

MISSISSIPPI—STATE OF THE UNION

DURING THE PAST several years in which the struggle for human rights in our country has reached a crescendo level, the state of Mississippi has periodically been a focal point of national interest. The murder of young Emmett Till, the lynching of Charles Mack Parker in the "moderate" Gulf section of Mississippi, the "freedom rides" to Jackson, the events at Oxford, Mississippi, and the triple lynching of the martyred Civil Rights workers, Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman, have, figuratively, imprinted Mississippi on the national conscience. In response to the national concern arising from such events, most writings about Mississippi have been in the nature of reporting, with emotional appeal and shock-value being the chief characteristics of such writing.

FREEDOMWAYS is publishing this special issue on Mississippi to fill a need both for the Freedom Movement and the country. The need is for an in-depth analysis of Mississippi; of the political, economic and cultural factors which have historically served to institutionalize racism in this state. The purpose of such an analysis is perhaps best expressed in the theme that we have chosen: "Opening Up the Closed Society"; the purpose being to provide new insights rather than merely repeating well-known facts about Mississippi.

The shock and embarrassment which events in Mississippi have sometimes caused the nation has also led to the popular notion that Mississippi is some kind of oddity, a freak in the American scheme-of-things. How many Civil Rights demonstrations have seen signs proclaiming—"bring Mississippi back into the Union." This is a well-intentioned but misleading slogan. The truth of the matter (and a rather difficult truth for some) is that Mississippi is a full-fledged 100% member of the Union, in more than just a "legal" sense.

Mississippi became a State of the Union in 1817 and geographically had been part of the national territory of the United States since the days of Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Originally, Mississippi

was the western-most boundary of Georgia and as the Federal Government systematically "moved" the Indian population from Georgia across the Mississippi river, the slave-plantation system spread westward.

Archeological expeditions in the area of Belzoni, (where Rev. George Lee was assassinated a few years ago for refusing to remove his name from the voter registration list) have uncovered evidence that there once existed a flourishing agricultural civilization among the American Indian tribes in the Mississippi Delta, more than five hundred years before Columbus discovered the New World on behalf of "Western Christian civilization."

The rich, alluvial soil of the Mississippi Delta is one of the most fertile areas of the entire world stretching 150 miles long from Memphis to Vicksburg and 70 miles wide. This was the natural base upon which Mississippi developed a Slave Society, a planter "aristocracy" and the largest-unit plantations in the entire south. This combination, stimulated by a growing market for cotton, in both Europe and America after the Napoleonic Wars, was responsible for Mississippi's rapid development before the Civil War as the leading cotton producing state in the country.

Wealth was easy to acquire for those few whose cotton-growing operations were big enough to meet the market demand. Consequently new technology, new inventions in cotton production and marketing were constantly sought as profitable and by the time of the Civil War, Mississippi led the south in manufacturing cotton gins.

In addition to such technical advances as the application of steam power to cotton gins, another major innovation in cotton culture, during the period before the Civil War, was the introduction into Mississippi of the "Petit Gulf" variety of cotton. This proved to be sturdier and of better quality than the Sea Island variety which had been widely grown up to that time. The early planter "aristocracy" centered in Natchez where, ironically enough, an Afro-American slave mechanic, named Barclay, built the first cotton gin in Mississippi from a sketch drawn by his master, who had seen a cotton gin during a trip to Georgia.

The Planter's Bank of Natchez was a branch of the Biddle National bank in Philadelphia, Penn., and these Natchez planters opposed President Andrew Jackson in the great national controversy over the bank charter in the 1830's. Jackson himself owned a plantation in the Delta as did President James K. Polk, under whose administration the war against the Mexican people was fought.

The Mississippi planters, among the newest of the agricultural breed of businessmen concentrated on making-that-dollar rather than on becoming some kind of a cultured "aristocracy" as in the case of the planters of Virginia and South Carolina. In Mississippi, doctors and lawyers were busy trying to become planters. Most authorities on the subject agree that this quest for the "American Dream"—Mississippi style—seriously retarded the development of a middle-class intelligentsia who normally would provide the "moderate" leadership in times of crisis.

The Mississippi planters bought their slaves through commercial agents in the slave markets in New Orleans and Memphis and these agents were paid their commission out of the transactions. The slave market in Memphis, which supplied Mississippi, was the commercial outlet for the big estates in Kentucky where black slaves were bred for sale along with the breeding of "fine race-horses." This Kentucky operation, in turn, was patterned after the great estates of Narragansett, Rhode Island, owned by some of the "best families" of New England. All of which is to say that Mississippi has been a part of the *mainstream of American life* for a very long time.

The Civil War's military defeat of the Confederacy (of which Jefferson Davis, of Mississippi, was President) did not alter that fact. Rather, the net result of the defeat was that the South was more firmly in the economic grip of Northern financiers who, in turn, engineered the assassination and overthrow of Reconstruction and the establishment of the state system of segregation. In Mississippi, the economic royalists representing mainly railroad and lumber money in New York and Chicago divided the spoils with the Delta planters whose power was restored by President Andrew Johnson's Executive Order putting the plantations back into their hands. Congress likewise obliged this new coalition of economic power, by repealing the Southern Homestead Act and opening up rich timber lands in Mississippi and elsewhere, which was promptly bought up by the thousands of acres by land speculators in New York and Michigan and by the Illinois Central Railroad.

The history of Mississippi since the overthrow of Reconstruction, needs no special elaboration here, for it is part of the history of the country. "The Closed Society" whose existence is slowly becoming apparent to all, today has its roots in the Slave Society which was the cornerstone institution in 19th Century American economic history. The brief legacy of Reconstruction democracy was buried and in its place arose a cult of ruthless political practitioners; devotees

of the "white supremacy" creed in Mississippi such as Vardaman, Bilbo, Rankin, Eastland, Stennis, Barnett and the present Governor, Paul Johnson.

Today, such politicians in America rely heavily upon the national psychosis of anti-Communism, which is almost a national illness in our country. This psychosis provides them with a convenient rationale for attacking the Freedom Movement with the savagery of a totalitarian state. So the Mississippi racists pretend to see "Communist infiltration" in every picket line, voter registration march, sit-in or other forms of protest made by the Negro community against injustices. Here again, though, the Mississippians are not the *creators* of this mentality, they are merely the cultivators of it. The myth is molded for them in high echelons in Washington, D. C. and in other parts of the country, in the drawing rooms of the Power Elite (some of whom, for tactical reasons, prefer to call themselves "white liberals").

The real human tragedy in the Mississippi situation, as elsewhere in the south, is not the embattled Negro people, but the white workers, small farmers, professionals and small businessmen who are so trapped by the institutions of "The Closed Society" and the mentality that these institutions have fostered, that they are still unable to openly identify with the main currents of human progress so vigorous in the world today.

Mississippi, therefore represents, in aggravated form, all of the major economic, political and moral contradictions present in American society as a whole, but slightly hidden beneath the surface of "Affluence." And, as a kind of footnote to history, the descendants of a proud Indian civilization in Mississippi are now "safely" on a Reservation in Neshoba county (where the triple-lynching of the Civil Rights workers took place last summer).

In 1860, the Mississippi section of the Slave Society produced 1,200,000 bales of cotton (Du Bois: "*Black Reconstruction*") with slaves, hand-hoes and overseers. In 1960, the Mississippi section of the Closed Society produced 2,000,000 bales with share-croppers, machines and farm managers. This is obviously a statistical portrait of the growth of "American efficiency" in cotton production. It may also be a definition and a commentary on how generations of human lives have been used up.

In its local politics, the white majority in Mississippi are loyal defenders of the slavery-time and segregationist traditions of the Democratic Party in the south, while, at the same time, finding it

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convenient to cast their votes in overwhelming numbers for the Republican Party's Presidential candidate in the last two national elections.

In summary then, Mississippi in this year 1965, is "different" only in the respect that it is still clinging to the Agreement, made by the oligarchy of the "New South," with the rest of the country in 1876. As we all know, the essence of that Agreement is summed up in the creed "keep 'the nigger' in his place." The embarrassment which Mississippi causes to the nation arises out of the fact that the nation has finally arrived at a "national consensus" (not to yield any substantial power to the black community) but to at least enlarge the "place," to include public accommodations, etc. A further contradiction is that Mississippi, as a leader and one of the pace-setters of the technological revolution in American agriculture today, is consequently a leader in the *economic displacement* of the black population.

Racism as an all-prevailing psychology, enforced by both custom and Government, and serving an institutionalized system of economic and political deprivation of the black community—such are the main ingredients of The Mississippi Problem. This is one of the prime examples of the totalitarian pattern of institutional development as shaped by specific American conditions, which has guaranteed the wealth and power of several generations of the American Establishment.

The long-overdue reconstruction of the Closed Society is the unfinished business of all civilized Americans today—100 years after Appomatox.