

August 10, 1966

The President  
The White House  
Washington 25, D. C.

Last January, numerous poor, homeless Mississippi Delta Negroes went to the empty Greenville Air Base seeking shelter from the winter cold. They were forcibly driven off by Federal troops. Some fled to Northern ghettos. Some burdened already overcrowded Mississippi kinfolk. Others are trying desperately to survive today on 400 acres of land in Washington County without adequate permanent housing, jobs, education, on the verge of starvation, and with little hope. Another group of poor, evicted Mississippi Negroes at Tribbett, Washington County, Mississippi, struggled through the long winter in tents because of the Federal Government's failure to respond to their pleas for housing. They have no jobs and almost no food. Despite the fact that over 477,732 Mississippians are helped by food commodity and food stamp programs, these men, women, and children have been unable to get the food they so desperately need. Callous disregard of the Federal Government for their plight, and the plight of tens of thousands of other poor Mississippi Negroes makes a mockery of all the humanitarian ideals this Nation espouses throughout the world.

Today in the Mississippi Delta, over 75% of all adults in the labor force fall beneath the poverty level. Unemployment figures for Negroes in the Delta are estimated at 66%. But even these shocking figures fail to portray the many poor Negro and white citizens in the Delta of Mississippi who are grossly underemployed and without

adequate shelter and food. Immediate mobilization of new, massive Federal, State, and private resources, human, physical and financial, to provide the poor with new hope and opportunity must occur to avoid an ever growing despair and bitterness.

An extraordinary opportunity to rectify the tragic effects upon Mississippi Negroes of State-supported and perpetuated racial discrimination in education, welfare administration, and employment and of mass Negro unemployment in the Mississippi Delta will be lost if the Greenville Air Base facility is conveyed in whole, or in part, to any public or private institution or agency steeped in these practices and traditions. The Greenville Air Force Base, containing hundreds of buildings suitable for classrooms, workshops, and living quarters, and located in the heart of the Delta, is uniquely suited for conversion into a huge center for providing training, housing, and supportive programs for the poverty stricken citizens of the Mississippi Delta, most of whom are Negro.

Such an urgently needed training center must involve, and be sensitive and responsive to the needs of poor Negroes, a sensitivity and responsiveness conspicuously absent from the Mississippi State Board of Higher Learning, the Mississippi State Board of Education, the Mississippi State Department of Welfare, and the Mississippi Employment Security Commission, agencies traditionally involved in programming for poor people. The State Employment Security Commission and the State Welfare Department maintain offices in each county staffed with less than one-half of one percent Negro employees in other than menial or custodial jobs. The Mississippi State Board of Education maintains separate offices for Negro and white education and programming. The Department of Welfare and the Employment Security Commission to this day frequently fail to address Negro

citizens with courtesy titles. The Board of Trustees of the Institutions for Higher Learning, which we understand is being considered by the Federal Government and the City of Greenville for operation of a project in the Greenville Air Base, is entirely composed of persons of the white race in a State where over 40% of the population is Negro. More than 75% of the funds utilized by the State Welfare Department and 100% of the funds utilized by the State Employment Security Commission are Federal, and fall within the ambit of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

Distribution of additional Federal funds to these agencies, presently in blatant noncompliance with Title VI, to support a program allegedly designed to aid members of the Negro race and from which they are excluded in any effective policy making positions, would represent an act of gross hypocrisy on the part of the Federal government. It is inconceivable that the United States Government can consider funding for additional programs agencies which have not desegregated existing programs. We specifically urge a thorough Title VI compliance review of every project or program being considered for involvement in a Federally assisted operation at the Greenville Air Base. Such a comprehensive review should be completed before any consideration is given to transferring funds or property at the Base to any public or private agency. Such a review should include not only services and other benefits distributed by the agencies, but also employment policies of the agencies involved in the program.

Disposition of the Greenville Air Base to any entity other than one composed of whites and Negroes responsive and sensitive to the needs of the tens of thousands of presently unemployable,

uneducated, homeless, hungry black and white people of the Mississippi Delta would represent a missed opportunity of tragic proportions on the part of the Federal Government. Uneducated, untrained, and hungry people do not and will not disappear. These people, United States citizens, want only an opportunity to participate in and become a productive part of the society from which they have thus far been excluded. Creative use of the Greenville Air Base for a living and training center by the Federal Government would represent an investment from which the State of Mississippi and America would reap dividends for generations to come.

We specifically urge the following:

(1) That the program at the Base be developed and coordinated by a group consisting of Federal and other officials and representative, able and concerned white and Negro citizens. This group should be responsible for approving the various projects submitted for funding by the Federal Government as well as for determining the nature and the selection of key staff for operating these programs.

(2) That immediate action be taken to provide decent housing for hundreds of Negro families now critically in need of such housing. The desperate urgency of the housing situation is complicated by the fact that with the bad weather of fall and winter coming on, hundreds of men, women, and children are now housed in completely inadequate temporary housing without heat, electricity, or sewage. The Office of Economic Opportunity, HUD, and other agencies should move promptly to provide such housing.

(3) Effective new and nondiscriminatory training programs must be provided for training unemployed and underemployed Negroes for jobs at every level from nonprofessional and unskilled to technical and professional. To assure that the necessary resources and

expertise for such programming is available, Federal agencies should supply consultant staff on a continuing basis to assure that the most effective and innovative programs are initiated and maintained.

(4) Clear-cut procedures should be established for evaluating each component of the program at the Base and for instituting changes as required.

Because of the gravity of the crisis we face and of the close relationship between rural southern problems and the problems now plaguing our northern cities, we urge that the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, the Secretary of Labor, the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Commerce, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, and the Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity arrange to tour the Mississippi Delta communities so that they may see at first hand the nature and dimensions of the problems for which their agencies must take the lead in providing answers. Quite apart from the pragmatic value of such a visit, this demonstration of National concern at the highest level would provide unprecedented hope and encouragement for tens of thousands of Negro and white Americans whose plight has too long been ignored or given the lowest priority of consideration.

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., PRESIDENT  
AND THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE  
SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

cc: Hon. John Gardner, Secretary, Department of H. E. W.  
Hon. Willard Wirtz, Secretary, Department of Labor  
Hon. Orville Freeman, Secretary of Agriculture  
Hon. John Connor, Secretary of Commerce  
Hon. Robert Weaver, Secretary, Housing and Urban Development  
Hon. Sargent Shriver, Director, Office of Economic Development