statement could not have been more ironic because we were parked right opposite Rust College, a small, coed, Methodist Negro college, where the average achievement of the graduate is equivalent to that of a ninth grader in the north. This is typical of all Negro colleges in Mississippi. He inadvertently revealed to us why he was respected in the local police force and in the county when he said that "if a 'nigger' asked my daughter out for a date, I'd blow his head off!"; and several weeks later he did what only he could do, he shot a Negro.

This experience was deeply unsettling because it showed a fellow human held at bay, a victim of the closed society with no freedom of choice, and because of this, torn asunder with the dilemma of accepting his Negro friends as humans and facing either outright ostracism or physical injury or both, or treating the Negro like an animal and suffering mental agony from doing what he inwardly knows is wrong. If I ever came near to feeling true compassion for someone it was that dark night. He was human enough to be my brother. I felt sorry for him.

ESSAY #3: PERSONAL REASONS FOR GOING SOUTH

To try to explain my motivation for volunteering for a summer of heat and battle of racial terror in Mississippi is most difficult. If I were to concisely explain it I would repeat a little speech I made to the people of Mississippi one night. The occasion was the performance of a play, written, acted, and produced by the local youngsters in our Freedom School about the life and times of their murdered dead hero, Medgar Evers.

This is what I said: I came to Mississippi for three reasons. First of all, I came to Mississippi because I am an Oriental, a third generation American, a member of a minority group of citizens which has almost achieved their freedom and equal opportunity. I have traveled through 45 states of our union. I, too, have felt the pangs of discrimination although by no means what you have gone through. I have come down to help my fellow American achieve what I almost have. Secondly, I came to Mississippi because I am a Hawaiian. In Hawaii we have shown mankind that the different races can live, work, and play side by side to a degree never imagined possible. It is inconceivable for us to full comprehend the cruel debasement of human dignity on racial groups. Thirdly, and finally, I came to Mississippi because I am an American, a citizen member of the greatest nation on earth with the greatest dream of mankind. I know I do not have to tell you that Mississippi is tragically far from this American dream. I am here to do my little bit to bring this dream to reality.

In a nutshell I was there because of my emotional involvement, curiosity, and idealism.

ESSAY #4: THE FOREIGN LAND OF MISSISSIPPI

Each of the twenty-one main projects had a communications-security specialist. Before we volunteers went to Mississippi we received a week of training at Oxford, Ohio, at the Western College for Women. There were 300 volunteers in the first training session. We were required to know beforehand about Southern culture through books like The Mind of the South, The Other America, and others. We did not go into Mississippi ignorant of the situation, as many of our critics have claimed. During training, we learned of non-violent techniques (ways to protect our bodies from a serious beating, how to overcome anger, etc.) and of voter registration procedures.

We communications-security people received different instructions. We also had a different manual. Because of the guerilla-warfare-type work we were doing, every project had a worker who was the pivot of the operation. All of us had volunteered for this task. Many had a lot of journalistic experience. Our job was three-fold: communicate project activities to headquarters and to the nation, be responsible for the safety of all volunteers, and manage the office.

As it turned out, it was not unusual to have a twenty-six hour working day. Never before have I worked so hard. I was a near physical wreck by the time my term expired. Theoretically, our communication responsibilities were: to feed information to our three communication centers, two in the state and one in Atlanta; to record the movement in our areas; to serve as a source of info about our areas for visitors and press agents.. Specifically this meant a knowledge of the political, economic, and social aspects of Holly Springs (the town in which our project was stationed); of the history of the movement in Holly Springs and of the policy of SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the youthful, militant civil rights which ran the greater part of the summer project); of how to handle the American press; to keep a diary; to write weekly progress and evaluation reports, and finally, general record keeping of such items as affidavits

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and all incidents of harrassments.

My security responsibilities entailed keeping track in a personnel book of all those leaving the office (where, how, what route, time left, time will return, the latter being the most important since if the party did not return within half-an-hour of the expected return time a search party would be sent out from the office, and this happened several times, and headquarters would be on standby alert to set in motion a massive-fine-toothed search conducted by the FBI, our lawyers, and even the congressman of the missing people), perusing the local newspapers for anti-civil rights sentiment, monitoring a short-wave citizens band two-way radio, keeping a friendly contact file, orienting new volunteers and visitors of special security precautions, maintaining an elaborate telephone security, keeping a record of all incoming and outgoing phone calls, and carrying in my back pocket a long notebook in which I kept the names of every single visitor a diary, and other miscellaneous notes.

On top of these tasks, there were my office responsibilities. I was the office manager, personnel officer, record keeper, file clerk, and janitor (particularly maintaining an adequate supply of toilet paper).

Of course, I eventually ran into span of control problems. It was not humanly possible to perform all these tasks efficiently. Therefore, I concentrated on the telephone and record keeping.

The telephone was the vital link in our security and communications system. A description of our set-up reveals the "foreign" or "alien" aspects of Mississippi. I will always remember my first day on the job. The central security office called us in the first of what was to be daily security checks. I was nervous. My nervousness was made worse by the security chief on the other end who kept on saying, "Be careful of what you say." I had forgotten one of the cardinal rules of telephone security. It did not dawn upon me until afterwards. The lines in

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Mississippi were tapped all the time. We could not give out names and addresses of anybody, especially the local people who helped us. We could not reveal the exact locations of any one of our workers. In other words, we tried to avoid giving the enemy any advantage that could easily lead to a life or death situation for our workers or the local people.

I had to be near the phone twenty-four hours a day. Often I was the only one in the office. The lines were kept as open as possible. Every single call made from the office had to have my clearance. There were good reasons for all these precautions. Whenever some one was in trouble out in the field, e.g., if dangerously harrassed or in jail, he would call in to me and every second counted in the tense circumstances in Mississippi. Also, canvassing workers would check in periodically to let us know of conditions.

There were innumerable instances of harrassment from the telephone company most of which were of the noise interference or dilatory type. Many times the phone would ring, but when we picked up the receiver there would not be anybody on the other end. Once in awhile we were cut off outright. The enemy stayed at the thresh hold of creating a very dangerous obstacle to security. Once during an emergency situation I talked to the head operator, lodging a complaint of poor service and threatened her with Federal investigation if one of us was hurt because of their non-cooperation, and abuse, of a federally subsidized media. She promised full cooperation.

Life for the typical volunteer in Holly Springs was full of tension and restriction: where everyone had to sign a security book to record his whereabouts where gas tanks and car hoods were locked at all times, where no one was to travel alone anywhere, where when getting out of a car at night, the car's interior light was turned out, where full names were never given out over the telephone, where upon hearing the window glass tinkle from an object crashing through or a strange

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thud against the house you immediately hit the floor, where shades were drawn at dusk, where someone stayed by the telephone twenty-four hours a day, and non-business calls were limited to three minutes, where you were careful not to be run-down while crossing the street, where car travelers had to look constantly back over their shoulders to watch for whites tailing them in unmarked pickup trucks with a shotgun on their racks, where two-way radios and walkie-talkies had to be used since telephone communications were not always reliable or available since most Negroes have been denied telephone service or because one may be escaping at 100 miles per hour from a pursuing mob of rednecks, and where mail has been tampered (opened, lost, or delayed).

All these are actual, existing conditions for American citizens in Mississippi who are either natives in the movement or are invited civil rights workers helping to bring freedom and equal opportunity to all the citizens of Mississippi. The names of the three lynched youths, Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, bear clear witness to this. It is a society totally alien to the great American dream. This is right in the backyard of America and all Americans should be aware of this.