

THE POLITICS OF NECESSITY AND SURVIVAL IN MISSISSIPPI

LAWRENCE GUYOT AND MIKE THELWELL

RECENTLY MUCH national attention has been focused on the State of Mississippi. Voluminous commentaries have appeared on the Summer Project of 1964, the murder of Cheyney, Schwerner and Goodman, the Challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegation to the Atlantic City National Democratic Convention in August of 1964, and on the 1965 Congressional Challenge to the seating of the five "representatives" from Mississippi also conducted by the MFDP.

It is perhaps indicative of the conditions of the American Press and politics at this time, and of the condition of the society that tolerates both, that so few of these commentaries speak directly and clearly to the real issues and conditions that surround the MFDP and dictate our actions. It has been easier, and in some cases more expedient to attempt to dismiss the MFDP as either an incongruous coalition of naive idealists and unlettered sharecroppers without serious political intent or possibility—a kind of political oddity embodying simply a moral protest—or else hint ominously at sinister, alien and, of course, unidentified influences, which find expression in an intransigent and unreasonable "militance." It is difficult to assess which of these two well-touted fictions is more prevalent, or the more misleading, but it is clear that the persons advancing them

Lawrence Guyot is Chairman of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Mike Thelwell is one of the founders of MFDP, and was director of its Washington office during the "challenge." This is the first of a two-part article. The second installment, entitled "Toward Independent Political Power," will appear in the summer issue, Vol. 6, No. 3.

cannot all be the victims of simple ignorance. They range through a curious and wholly unprecedented assortment including: old line civil rights leaders, the Mississippi White Democratic politicians, LBJ "liberals," labor movement leaders, and hack journalists allegedly "close" to the Administration.

It is not particularly useful to speculate, as intriguing as that may be, on precisely what it is in the prospect of Mississippi's Negroes organizing themselves politically to end almost a century of systematic exploitation and suppression, that so confuses and threatens so many within the Establishment. Clearly it is time that the MFDP gives some kind of comprehensive public expression of its necessities and goals so as to relieve these overly willing commentators of that obligation.

There is nothing inherently unique in the idea and operation of the MFDP. We are a political organization of people in Mississippi. Our purpose is gaining and utilizing the greatest possible measure of political power and influence in the interest of our constituency, *as that constituency expresses its interests*. There is no radically dramatic mystique or visionary political insight attendant on the MFDP's functioning—unless one considers as new political insights the idea that Mississippi's Negroes can and must gain political representation in proportion to their numbers, that the entire community must be encouraged to participate in the decisions governing their lives and that vote must be used as an instrument of social change.

We are the political organization of a community, which, if it is quite literally to survive, must win for itself those political rights which white Americans take for granted. As we will show, the decisions taken, the policies and programs pursued, and general strategy of the MFDP, to the extent they are unique, derive not from a tendency toward abstract political philosophy, but from a practical response to the primitive conditions of political life in Mississippi, and the experiences that unless we in Mississippi save ourselves politically, there is no source of salvation in the country to which we can look.

The movement for Negro rights in Mississippi indicates very bluntly that we cannot look to the Office of the Presidency, the Democratic or Republican Parties as presently constituted, the redemptive force of love, public moral outrage, the northern liberal establishment, nor even to the Congress with its "Great Society" legislation. We are not saying that these institutions and groups are necessarily hostile or can be of no practical assistance to the Mississippi Negro in his struggle for survival and political freedom. This is not so. But it is

true that the political and legal rights of the Negroes of Mississippi, even when guaranteed by the Constitution and enforced by civilized morality, will continue to be subject to the self-interests of these institutions unless reinforced by political power. This can be clearly illustrated by examining the historical record of Mississippi's illegal actions against its Negro population, and the national record of tolerance and indifference to these policies. And it is a fact, (despite the much-vaunted "progress" in the area of civil rights), there has been no effective change, on any significant political or economic level, in the policy of tolerance on the part of those who hold national power, towards the systematized degradation of the black population in Mississippi by the State.

the old Mississippi plan

To understand present realities in Mississippi, it is necessary to grasp clearly certain historical facts because nowhere are the effects of history so present and so real, as in Mississippi today. It must be understood that during the past 150 years, *the overwhelming political concern of the white power structure of Mississippi has been, and is, affecting and perpetuating the subjugation of the black population.* Historically the policy of the State towards the Negro community has been one of war, and this warfare has been conducted with the placid acceptance of the rest of the nation. This must be stressed, because despite the fact that constitutionally speaking there has been no legal government in Mississippi for 90 years, the State of Mississippi has enjoyed full political rights and complete acceptance from the nation. Conditions in Mississippi today—the grinding poverty, lack of education, absence of legal rights—which affect its Negroes are not accidental or the results of private prejudices, or blind emotional racism on the part of some of its citizens, as is widely projected by the American press, but are the result of deliberate and systematic policies of the State's government, and must be understood in that light.

Today, the smallest political sub-division in the State is known as a beat. This terminology comes from the 1840's and 50's when Mississippi was one of the wealthiest states in the Union, with a large proportion of that wealth deriving from the value of its slave population. This "wealth," however, constituted more of a threat to the peace of mind of its owners than more traditional forms of capital. It represented the danger—which haunted and still haunts the Southern mentality—of a violent uprising. In order to secure this "wealth,"

it became necessary for the owners to organize the State as though it were an occupied territory. Every evening at sundown, in every town and city in Mississippi a military exercise could be observed. A mounted militia, composed usually of every able-bodied white male, would parade to the rolling of drums, after which it would disperse to assigned "beats," which were patrolled during the night to prevent the movement of slaves between plantations, an activity necessary to the planning of any organized uprising. Negroes without passes were, as a matter of course, denied the streets between the hours of six p.m. to six a.m. (Curfews which apply only to Negroes are still a mainstay of Mississippi police activity). These "beats" were divisions according to population and were utilized in setting up political precincts. What is important, however, is the fact that this military garrison psychology is still present in the State's attitude towards the Negro community.

After the Civil War, the Negro population, rather than diminishing, increased substantially as a result of the creation within the State of a number of centers for the reuniting of Negro families scattered by slavery and the war. Many of the freedmen who were drawn to these centers remained in the State and became registered voters under the Reconstruction constitution of 1869, creating by 1890 a Negro voting majority. The full political effect of this majority was never realized, however, because of terroristic activity and election fraud on the part of the whites. After the elections of 1873 in which large gains were made in the number of Negro elected officials, Mississippi's whites were determined that the Congressional elections of 1875 were to be white dominated.* The *Yazoo City Banner* (July 31, 1875) declared editorially that "Mississippi is a white man's country, and by the eternal God, we'll run it." Another newspaper, the *Handsboro Democrat* (April 10, 1875) called for "A white man's government, by white men, for the benefit of white men." This hysterical fear of an incipient Negro take-over is still reflected in the public statements of Mississippi's white politicians. It is at this point, that Mississippi's white minority evolved the first of many "Mississippi Plans" not so much by the agency of the eternal God, as by rewriting the constitution in 1890, to disenfranchise the Negro electorate.

This first plan was many-faceted, and was designed to promote a

*For an elaboration see documentary section in special Mississippi issue of *FREEDOMWAYS* (Spring 1965)—The Editors.

number of purposes which have been fairly consistent until the 1950's, and which need to be understood.

The simple expedient of driving the Negro majority from the State was not possible, since Negro labor was necessary to the economy. Negroes had to be kept in the State, but they could not be permitted participation in politics since that endangered the new "Mississippi Way of Life," and would eventually remove the Negro from his condition of serfdom. Education for the Negro was also unthinkable, since educated people do not pick cotton, do the washing, or sweep the floors.

Consequently, any policy adopted by the State had to accomplish a number of tasks: it had to disfranchise the Negro, keep him uneducated, economically dependent, and psychologically manageable, and, at the same time, *prevent him from leaving*. By a combination of organized terror and violence, reinforced by the new constitution of 1890, and a succession of discriminatory voting laws, the first purpose was accomplished, the following figures reflect how well. In 1890, when the constitution was rewritten there were 71,000 more registered Negroes than white voters, and a total Negro majority of population. By 1964, after some 75 years of the "Plan" the Negro majority had declined to 45 per cent of the total population, and only 5 per cent of the 450,000 voting age Negroes were registered voters.

The agent of this disfranchisement was, of course, the Democratic Party, which then enjoyed 75 years of unbroken control of the State as the political expression of "white supremacy." It also gained increasing national power and influence through the Congressional seniority system, and the longevity of the Congressmen it sent to Washington.

Once the political goal of Negro disfranchisement was achieved, the other items of policy followed easily.

To limit Negro education the simple expedient of building few or no schools for Negroes was followed. It is a fact that there are counties in Mississippi where the first high schools for Negroes were established in 1954, after the Supreme Court decision calling for desegregation in education (65 per cent of all schools in Mississippi have been built since World War II, and of those schools 75 per cent are Negro).

The economic reorganization of the State centered around the introduction of sharecropping, and the re-establishment of the plantation under a system of labor only slightly more sophisticated than outright slavery. One advantage of this new credit work system was that in the event a Negro died or was killed, the plantation owner was not

out-of-pocket to the extent of a slave's value.

Theoretically, Negroes could leave plantations, and some did. As a practical matter, however, many remained because of immobility, coercion or the rather prevalent ploy where the owner informed the worker at the end of the year that he had not earned enough to cover the expenses of his family's keep, and was thus obligated to work another year, thus getting deeper in "debt." Workers who left despite this warning were frequently jailed for evasion of debt and "paroled," for the duration of excessive sentences, to the very same plantation. This plantation system exists today with labor conditions virtually unchanged, which violate every federal child labor, and condition-of-labor, law which has been passed. The national responsibility here is very clear, since it is the Federal Government, through its cotton subsidy laws, that subsidizes these plantations.

The police machinery of the State continues to operate precisely as though its primary function is the protection of the white society from Negro uprising. The State Highway Safety Patrol is, like the slavery-time militia a para-military organization. However, the concept of the militia survives most obviously in the ever-present "posses" of deputized and armed whites which are selected at random to be utilized against Civil Rights activities.

Despite the conditions just described, the formal ending of slavery did result in the emergence of a small Negro middle class of businessmen, independent farmers, and a number of professional persons who, for some reason, did not escape to the North with their education. The exploitative economic conditions, and repressive social and political system forced a steady trickle of Negroes northward, and the absence of adequate medical facilities and the resultant high infant mortality rate served to erode the Negro majority of 1890, to the present figure of 45 per cent.

This, very briefly, is the old "Mississippi Plan," representing the full legal, economic and military resources of a State being consciously directed towards the systematic oppression of a segment of that State's population.

the new Mississippi plan: gradual depopulation

The posture of the Government of Mississippi towards the Negro population did not change significantly from 1890 up to the 1950's. At this time, the rumblings caused by the Supreme Court school decision, and the spreading wave of Negro demands for justice caused

the State to rethink their plan. One extremely significant change had taken place since the end of the Second World War. Whereas, in the past, it had been necessary, even to the extent of violence and fraud, to keep Negroes in the State for economic reasons, technological changes in the cotton fields were beginning to make large concentrations of Negroes unnecessary.

In the early sixties, the first modern voter registration drives, which is to say, the first signs of sustained political activity in the Negro community, were begun. At that time, there was an attitude prevalent in the older Civil Rights groups, notably the NAACP, that Mississippi had to be changed from outside pressure. Inherent in this attitude was the belief that it was not possible for Negroes in Mississippi to organize for political action without a disproportionate cost in human life. What was established, under federal conditions, by that first small group of SNCC* organizers, and the local Negroes, is that it was possible to organize politically and to survive. And, as far-fetched as this may sound today, the right to organize politically in Mississippi was really in the balance during those violent months in 1962. That the MFDP exists today is due to the determined heroism of the small group who fought and won that first battle.

It is at this point where even the most hide-bound racist could recognize that the Movement in Mississippi was not to be driven out by violence and economic reprisal, that the change in the State's policies began to be evident. This change focused on the fact that there were just too many potential voters in the Negro community, and that Mississippi had the highest percentage of Negroes of any State in the Union. (Later, during the debate over the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, the Dixiecrats were to express this fear of the large Negro population, by their advocacy of a program of "equalizing the proportional Negro population of all states," in which they challenged the nation to undertake a program of relocating the Negro population so that each state would have the same proportion of Negroes.)

In Mississippi the State began a program which can best be characterized as one of gradual genocide, the goal of which was to effect the dispersal or extinction of the Negro population.

The White Citizens Councils were organized, and in Mississippi received financial support for their programs from the State through the Sovereignty Commission. Richard Morphew, Public Relations Director of the Councils, admitted to receiving \$90,000 from the State.

* Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

In communities touched by the movement the Citizens Councils launched counter programs designed "to make it impossible for Negroes involved in agitation" to get work, credit, in short to remain in the community.

This was particularly true in the Second Congressional (Delta) District, where the densest concentrations of Negro population is to be found. It is in this area where the huge plantations are located, and where the large reservoir of Negro labor had to be maintained. In this area the Negro population is predominantly agricultural laborers, who live either on plantations, sharecrop a small "section," or else are herded together into tar-paper and clap-board shanty towns from which they are fetched in trucks and busses to their work on the plantations. To a person going through one of these towns, the dominant impression is of large numbers of people who are *waiting*. That is precisely their condition, they have been *kept* available, in a kind of perpetual waiting for the times when their labor would be needed on the plantations. So long as they were needed, they were given credit, welfare, or some form of subsistence during the winter months. Even in the best of seasons, families that worked a full season in the fields—an increasingly rare occurrence—would be forced as a matter of course to go on welfare during the winter. It was in this manner that their economic dependence was maintained, as a matter of political and economic policy.

However, with Negroes clamoring for the ballot, and the mechanization of the cotton fields rendering Negro labor more and more unnecessary an entirely new situation came into being in Mississippi.

These changed conditions precipitated a kind of grim race between the Negro community and the State. It has been our necessity to militate for the franchise before the new conditions forced so many Negroes out as to render the franchise meaningless in the depleted community. The State's policy was to delay and obstruct Negro voting until the community had been thinned out. There have been specific acts that the State has taken against the Negroes which are illustrative of this warfare.

Welfare payments to entire communities, and particularly persons who have attempted to register, have been severely cut back. In these same communities the Welfare Agency has distributed leaflets extolling the generosity of welfare and wage rates in northern cities like Chicago.

The State has steadfastly maintained that it is unable to afford the cost of distributing free federal surplus food to needy Delta com-

munities. This despite the fact that it can afford to subsidize Citizens Council propaganda broadcasts, appropriated \$50,000 to lobby against the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, has undertaken the cost of the legal defense of any County Clerk indicted under the 1957, '64 or '65 Civil Rights Bills for failing to register Negroes, and which could in 1964 afford to double the manpower of the Highway Safety Patrol, and purchase thousands of dollars worth of military weaponry to use against the Summer Project.

In 1961, the Congressman from the Delta, Jamie H. Whitten, in his capacity as Chairman of the House Sub-committee on Appropriation of the Agriculture Committee, killed a measure that would have provided for the training of 3,000 tractor drivers in Mississippi. Two-thirds of the applicants for this program were Negro.

These actions by the State represent essentially a changing of the rules, an alteration of the economic arrangement in which winter credit and subsistence to agricultural workers was central. Viciously effective, it leaves thousands of Negroes with the alternatives of starving or leaving. It poses a serious crisis to the Negro community, especially since those affected have been deprived of all opportunity to develop skills which would enable them to adjust to the requirements of an industrial society.

As 1966 opens, the economic interests in Mississippi have moved against the Delta population with a new ferocity. What appears to be the beginning of an organized wave of evictions has begun and some 250 families—about 2200 human beings—have already moved or have been informed that there will be no work for them this spring. It has been estimated that between 10,000 and 12,000 persons will lose their homes and livelihood this current season. These families are not eligible for social security, unemployment compensation or any state or federal welfare program. The plantation owners are not required to give prior notice or compensation to those displaced. On one plantation in Bolivar County the owner gave notice to nearly 100 workers by giving them \$10 each and advising them to go to Florida. Many of the evictees are active in the MFDP and the Civil Rights Movement, but the evictions represent the bulk dismissal of unskilled workers on the large plantations. Only skilled workers—tractor drivers, cultivator and cotton picking machine operators are being retained. This situation is aggravated by the actions of the Mississippi Economic Council, an association of planters and business men which has been campaigning for the rapid mechanization of cotton production as a means of spurring the Negro exodus, and by the fact that this year,

the Federal acreage allotments for cotton production have been cut by 35 per cent.

The economic squeeze is undoubtedly the most effective and cruel of the State's weapons, but the full force of the "embattled minority" neurosis, that guides the actions of white rulers of Mississippi, was most fully reflected by the legislation introduced, and in many cases passed in the legislative session in the Spring of 1964.

When SNCC announced the plans for the Summer Project of 1964 a special session of the State Legislature was called and the legislative record shows clearly that Mississippi's attitudes towards the black population has remained remarkably free of change since the 1840's. Introduced and passed were: a bill outlawing economic boycotts; two bills outlawing the picketing of public buildings (courthouses are the scene of registration attempts). Both bills were almost identical but the second was to be used in the event the first was declared unconstitutional by the federal courts. A series of police oriented bills were introduced; these provided for extra deputies, for security and patrol personnel for public institutions, for placing the Safety Patrol at the disposal of the Governor and doubling its manpower, providing for a curfew which could be enforced at the discretion of local police authorities, providing for the sharing of municipal police forces during civil disturbances, providing for juveniles arrested for Civil Rights activities to be treated as adults, and finally a bill to prohibit the summer volunteers from entering the State.

On the question of education, bills were passed to prohibit the establishment of freedom schools and community centers and to revoke the charter of the integrated Tougaloo College. The pattern of the "Old Plan" of control by military force and restriction of educational opportunities can be clearly recognized in these legislative proposals.

Two pieces of legislation introduced in this session deserve special comment as they are symptomatic of a species of desperate hysteria which is completely unpredictable and therefore dangerous.

The first provided for the sterilization of persons convicted of a third felony. This was introduced by Rep. Fred Jones of Sunflower County in which there is a Negro majority. Jones was then a member of the Executive Committee of the Citizens' Council. While not specifically mentioning Negroes, the bill contained a clause placing the ordering of sterilization at the discretion of the all-white trustees of Parchman Penitentiary and since Negroes are more subject to criminal conviction in Mississippi courts, the intent of the proposal was clear.

A similar bill was introduced and *passed*, though with amendments. This bill provided for the sterilization of parents of the second illegitimate child, with the alternative of a prison sentence of from three to five years. In introducing this, Rep. Meeks of Webster County clearly indicated that it was intended towards the Black population. After passing the House the bill went to the Senate where it passed with amendments deleting sterilization and making the birth of the second illegitimate child a misdemeanor rather than a felony and lessening the sentence. When it came back to the House for ratification, the proponents of sterilization argued for its inclusion, Rep. Ben Owen of Columbus saying, as reported by the *Delta Democratic Times* of May 21st, "This is the only way I know of to stop this rising black tide that threatens to engulf us." The bill finally passed as amended by the Senate.

We have been at pains to delineate this background of social, economic and political attitudes, actions and conditions in some detail. It is only from this perspective—not one of individual and irrational acts of racism, but one of rational, organized, and programmatic oppression on the part of the power machinery of the State, that the plight of Mississippi's Black population, and the MFDP response to it can be understood.

the political movement in Mississippi

In the light of the conditions we have outlined, the Movement in Mississippi recognized the need for effective and speedy political changes in the State before most of the Negro population had to face the choice of starvation or migration. The answer to the prevalent northern question, "Why stay?" is simply, where is there for an agricultural Negro to go?

It was evident that the resources of education, training, medical facilities, housing, food and employment that the community needed could only come from massive government programs which the State was not prepared to participate in. The federal government, while possessing these resources, was not inclined to initiate any such program in Mississippi for a number of reasons, foremost among which is its traditional and scrupulous respect for the right of the State government to conduct the affairs of its concentration camp as it sees fit. There is hardly one federal program, including the Poverty program, which does not require the approval of the State Governor. The obvious answer is to change the composition and thus policies of the State government.

However, in 1963, this kind of thinking was the most rarified and remote kind of theory. What kind of effective political participation, and what kind of organization was possible for a people whom the entire apparatus of government operated to exclude and disperse. The concept of parallel elections or "freedom ballot" provided a partial solution. Its operation was simple. While most Negroes could not vote, a Negro could stand for election, and the Negro community could unofficially cast their votes in a parallel election.

The strategic advantages of this device were many. The entire community could be involved in these campaigns and a people who had been without political exposure for three generations could in this manner be introduced to the mechanics, at least, of political action. At the time that these campaigns created a tradition of political involvement in which indigenous leadership could develop, the vote itself would be an effective refutation of the curious southern contention that people who were daily risking their lives and livelihoods to attempt to register were really not interested in voting. But, most important the "Freedom Vote" was a means of taking politics to the people, *where they were*. For example, when in 1963, Dr. Aaron Henry and Rev. Ed King ran as Freedom candidates in the gubernatorial elections, the people in churches, led by the choir, lined up and marched singing past the ballot boxes to cast their votes. Six thousand ballots were mailed out to more violent areas, to be returned by mail, and organizers travelled around the rural areas, in "vote-mobiles" to encourage participation. Over 80,000 votes were cast in the Negro community or Dr. Henry for Governor and Rev. King as his Lieutenant Governor.

Even from this first freedom election, it must be noted, the underlying concept of challenging the illegal state structure, outside that structure, was present. Our intention was to file a suit calling for the voiding of election results on the basis of the voting section of the 1957 Civil Rights Bill and a Reconstruction Period statute, providing for the challenging of state elections for reason of racial discrimination. Although this particular challenge never materialized, the challenge *concept* persisted. This was based on a need to demonstrate some kind of political effectiveness, which could not be accomplished inside a State where you could not vote, and on the fact that the government of Mississippi, and all elections it conducted were, and had been since 1890, in clear and indefensible violation of the Constitution.

In retrospect, this represented a confidence in the ultimate morality

in national political institutions and practices—"They *really* couldn't know and once we bring the facts about Mississippi to national attention justice must surely be swift and irrevocable,"—which was a simplistic faith somewhat akin to that of the Russian peasants under the Czars. Caught in the direst kind of oppression and deprivation the peasants would moan, "If the Czar only knew how we suffer. He is good and would give us justice. If he only knew." The fact was that he knew only too well.

Although the "challenge" to the gubernatorial elections of '63 never materialized, perhaps the most significant practical consequence of the King-Henry campaign was the state-wide nature of the campaign. It took the Movement, for the first time, beyond activities affecting a single town, county, municipality or electoral district, and placed us in the area of state-wide organization. This consideration is now a basic tenet of MFDP organization and operation, that the entire Negro community, all 45 per cent of the vote it represents, must be united in an independent, radically democratic organization so as to be able to act politically from a position of maximum strength. Without this kind of solid community organization the vote, when it comes, *will be* close to meaningless as an implement of necessary social change. It is the beginnings of this organization that emerged from that campaign, and in the Summer of 1964, the state-wide organization was formalized by a series of precinct, county, district meetings, culminating in a State Convention of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.