A Response to the 13th and 14th Bombings in McComb, Mississippi

The first bombing comes at 10:50. Most of the Negroes of McComb are in bed—but only some are sleeping. These days most Negro adults in McComb don’t fall asleep until the wee hours of the morning. Then the blast. That sickening, anguished sound that has been heard twelve previous times over the last three months—that sound that Negroes in McComb have come to know so well. And everyone in McComb hears the sound of the blast—McComb is a small town and very, very quiet. At night, the sound of the blast can be heard for miles. And so tonight the blast is heard for the 13th time—and shortly later for the 14th time. Tonight the sound is more anguishing—for the pain grows worse with each bombing. Every Negro in McComb instantly knows what that sound means. And then the moments of torment that follow—whose house, who is dead? It’s not mine. Then who? My neighbor, my friend—my mother, my brother, my son, or maybe COFO again. Who? And one’s stomach aches with pain and the pain seeps up into the chest and the head and comes out of every pore. Who? Is someone dead? The fear and the suspense grow—the anguish becomes unbearable. People grab whatever clothing they can find and run out into the streets.

The pain increases with each bombing. The 13th takes place at 10:50. The bombers know no restraint—they don’t even wait until the Negro community is all in bed. It doesn’t matter to them that the cafes are still open and that there are Negroes in the street. They come anyway—the police are their friends and they certainly need not fear apprehension. This is the 13th bombing, not to speak of 14 church burnings, and no one arrested. And this in a town of 15,000 where everyone knows everyone’s business.

People quickly hear the news—it’s Mama Quinn’s house. It couldn’t be worse. Everyone loves Mama Quinn. She owns a popular cafe. She is kind and good to everyone. But more than that, she is a towering figure of strength. She can’t be intimidated. Three years ago she was one of the first to welcome Moses and lend him and the SNCC workers her support. Her cafe has always been open—despite the threats. And this summer, again she leads the community. She serves black and white, night after night, and the pressures increase. Threats. The police raid her place twice—the first time they plant a bottle of whiskey and it costs her $150. She holds meetings of the Citizens League, a newly formed group of Negro business people, banded together, meeting secretly to send aid and comfort to the COFO effort. They meet twice a month to plan buying land for a community center. Mrs. Quinn wants to offer the land she has.

Friends of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
in the back of her house—and this despite the increased hazards that would be brought into her life. Finally, they succeed in making Mama Quinn close her café—she gets the final warning. She would rather close than be forced to stop serving the GOFO people.

And so it was Mama Quinn—and it couldn't be worse. It comes at 10:50. And two little children are hurt. Oh my god, they could have easily been killed—if they had not been in the rear of the house. The house is almost demolished. They weren't out to frighten tonight. Mama Quinn was to be killed.

How much can a human being take? And here come the police. They know who did it—they might have planned it themselves. They have been after Mama Quinn for a long time. Her white landlord, when he told her she must close down if she didn't stop serving the GOFO people, replied when Mama Quinn chose to close down: "Good, now I can go tell the Sheriff and Police Chief and you wouldn't be bombed."

Here come the police. The same police who have beaten out fathers and raped our daughters—and put our children in jail. Right now two little boys sit behind bars in the county jail, sentenced to a year for making, "threatening and obscene phone calls to a white woman." And the phone rings in the Negro community night and day with threats not to associate with those GOFO workers. Some come from the police themselves. And now, the police stride into the Negro community. They wear helmets, carry clubs and shotguns. They will pretend to investigate. Actually they come to intimidate the victims and gather up whatever evidence lies around before the FBI can get to it. They come to arrest the people whose houses have been bombed. They've done it before. The pattern repeats itself. A house is bombed, the victims thrown in jail. Mr. Dillon is in jail—his house was bombed on August 28th. The highway patrolman told Dillon's wife that she had better stop cooperating with GOFO or the next time the dynamite will be dropped in the middle of her house. The Sheriff makes a similar threat. Now the police are coming. They will probably arrest Mama Quinn. (Actually they arrested her daughter, a teacher in the Freedom School this summer, and the baby sitter.)

How much can a human being take?

And in the midst of the pain and anguish, comes the second thud. It's on the other side of town. Who now? My mother, father, sister, brother. God damn, how much blood do they want. They got the church—Society Hill—the movement church. Its doors were closed this summer, but it has always been the center of the movement in South McComb. All the Freedom School kids belong to Society Hill. It's Bryant's church. The NAACP holds its meetings there. I spoke there this summer. GOFO workers were there this past Sunday and the Sunday before. Next door lives Alma Jackson, the mother of eight children, who lived in Amite County
and who, three months ago, was dragged out of her home by 10 armed men and taken to a field where she was beaten and cut up and left half dead. Her children don't like McComb— they wish they were back home where their friends are. But mother has told them they can't go back. Mother lies in bed awake at night. She lives next door to the church. It was the only place she could find that she could afford. But she knows that one night they are going to bomb her place. Her life is never-ending fear. Is this America?

The church is demolished. It was a terrible blast. The police are here, certain again to see that all clues are removed and destroyed.

And where is the federal government? But no, the local police must handle the situation; they are the upholders of the law. The federal government has no authority. And so the police stride in. The Negroes crowd in the street, brooding, exulting. To the police this is a mob. So they tell the press: 3,000 Negroes gather in the streets. Yet the entire Negro population of McComb is just over 3,000. This doesn't matter. Cover up the real story. Paint a picture of rioting Negroes. Play on Northern fears. This is what the press will pick up, and so Mike Wallace calmly and objectively explains to mourning T.V. viewers that last night the Negroes of McComb reacted with violence—the rest—to two bombings follows, but is not heard. And so the story of the murder of a community goes untold.

By S.M.E.N field secretary who worked in McComb this summer.

12 midnight—Tension continued to mount today (Monday, September 21, 1964) and helmeted county police poured into McComb. The state police had come into McComb in the early hours of the morning and were still visible. A rally was held at the site of the bombed church and was attended by about 150 people. During the rally Dennis Sweeney, 21, from Portland, Oregon, told of his conversation earlier in the day with Mrs. Quinn. He asked her if she had a place to stay and she said yes. But a moment later she broke down and cried saying she didn't know if they would want her to stay there because they might get their house bombed, too. Shortly after Dennis was finished speaking and encouraging people to support the voter registration drive, he was arrested by police (state) and taken to be booked for inciting to riot. He was interrogated by plainclothesmen who appeared to be state investigators. They warned him that he wasn't wanted in town and said he'd better leave. One investigator told Sweeney that McComb was "a powderkeg that could blow up at any minute". They also questioned Sweeney about his father, where he worked; they took out all the contents of his wallet and ripped the pages out of his address book. He was then released.

Five others were arrested Monday night but later released. They were: Jesse Harris, project director; Cephas Hughes, Negro S.M.E.N worker from Washington, D.C.; Ursula Junk from Germany; Bill Powell from Britain; and Roy Lee, a local resident. Ursula Junk was the first to be questioned. She was interrogated by plainclothesmen who were surrounded by police who came in with intimidating remarks throughout. She asked what
was she arrested for and was told "inciting to riot". Ursula then said "I have a right to call my embassy and have them provide a lawyer for me." The investigator answered: "WHEN YOU ENTER MISSISSIPPI, YOU AIN'T GOT NO MORE RIGHTS. DIDN'T YOU KNOW THAT?" Ursula answered, "I heard about that but didn't know if it could be true." And the investigator responded: "Unless you leave Mississippi voluntarily we are going to help you leave faster." The questioning continued—was she engaged? No, Did she date niggers? The answer: "I go out with people." "You mean white people or niggers?" The answer: "I mean people". Then there followed a long period of time when Ursula's investigators tried to insinuate that she was a prostitute. For example they said they would have to give her a medical check up and asked did she have any venereal diseases. They asked where she lived, etc. After establishing that she was a Catholic one said: "Oh those niggers climb on Catholics, too." Other policemen chimed in with similar taunts. Then followed a lengthy interrogation about communism. After an hour and a half of questioning from police she was taken into the Mayor's office where she was questioned by FBI agent Murphy for an hour. After Murphy established that Ursula was Catholic he said: "But you didn't go to church last Sunday," "Yes," she said, "I went to church with one of the Negro workers." "You offended the whole community...It was the feeling of the community that you came to church in order to demonstrate...and you still wonder what the reasons for the bombings were? The reason was you offended the community. Don't you see the connection? Church bombings and Mrs. Quinn's house?" (Ursula had been staying at Mrs. Quinn's).

Questions for Jesse Harris followed. He was told that they would "get him" for contributing to the delinquency of minors and for "inciting to riot". And then, "we are going to lock you up for good," said the police. Bill Powell from Britain was next. When he asked Murphy, the FBI agent, if he complained to his embassy would anything be done, Murphy replied by trying to convince him not to complain to his embassy but to give him (Murphy) his complaints.

Finally all five were released. Jesse Harris and Caphas Hughes were released separately, though and had to pass through a crowd of whites to get their car. They were followed to the Freedom House.

This is Mississippi in the year 1964. The only way these people will be safe is through federal protection...The only reason the federal government will act is if you put pressure on them.

The election campaign has taken the eyes of the nation off the South. This has allowed the racists to step up their attacks—to be more brave in their bombings. Terror and intimidation threaten in some areas to destroy the movement.

WRITE TODAY, PLEASE! GET FIVE FRIENDS TO WRITE. We must show the Justice Department and the White House that we are concerned and outraged....our protest must be massive.