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Special Report
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MISSISSIPPI: IMAGE AND REALITY

"There are a lot of people who have been talking about the need to improve the image of Mississippi," former Governor Ross Barnett told a Citizens' Council meeting in New Orleans a few months ago, "but let me ask you people here...is there anything wrong with Mississippi's image?" Barnett answered, "No."

The racist political leader continued, "...if some of the people who are talking about Mississippi's image would just spend a little more time having their 'fuzzy' thinking adjusted then maybe they could see as clearly as you and I can--that there is not much wrong with the Mississippi image."

Since that time Mississippi's leaders have been trying to adjust the "'fuzzy' thinking" of others who have thought that racism and second-class citizenship are part of Mississippi life. These leaders have suddenly decided to do this as state revenues fell and the state began operating on a hand to mouth basis and as the state's five congressional representatives were being challenged.

Last November a state sales tax of 3.5 percent produced less revenue than a 3.0 percent levy brought the same month the preceding year. After the Neshoba County slayings tourist trade along the Gulf coast dropped 50 percent. By December it was still low. Hotel and motel occupancy in the Gulfport-Biloxi area was only 8 percent. From March to December the state was forced to borrow \$8 million.

Robert Gordon reported in a UPI dispatch February 28: "Business leaders feared a boycott campaign against Mississippi industry and products and noted the state's slow industrialization. Others pointed to the challenge of the Mississippi congressional delegation."

This latter is perhaps the most important reason for the sudden attempt at window dressing. Mississippi political leaders have taken the congressional challenge very seriously and are worried about the outcome. The number of votes against Mississippi last January 4th has given leaders second thoughts about their state's "image". All of these attempts to change the impression of Mississippi have come since that January 4th. They realize that a better impression will lessen the chance for any success by the Freedom Democratic Party.

The challenge "has drawn an inordinate amount of publicity and has whipped up even more anti-Mississippi sentiment," William L. Chaze wrote in the January 3 Jackson Clarion-Ledger and Daily News. "And more of this type sentiment we don't need," he concluded.

After the January 4th challenge, Mrs. F. A. Parker, editor and publisher of the Prentiss Headlight, wrote in her column: "There is no place for rejoicing over the vote that seated the Mississippi Delegation in Washington Monday, but rather deep misgivings that in that august body there were 148 members who voted against the seating of the duly and legally elected representatives against 276 who voted for seating them. There is cause to be alarmed when we find that many jackasses in the greatest deliberative body in the world, the legislative branch of our three part federal government."

Mississippi leaders don't want another January 4th and feel that a new "image" will help.

"...with a little intelligent planning we should be able to kill off this political monstrosity [the Freedom Democratic Party] altogether," the Tupelo Journal editorialized on January 5. "And if white leaders can so handle state affairs," the paper continued, "that the Freedom Party is provided no issue which will thrust it back into the national spotlight that was turned on it by the walkout of our delegation at the Democratic convention, there is a good chance that it will wither away completely."

Thus the work of making a good impression continues.

Lt. Gov. Carroll Gartin, on January 20, spoke before the Greenville Industrial Foundation. He told the group of an Ohio industrialist who refused to consider expansion of two Mississippi plants until the state "decides to become a part of the union again."

Gartin commented, "I am deeply concerned about the impression we make on the people in other parts of this nation. We cannot build a fence around ourselves."

But if Mississippi was now joining up with the other 49 states it was doing it on its own terms. As Governor Paul Johnson pleaded to the rest of the nation at U. S. Civil Rights Commission hearings in Jackson on February 16, "Get off our back and get on our side."

And Edward P. Moore covering the Greenville meeting for the Memphis Commercial Appeal reported: "Mr. Gartin, maintaining his personal belief in segregation, urged businessmen, civic leaders and industrialists 'to speak up and speak out' in a positive manner about conditions in the state."

The new "image" then is coming from speaking "in a positive manner about conditions" rather than from doing much to change the conditions.

Mississippi Manufacturers Association (MMA) president Ed Palmer told a Jackson civic club on February 10 that the MMA is "convinced, as are you, that much of the radical thinking towards Mississippi is not based on fact but on rumor and supposition." He then revealed that the MMA was going to mount "a massive public relations campaign" based on the approach that "with the good and the bad, Mississippi's net picture is one favorable to investments and economic growth."

The financial worries of state leaders not only pertain to tourist trade, developing industries and selling products, it also extends to federal aid. Mississippi wants to be considered part of the union so that it will continue getting federal aid in an amount that, according to Drew Pearson, totalled more than one billion dollars in 1964.

"Leadership on the state level agrees that we cannot afford to lose federal aid," Erle Johnston, Jr., told a civic club meeting in early February. Johnston is head of the segregationist State Sovereignty Commission.

However a few leaders and state organizations have spoken about obeying and respecting the law, ending terrorism, and ending unfair practices in voter registration. But it is interesting to note who said these words and under what circumstances.

Both Governor Paul Johnson and Attorney General Joe Patterson spoke before the Mississippi Sheriffs Association. They made pleas that the laws of the U.S. should be obeyed. The association itself passed a resolution calling for compliance with federal laws and an end to terrorism. This has a rather hollow ring, coming from a group whose membership includes Neshoba County Sheriff Lawrence Rainey. In fact at its previous meeting both Sheriff Rainey and Deputy Cecil Price, free on bond, appeared and were cheered and praised by the Mississippi lawmen's group.

The Circuit Clerks Association of Mississippi--circuit clerks function as voter registrars--adopted a resolution on January 10 which urged citizens "to conduct themselves with dignity and not to act in defiance of law." All well and good. But they went on to say that criticism of themselves resulted from "ignorance of the law" and "indifference to law and facts." This in face of the fact that Negro registration in Mississippi is less than 7 percent.

They concluded by saying that "those groups who allege discrimination should concentrate their efforts upon improving cultural and moral standards of those who cry discrimination." In other words SNCC and other groups who are pushing voter registration in Mississippi should stop their work and let the politics in the state be of, for and by white people. And the Justice Department should drop the more than twenty voter registration suits it has filed in Mississippi. More than twenty-five circuit clerks are named in these suits.

Commenting on voter registration in the state before the Mississippi Society of Professional Engineers on February 26, Governor Johnson said, "It doesn't make much sense to turn down a person with an MA degree when he attempts to register to vote, and then register one who has not been to school. We don't have a leg to stand on." ...when a suit is filed, the governor might have added. For in a number of suits, the Justice Department is asking that similar standards be applied to Negroes seeking registration as have been applied to whites already registered. In other words if registrars have turned down a Negro with an MA and registered a white who hasn't been to school, the registrars will have to register Negroes whether they've been to school or not.

In Panola County whites were registered without being given a section of the state constitution to interpret. Now, as a result of a court suit, for a twelve-month period Negroes seeking to register are not being given any section either and since May 1964 some 800 Negroes have been registered. Governor Johnson clearly does not want this to happen in other counties.

Mississippi leaders and organizations are only becoming more sophisticated in their racism. They are realizing now that they at least have to give the impression of complying with integration orders. They can no longer continue to openly defy them. If they do, strict orders to integrate may follow.

As the Itawamba County Times commented editorially: "Our opinion is that all of the districts of the state of Mississippi will be forced to comply [with school integration orders] whether they like it or not. In fact, the courts have already proven this point. So why not submit a plan of our own choosing instead of having to submit by court order to a plan which might not be quite so palatable."

How this might be done was demonstrated in Clarksdale in summer 1964. Under court order to integrate its schools, the city drew up its own plan. This plan of course was based on new school boundaries so that the zones would be either all-white or all-Negro. In one case where this was not possible, the Negro homes were condemned.

All these words of "complying with the law," "ending terrorism" and so on were spoken during January and February. Following is a chronology of what has happened in Mississippi since the end of January.

February 2:

Rolling Fork -- Two Mississippi Student Union members were threatened with expulsion from Henry Withers High School for getting 150 students to wear Freedom pins.

Holly Springs -- A white court stenographer working with FDP lawyers was asked to leave Maurice's restaurant when it was discovered that her white companion was a COFO worker.

February 3:

Biloxi -- Four COFO workers arrested when they tried to re-integrate Vic's Newsstand Lunch Counter. They were arrested after insisting that their coffee be served in regular cups rather than in paper cups.

Rolling Fork -- More than 200 students at the Henry Withers High School were sent home because they were wearing Freedom pins. In protest over 200 students walked out.

February 5:

Indianola -- Thirty persons, including SNCC staffer Fred Winn, were arrested for picketing the segregated white library.

Vicksburg -- Seven Negro students were ordered out of the white library by the librarian assisted by police. After a lecture at the police station, they were released.

Shaw -- A COFO station wagon was fire bombed.

February 8:

Natchez -- Two white Freedom Democratic Party attorneys and a local Negro were refused service at the Eola Hotel.

February 9:

Laurel -- A shot was fired into the SNCC office around 9:30 p.m. No one was injured.

February 10:

Jackson -- A white man smashed the windshield of a COFO car after the two riders, one white and one Negro, had eaten together at the Toddle House.

Tallahatchie County -- Deposition gathering for the congressional challenge had to be cut short because no notaries could be found who would sign subpoenas for adverse witnesses.

February 15:

Indianola -- SNCC worker Fred Winn arrested for distributing leaflets on public property without a permit. He was taken to jail and held on \$100 bond.

February 16:

Meridian -- Fifteen persons arrested while picketing a segregated meeting at a segregated hotel which featured an FBI agent as the speaker. Earlier, a group of local Negroes, who tried to enter the "public" meeting, were threatened and refused admittance.

Laurel -- The SNCC office was fire-bombed. One room was completely destroyed, the others were badly damaged. Office records, a 2,000 book library and a mimeograph machine were destroyed. Typewriters were missing.

February 19:

Indianola -- Students and SNCC workers were arrested while picketing the white-only library.

February 20:

Indianola -- More persons were arrested as picketing at the white-only library continued. Over 50 persons were arrested in the two days and several of them were beaten by police.

Ruleville -- A cross was burned in front of the SNCC community center.

February 21:

Moss Point -- Six people, two white and four Negro, were arrested as they attempted to seek service in Burnham's Drug Store.

Ruleville -- An integrated group of nine people attended the local movie theatre and sat in the white section. Half a dozen white persons threw objects at them while they sat watching the film.

February 22:

Holly Springs -- St. Joseph's Church, site of regularly held voter registration classes, was burned completely to the ground.

February 23:

Batesville -- Twenty-two high school students were thrown out bodily of a cafe they had attempted to integrate. Another cafe closed rather than serve them. Next they picketed the courthouse and were arrested for disturbing the peace and obstructing the sidewalk.

February 26:

Indianola -- Policemen entered the Freedom School and individual homes without warrants, arresting nine persons. The nine were charged with either contributing to the delinquency of minors or with disturbing the peace.

Marks -- A SNCC worker was arrested and charged with driving without a license and switching inspection stickers.

Canton -- In separate incidents involving different groups, Negroes were turned away from three restaurants.

February 27:

Batesville -- Sixty students picketed the courthouse to protest the arrest of twelve persons the previous day. In the afternoon at the courthouse four whites attacked two Negro men and a white SNCC worker. When the four whites ganged up on the one SNCC worker Robert Miles, a Negro farmer, went to defend him and hit one of the attackers. Miles was later arrested by the deputy sheriff for disorderly conduct.

February 28:

Batesville -- A shot was fired through the front door of the home of Robert Miles. The shot missed SNCC worker Penny Patch by two feet.

March 1:

McComb -- County officials served the entire SNCC staff plus local leaders with an injunction prohibiting them from demonstrating or encouraging others to demonstrate. In the afternoon 35 students and 11 staff people were arrested at the Pike County courthouse. A lawyer who went to the jail was thrown out. When he returned, he was attacked from behind by the jailer.

March 3:

Columbus -- A SNCC worker was arrested for reckless driving and improper brakes. The arrest was made by a highway patrolman well-known for his harassment of rights workers.

Indianola -- The formerly white-only library finally integrated. However, all the tables and chairs were removed.

Marks -- A group of thirty students attempted to test public accommodations but each restaurant closed down as they approached it. Later, two workers were arrested on charges of contributing to the delinquency of minors.

March 5:

Greenwood -- The home of Silas McGhee was fire bombed. The fire was put out with an extinguisher by a truck driver who was passing by at the time of the blaze. Previously the home had been shot into and Silas McGhee himself had been shot once and beaten a number of times. The family has long been active in vote activities.

Belzoni -- A local leader was arrested and charged with interfering with the duties of an officer.

Indianola -- The Freedom School and SNCC office was burned to the ground. Fire also destroyed a staff car. Eight SNCC workers who tried to enter the area were arrested by police who had cordoned

off the area. Police took all of the files which included lists of local Negroes who belonged to the Freedom Democratic Party.

Columbus -- A SNCC worker was fined \$12 for failing to stop at a non-existent stop sign. The arrest was made by a highway patrolman notorious for his arrests and harassment of civil rights workers.

March 6:

Natchez -- Two Negroes tickets to the annual Pilgrimage."

March 9:

Moss Point -- Twenty-six persons who were picketing the Magnolia Junior-Senior High School were arrested on charges of refusal to obey an officer and trespassing.

Columbus -- Four SNCC staff persons on their way from Cleveland to Selma were picked up by police and charged with public drunkenness and disorderly conduct.

March 10:

Marks -- A local Negro, bringing food to rights workers in jail, was beaten by trustees.

Belzoni -- A civil rights worker was beaten in jail.

March 12:

Natchez -- Six people were arrested while picketing in front of the city auditorium, protesting discriminatory ticket sales to the Pilgrimage.

Vicksburg -- Four persons were arrested while picketing a grocery store.

March 14:

Tchula -- A local Negro was shot by the owner of the plantation on which he worked.

March 15:

Jackson -- Thirteen persons were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct while standing in front of the courthouse.

Starkville -- Ron Bridgeforth, project director, was arrested, charged with reckless driving, speeding and improper passing.

Batesville -- SNCC worker Chris Williams was arrested while walking from the office to a cafe. He was charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor and disturbing the peace.

March 16:

Belzoni -- A white man in a truck tried to run down a group of Negroes who had just left a meeting.

Vicksburg -- A cafe at which SNCC workers eat was fire-bombed.