

MISSISSIPPI AND "THE ESTABLISHMENT"

JOANNE GRANT

ONE OF THE constantly recurring questions these days is what can the United States government do about Mississippi? Sometimes the question is more realistically put thus: what could the federal government do, if those who exercise federal power wanted to do something?

There are several areas in which the government has authority to act—economic, legal and political. In the economic sphere federal authorities could shut off the funds of federal programs. It could (in fact it is bound to do so under the 1964 Civil Rights Act) suspend aid to Mississippi schools which do not desegregate. There are so many ways in which the federal government spends money in Mississippi that it is difficult to get an accurate total. The best estimate is that federal aid to Mississippi amounts to \$1 billion annually. Mississippians pay about \$300 million in federal taxes. The aid covers various types of educational grants and agricultural services plus such items as highway building. In fiscal 1963 Mississippi received \$39 million in grants in aid to build highways on which it is not safe for the Negro population to travel.

Another item of federal aid, hard to measure, but significant, is in the form of agricultural allotments. One of the state's most powerful political figures, Senator James O. Eastland of Sunflower County, was allotted 1,725.3 acres in 1961 for cotton planting on which was produced 1,932 bales of cotton. Under the allotment plan, if Eastland planted no more than the acreage allotted he could have sold the entire crop to the federal government at the U.S. support price of about 32 cents a pound, amounting to over \$300,000. Planters usually try to get higher than the government-support price on the mar-

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ket before determining how much to dump on the U.S. Commodity Credit Corporation. In 1961 Eastland sold \$82,110 worth of cotton to the CCC. What such guarantees to individual plantation owners mean is that the federal government is subsidizing segregation. It is not merely looking the other way—it is *in fact financing the perpetuation of oppression*. Sunflower County Negroes charge that Eastland among other plantation owners obtains “slaves” to work on his plantation for subsistence; parolees from Parchman State Penitentiary. But whether or not this is a general practice, it is certain that the allotments are paid to employers who pay substandard, near-starvation wages to employees, tied to the land in a feudal-like serfdom. (For example, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer of Ruleville, Mississippi, reports that she was fired from a plantation, where she had worked for 18 years, the day she registered to vote. Her husband was promised that he could take their personal possessions with him when he left if he remained until the end of the harvest. He was not allowed to take the car on which they had been paying for ten years, however, as the son-in-law of the plantation owner, who repossessed the car, claimed that the Hamers still owed \$300 on it.)

The median income of the nonwhite family in Sunflower County is \$1,126 per year. Statewide median nonwhite rural farm family income is \$974 per year. Median white family rural farm income is \$2,610.

Other forms of federal economic assistance include the building and operation of military bases. There are 6 military installations in the state, and defense contracts amounted to \$156 million dollars in fiscal 1964.

Drew Pearson wrote January 30: “Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, who was asked two months ago to check on Army-Navy-Air Force purchases of textiles from Mississippi mills that practice discrimination, as of last week had not done so.”

In the field of law the federal government has taken some steps. It has filed and won a voter registration suit in one whole state. The Supreme Court has recently upheld the Justice Department’s right in the case (U.S. vs. Mississippi) which seeks to eliminate the “constitutional interpretation” test. (This suit may be rendered moot by the passage of the new voting bill.)

But civil rights groups have always urged that more voting suits be filed and that court action be taken on school desegregation, and public accommodations as well. In addition, there are criminal statutes of which the federal government does not avail itself. One of the most

flagrant of these oversights is the anti-bombing statute which makes it possible to bring federal prosecutions against bombers of churches, homes, and schools. At the time of the 1963 Birmingham bombing, when four young girls died in a church blast, the then Deputy Attorney General for civil rights, Burke Marshall, said the Justice Department had no power to act. The anti-bombing statute had been adopted in 1960. It is a federal crime to possess explosives on the presumption that they may have been transported across state lines. When 15 white men were arrested for one of the South's myriad bombings in McComb, Mississippi last fall, some felt their arrest under a state law was a breakthrough. They were found guilty but they received suspended sentences and a judicial reprimand.

The handicaps under which the federal government operates in the legal area have been made all too clear in the recent case of the men charged with conspiracy in connection with the murder of three civil rights workers last June. Yet, the important consideration, I think, is that the statute making it a crime to conspire to deprive anyone of his constitutional rights under color of law has been on the books since 1866 and has scarcely been used! Since World War II it has been used only a half dozen times.

politics, economics, education, segregation

The political area affects each of the other areas. Take one of the federal government's economic aids to Mississippi—the farm program. The many elements of the farm program are administered locally, but as the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights pointed out in its recent report of hearings in Mississippi, the programs are *directed* from (and paid for by) Washington.

The Commission found under the Farmers Home Administration, Negroes received smaller loans than whites and white farmers received capital improvement funds while Negroes got loans primarily for operating and living expenses. Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman himself pointed out that the Farmers Home Administration did not have a single Negro county committeeman before 1961. He said "there are some now," and he promised, as have others in this and previous administrations "there will be more."

The Civil Rights Commission said that allotments of \$11.6 million made by the Cooperative State Research in 1964—under the U.S. Department of Agriculture—went to white land-grant colleges in 11 Southern states, including Mississippi. *No allotments at all went to Negro land-grant colleges in those states.*

Why?

And why in 1965 does R. Sargent Shriver appoint State Senator J. P. Dean of Corinth, Mississippi to head the Mississippi anti-poverty program? Senator Dean said a year ago he would use federal urban renewal funds to relocate "82 Negro families who live within a block of our white high school, and solve a potentially dangerous situation." Senator Dean will spend the federal government's \$700,000 anti-poverty fund in Mississippi.

The reason for all this, that is often given, is that social custom of long years is so deeply ingrained that any change must be exceedingly gradual.

But the real reason is politics. Power.

Senator Eastland has run Mississippi from Washington for over 20 years. One source of his power is, of course, his personal economic standing in the state; another is the U.S. legislative system. Perhaps the best illustration of the "system" was the answer Carl Vinson of Georgia, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee in the 50's and 60's, gave when he turned down the post of Secretary of Defense. Said Vinson, "I'd rather run the Pentagon from up here."¹

Senator Eastland (or Big Jim Eastland, as he is affectionately and otherwise known) is chairman of the Committee on the Judiciary and of its subcommittees on Internal Security and Immigration and Naturalization. He is fourth ranking member of the Agriculture and Forestry Committee, and chairman of its subcommittee on Soil Conservation and a member of the subcommittee on Agricultural Research and General Legislation. The following are some of the subjects covered by the Judiciary Committee: judicial proceedings civil and (criminal); Constitutional amendments; Federal courts and judges; protection of trade and commerce against unlawful restraints and monopolies; civil liberties; immigration and naturalization; apportionments.

The junior Senator from Mississippi, John C. Stennis, is a member of the Appropriations Committee and of its subcommittees on Defense, Military Construction, Atomic Energy, TVA and Agriculture. Stennis is the ranking Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, a member of its subcommittee on Central Intelligence and chairman of its subcommittees on Officer Grade Limitations, and on Preparedness, one of the most powerful of Senate subcommittees.

1. Neil MacNeil, *Forge of Democracy, The House of Representatives*, David McKay, New York, 1963. p. 170.

Together the two "gentlemen from Mississippi" have important positions on three of the five major committees of the Senate.² They are part of what Senator Joseph Clark (D.-Pa.) described in detail in Senate speeches Feb. 19-25, 1963, as the Senate Establishment—the bipartisan, conservative and Southern-dominated coalition which runs the legislative branch of the federal government.³

the misuse of seniority

The control is unofficial, for major decisions of Congress are taken in the councils of the majority party and the bipartisan leadership meetings and the Congress is run by *unwritten* rules. One of these rules—thought by many to be the foundation stone of the Establishment, is the seniority rule by which a member moves up the ladder of a committee until he eventually gets the chairmanship. While this rule has added to Southern power, Clark pointed out in his speech: "When the Democratic steering committee [the Democratic Committee on Committees appointed by the Majority Leader Mike Mansfield] met, it became obvious that in filling committee membership vacancies, the establishment would ignore seniority when to ignore it would strengthen the establishment's control, but would follow it when to do so would have the same result."⁴ Clark listed committee appointments for the 88th Congress, then said that it seemed to him a pattern emerged: "Namely, that seniority is disregarded in a significant number of cases of Senators who vote to restrict the filibuster and to apply a more rigid cloture rule, and that such Senators are passed over, in favor of Senators who vote to maintain the filibuster and to oppose more stringent cloture."⁵

2. Mississippi Democratic members of the House of Representatives have the following assignments: Thomas Abernathy, Agriculture and number two on District of Columbia; William Colmer, number two on both Ways and Means and Rules; Jamie Whitten, Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee; John Bell Williams, number two on Interstate and Foreign Commerce and number five on District of Columbia.

3. Of 20 standing committees in the House, 14 are chaired by Southerners. A look at the top six members of the eight major House Committees shows the following number from the South: Appropriations, 4; Armed Services, 4; Banking and Currency, 2; Education and Labor, 1; Foreign Affairs, 2; Judiciary, 2; Rules, 4; Ways and Means, 4. On the House Un-American Activities Committee the ratio is 6 out of 9 members from the South. On the District of Columbia Committee it is 13 of 25.

4. *The Senate Establishment*, by Sen. Joseph S. Clark (Dem., Penna.). Hill and Wang Publishers (N. Y., 1963), p. 40.

5. Clark, *ibid.*, p. 65.

In addition Senator Clark charged that: "It is only with the aid of the able and beloved minority leader, the champion of the Republican establishment that our friends in the Democratic establishment have been able to retain that control of key committees which is essential to the slowing down, if not the defeat, of major progressive proposals of the President of the United States."⁶

Much of the business of the Congress is dealt with by a small group—the Congressional leadership—which meets weekly with the President. This group now is comprised of: President Johnson from Texas, Senate Majority Leader Mansfield from Montana, Speaker of the House John McCormack of Massachusetts, Senate Whip Russell Long of Louisiana, Senate Secretary of the Democratic Conference (number 3 man in the Senate) George Smathers of Florida, House Majority Leader Carl Albert of Oklahoma and House Whip Hale Boggs of Louisiana. Four out of six from the South. For whatever legislation he wants these are the men the President must maneuver. If he wants "progressive" legislation he must fight, he must buck the system and buck it vigorously. Indications thus far are that he is not willing to do this. The Senate adopted a resolution this year to set up a committee to study the organization of Congress.⁷ Such a committee had been proposed by Senator Clark several times. This year he proposed an amendment to give the committee power to make recommendations for changes in rules and procedures. The amendment was defeated by 29 to 58. President Johnson took no position on the amendment, thus insuring its defeat.

Johnson and the establishment

Other tests of Johnson's willingness to make a fight to wrest control from the bipartisan conservative coalition are coming up. One challenge is the vacancy on the bench of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. Traditionally the vacancy belongs to Mississippi. Senators Eastland and Stennis have agreed on their man and Eastland chairs the committee which confirms the appointment. While President Johnson owes them nothing since, with their aid Mississippi went for Goldwater, there is no reason to believe that Eastland will be forced to give up his traditional practice of telling the White House whom to appoint as judges.

6. Clark, *ibid.*

7. House liberals, the Democratic Study Group, proposed a Joint Committee, but the proposal was not acted on.

There is little reason to think either that Johnson will break with his old friend Sen. Richard Russell of Georgia despite his disappearance during the campaign which cost Johnson Russell's home state. Whether the strongest influence is friendship or the fact that Russell is widely acknowledged as the most powerful man in the Senate is hard to know. Russell is both chairman of the Armed Services Committee and the number two man on the Appropriations Committee and he is chairman of the subcommittee on Defense Appropriations.

It would not be easy to buck such power, but Johnson is known as a fighter and he would certainly have hard-working allies in both houses should he decide to take the Establishment on. But Johnson was very much a part of that Establishment and it seems unlikely that he would become the standard-bearer of the Liberals and try to break that which put him where he is.

The Civil Rights Movement has found that study of the system, tracing the entangled web of interrelationships among the members of the Establishment (finding out who owns whom) is useful in revealing pressure points to force the manipulators to manipulate each or take a step or two they do not wish to take. But for the most part the Movement has found in Mississippi, at least at this stage, that it operates most effectively outside and irrespective of the "system." The Movement's most outstanding achievement perhaps was the building of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party—a structure which parallels the system's political vehicle in its formal, orderly, open operation, but which refused to adopt the wheeling-dealing informal or "traditional" behind-the-scenes methods of the Establishment. The MFDP found its pressure points and at the National Democratic Convention in Atlantic City last summer forced the attention of the nation, from President Johnson on down, on the absurdity of the pretense of the Democratic Party's professions of "liberalism."

While the conservative white Southerner still runs the country, the Mississippi Negro has succeeded in keeping us, for a year at least, from ignoring the fact, and perhaps he might even force us to change it.