

On the role of private Black colleges  
in the Southern Freedom Movement -  
N.Y.C. Mayor Richard Wagner was co-speaker.  
SPEECH OF JOHN R. SALTER

Later, ~~given~~  
given at  
Rockefeller Center

GIVEN AT THE HARVARD CLUB OF NEW YORK  
ON SEPTEMBER 11, 1963

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is good to be here. I've been asked to speak with regard to the role of the United Negro College Fund colleges in the South, and I am very happy to do this.

Now for all of its romanticism, the American South, as we all know, is a miserable place indeed, especially for American Negro people. There are, of course, some portions of the South, such as North Carolina, that have made much more progress than, say, Mississippi or Alabama or South Carolina. But the situation all over the South is still quite grim from the standpoint of massive deprivation of human rights. Indeed, to be quite accurate, the facts of life are simple enough for an American Negro anywhere in this country: he can expect, from many quarters, overt and covert prejudice and discrimination.

But the South is far and away the worst area of all: Mississippi is almost completely recalcitrant on the matter of civil rights; Alabama and Louisiana and South Carolina are not far behind her. Many sections of the other southern states are almost as bad. Atlanta, Georgia, and Raleigh, North Carolina, for example, have made progress, but, even within the city limits of those communities, and in the hinterland around them, there is much to remind one of Mississippi.

White society, and generally a white elite at that, is dominant in the South, and, totally oblivious to everything that we know about human beings and anthropology and such, southern white society holds the Negro to be inherently inferior to Caucasians. And, perhaps most tragically of all, the Negro in the South is taught, by a variety of techniques, to accept this quack racism and all too often comes to believe it himself. The Southern Negro is given a generally substandard education in the widely prevailing segregated school systems of the South. Even in the so-called "enlightened" Southern states, much less is spent on educating the Negro youth than is the case with his Caucasian counterpart. The Negro in the South is taught that, never under any circumstances must he step "out of line" or deviate, in any way, from the rigid folkways of the "Southern Way of Life."

Take Mississippi for example: the state is rigidly controlled by a racist elite, and prejudice, discrimination, and segregation pervade every aspect of Mississippi society. The entire state school system from kindergarten to the colleges and universities is under rigid state control. This is true whether the school in question is a grossly under financed Negro school or a white school. The philosophy of racism is taught openly in most of the white schools, or, at the best, mention of the situation is skillfully avoided. In the public Negro schools, the whole issue is generally

avoided; but the students, of course, are conditioned never to challenge the segregation system. This is the way it is in the public schools of Mississippi.

For the completely uneducated Mississippi Negro there exists only the hardest and dirtiest of the hard, dirty work that prevails in the comparatively unindustrialized South. For the partially educated Mississippi Negro — a man who has, perhaps, a high school diploma — there exists a generally marginal existence fraught with socioeconomic uncertainties. For the educated Negro in Mississippi — a man with a college degree — there does exist a chance for a fair, and only a fair, standard of living. And, regardless of degree of education, the lives of all Negro people in Mississippi are badly scarred by their status as second-class citizens.

This is Mississippi. But, as I have indicated, this is basically the way the system operates throughout most of the American South and, regrettably indeed, in portions of the North, East and West.

Now today we are witnessing one of the greatest social and economic upheavals in the history of our nation — perhaps the greatest upheaval of them all: the rise of the Negro people in their long-overdue and determined quest for full human rights. The names of the battlefields are in all the mass media: Birmingham, Jackson, Albany, Danville, Cambridge, Gadsen, Clarksdale, and on and on — and with less dramatic, but nevertheless quite significant, conflicts in other sections of the country.

To some, this social revolution seems to have appeared out of nowhere in this year of 1963. To others, the beginning date may appear to be the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and to others, the 1954 Supreme Court desegregation decision. Actually, of course, this revolution began to shape up when the first human beings were brought to this country in chains and forced into chattel slavery. We are witnessing now the great climax of a social process that has been over three centuries in the making.

There are a good many components that go into the making of a socioeconomic revolution of this sort, and they are all important factors: the people at the grassroots and their leaders and their organizations; the scope and depth of the injustice and tyranny; the attitudes and practices of the various political and social and economic power structures. All of these are found in the Negro revolution.

And one of the most important components of any revolution are the schools. And, certainly, one of the very basic elements involved in this revolution are the Negro colleges — most especially those colleges under private auspices that are free from the control of segregationist-oriented state governments. It is many of these colleges, of course, that are affiliated with the United Negro College Fund.

The American South today is still largely a miserable place, and one can only ponder in awe what kind of a frightful place it was a century or so ago when most of these private Negro colleges and universities were set up — set up primarily because not a public school system in any of the Southern states was making any real effort of any sort to really educate its Negro citizens.

Those early Negro colleges and universities often began as schools which taught from the first grade right on up the ladder. Some of the schools, because of financial problems and/or opposition from white society, died; others survived and still carry on their work. As the years passed, Southern school systems made some provision — albeit skimpy and racist — for the elementary and secondary educations of Negro youth. But even then, and this holds true for today in large measure, private Negro colleges have found it necessary to give, as the saying goes, "six years of education in four." Through no fault of their own, most Southern Negro youth — deprived of adequate elementary and secondary educations in the public school systems — come to Talladega or Tougaloo or Philander Smith or the others — academically handicapped. But the students who come to these private Negro colleges secure the best education that a dedicated faculty and administration can give them — and it is a first-rate education. And one of the very basic reasons it is first-rate, I might add, is that the absence of control from segregationist-oriented state governments, and reliance on such out-of-state sources of strength as the UNCF, allow the college community to pursue all of the roads to truth, to let the free minds of human beings reject error and accept truth.

And many of these students have gone on into graduate schools all over the country, or have stayed in their home states in the South to practice their professions. They have gone out into the world in many directions but, most importantly, they have been well trained for leadership, and a tremendously high percentage have taken positions of an outstandingly competent nature in our American society.

These students have done something else too, very frequently while they are still students at these colleges and universities; they have initiated the Negro revolution. For never, under any circumstances, forget this: pure academic education, and nothing more, is not enough. All human beings must be educated — but all human beings must be free, must possess adequate liberty and adequate material well-being. When, for example, a college-trained Negro elementary or secondary teacher in Mississippi is given a substandard salary, quite possibly never allowed to vote, and is treated in all respects as a subhuman creature — believe me, academic education and nothing more is definitely not enough.

There hasn't been a private Negro college or university affiliated with UNCF, for example, that has not witnessed its students, frequently many of its faculty members, and often some officers of its administration, playing a major role in the Negro revolution. This is not to imply that Negro people in other environments do not recognize injustice and tyranny and do not play major roles in the freedom movement.

But let me assure you that the absence of control by segregationist state governments makes it much easier for students and others in private Negro colleges and universities in the South today to organize and demonstrate. In a great many areas indeed, it has been the people from the private colleges and universities that have taken the lead in economic boycotts and voter registration campaigns and in full-dress mass community drives for full equalitarian integration.

Now let me tell you about Tougaloo Southern Christian College, the UNCF school with which I am most familiar. What applies to it, applies substantially to the others.

Tougaloo is located a few miles from that national symbol of human repression — Jackson. This is the region where the white Citizens Council is the dominant ruling organization — this sick and vicious first cousin to the Ku Klux Klan. The Citizens Council controls the state, county and municipal governments; most of the white people in the region subscribe to a fanatic racism, and the few who do not hold such views are fearful of speaking out against the system. This is an area where no Negro, regardless of the amount of academic education or money that he possesses, can enter a white-owned restaurant or motel or hotel. This is where comparatively few Negroes, through no fault of their own, have ever voted. This is a region where the local newspapers, as one authority has put it, "sing their daily hymn of hate." This is a sick and sorry region.

When I first went into the Deep South, driving through East Texas and Louisiana and into Mississippi, I passed through miles of agricultural land marked occasionally by huge and luxurious plantation homes, and by the seemingly endless shacks of poverty-stricken Negro sharecroppers. I saw slum shacks in the towns and cities that revealed depths of poverty that I had never dreamed existed in any city of the nation. I saw more police than I had ever seen in any section of the United States. I saw police dogs. And things worsened, the closer one got to the sovereign land of Mississippi and its fair capital, Jackson.

That day was quite an introduction to the Deep South. I'll never forget it, not just because of the miserable and repressive nature of the region, but because, along toward the end of the day, I entered the campus of Tougaloo. And there matters were in marked contrast indeed to the southern picture that I had viewed up to that time.

Now the buildings of Tougaloo College are, owing to its limited budget, somewhat old and worn for the most part. But there is nothing old or worn about the spirits of the students, faculty and administration. The 500 or so students come from many walks of life: some originated in the shacks of sharecroppers and urban slums and are attending the college with scholarship aid. Others have come from families that are comparatively well-to-do, although, of course, by northern standards, not so well off. The three dozen faculty members, coming from all sections of

the United States and several foreign lands as well, teach from a high missionary sense of dedication, and the same holds true for the officers of the administration.

There are some interesting things to note here. The faculty and administration are interracial — the only school in Mississippi, regrettably, that can say this. The student body is desegregated — there are a half dozen white students attending college at Tougaloo. As we know, the only other school in Mississippi with a desegregated student body is Old Miss — and there it took the U. S. Army. But desegregation and integration have always been the practice at Tougaloo.

There is a powerful atmosphere of academic freedom at Tougaloo. A student or faculty member or administration officer can believe as he wishes, and can discuss freely from such a perspective. Not only are there no other schools in Mississippi that practice this, but there are not very many in the United States.

It is here, then, that young Negro people come — kids just like kids anywhere except that they have been battered and scarred by the racism of the South. They come to Tougaloo, the only really free and democratic place in the entire state, and here, for the first time in their lives, they secure a rich academic education, with classroom lectures supplemented by excellent guest lecturers and extremely interesting visitors to the college. Here they meet, for the first time in their lives, white people on a friendly human-to-human basis.

And here, too, other things are done — of the utmost importance. The first real civil rights direct action in Mississippi took place in the spring of 1961 when nine Tougaloo students sat-in at the so-termed "white library" in Jackson and were arrested, jailed, and later released on \$500 bonds apiece. In succeeding months, Tougaloo students played a major role in other endeavors in the region, initiating, among other things, local voter registration campaigns.

It was primarily Tougaloo students and some faculty who, in the fall and winter and spring of 1962-1963, with aid from every one of the civil rights organizations, organized and led the economic boycott of the 127 white-owned stores in downtown Jackson, a movement aimed at securing fair employment practices and fair consumer practices — the first time in the history of Jackson that a continuous movement had gone on.

Later, in May and June, this boycott movement developed into the Jackson Movement, an upsurge of humanity which saw 1150 demonstrators arrested in less than two weeks time, appalling police brutality of the most animalistic sort, the cold-blooded murder of Medgar Evers, and eventually some concessions wrung from the political and socio-economic power structure of Jackson, and, perhaps most importantly, a wide base of support from the Jackson Negro community which promises much more freedom movement activity in the months and years ahead. Tougaloo students and some faculty were the first to get arrested in the Jackson

Movement and, even when it had broadened to include, in one way or another, all of the Negro people in Jackson, Tougaloo people continued to hold major leadership positions.

At one point in the campaign, several of us — Tougaloo students, a few students from another school, the chaplain of Tougaloo College, and myself — sat-in at the F. W. Woolworth store in Jackson, which refused to serve us. In a surprisingly short time, about three hundred white people, many of them teen-agers, gathered to beat on us as we continued to sit there, threw ketchup, enamel paint, and mustard all over us, and threw pepper in our eyes. The sit-in continued, hour after hour, while the mob continued to rant and rave and while the city police of Jackson strolled, in a leisurely fashion, up and down the sidewalk outside. Things were really beginning to get rough when the Tougaloo president, Dr. A. D. Beittel, who had heard the report on the radio and had driven quickly into Jackson, walked through the mob and sat with us. His was an admirable act of courage. And this particular Woolworth sit-in, one of the most violent in the history of the civil rights movement, was a Tougaloo sit-in.

The segregationists of Jackson have done everything that they could, of course, to cripple the college and, if possible, to put it out of business. The local newspapers have referred to it as "cancer college." Politicians running for office have called this citadel of democratic humanism a "communist training camp." The sheriff and his deputies have frequently clustered around the gates. The college's telephones have frequently been wire-tapped. Various attempts have been made to apply economic pressures. Gun-thugs have fired onto the campus a number of times; fortunately no one has yet been hurt. The college, its president and its board of trustees, and several of its faculty members are currently under an anti-demonstration injunction. But the college carries on, its various activities unabated.

Let me tell you one more story of Tougaloo and the Jackson Movement. We had gone — after classes, for the day was over — with almost one hundred Tougaloo students to a church in Jackson where we were organizing a demonstration. While we were gathered, waiting for the affair to begin, things became just a little tense. (Demonstrators are always tense just before a demonstration in Jackson, but nobody ever fails to go through with it.) To make conversation, I asked one young man, an excellent student who came out of a poverty stricken rural area and who plans on going on to graduate school, "Just why are you here now?" He thought for a few minutes. Then he said, "When I was growing up, my parents, my school teachers, even our minister, told me, and told the other children, that if I wanted to get along in this world, not to have anything to do with white people, to stay 'in my place' where I belonged." The student thought a little more, and then went on: "It wasn't until I got to our college, and listened to what the teachers and the upperclassmen were saying, and got to know white people, that I really began to understand what 'equality' and 'integration' and 'democracy' really meant. And I lost my 'Uncle Tom' ideas in just about one week's time. And that's why I'm here."

And the other students agreed.

Then it was time for our demonstration to move out of the church, carrying the little American flags, and singing the freedom song "We Shall Overcome." When we all got outside, we saw several hundred police and state troopers and sheriff's deputies — carrying guns and clubs — and waiting for us a few hundred yards down the street. In only a few minutes' time, our demonstration was surrounded on all sides by the cops who clubbed many of us, and who tore up the American flags. Soon we were carried off in paddy wagons and garbage trucks to the large, wire-enclosed concentration camp that the Mayor of Jackson, Allen Thompson, had ordered built for the arrested demonstrators.

It was Nazism — pure and simple.

Within the next day and a half, we were all back on campus — out on bail bonds. I saw the student with whom I'd spoken just before the demonstration. He'd had a rough time of it — along with everyone else — but he was on his way to a class, carrying his books and not looking at all as though he'd been through what he had been through only a day and a half before.

"Would you do it again?" I asked him. "You bet," he told me. "We're going to win." And he did do it — again and again. And so did a great many others.

Now I want to say in conclusion that there hasn't been a UNCF school that hasn't contributed students, and some faculty, and very often administration people, to this crucial freedom struggle. One can go on and on reciting the names of Talladega, Clark, Fisk, Dillard, Shaw, and all of the others. There have been many individuals, many crucible-like incidents. And there has been progress — slow progress, like it always is in the South — but, like the Tougaloo student said, "We're going to win."

And believe me, the symbol of the UNCF — the burning lamp — is more than just an idle symbol; it's the spirit of American democracy and, in the largest sense of all, the spirit of humanity on the march.

Some day, when we've passed through this pain-filled and blood-dimmed era, when all of our people, everywhere in the world, have their full measure of education, full measure of human liberty, and a full measure of material well-being — then, maybe all of us can relax a little.

But we can't — in any way — relax now. If we are going to win, and believe me, we are, then we've got to work, and work mighty hard.

I thank you, ladies and gentlemen.