

VIOLENCE IN BOLIVAR AND SUNFLOWER COUNTIES

Intimidation is a potent force in Mississippi as anyone can see from the list of incidents included in this paper. It should be stressed that this list is far from complete for these two counties, both because of the limited number of interviews, the absence of interviews in most towns, and most important the fear of the average Negro which prevents him from speaking the truth. This study is based on 119 interviews mostly conducted by myself. There were 29 interviews in Raleighville, 5 interviews in Drew, 5 interviews in Indianola, 5 interviews in Mound Bayou, 3 interviews in Cleveland, and 72 interviews in Shaw. There was no set pattern for interviews since the opportunity to interview was limited by the area to which I was assigned. These interviews are supplemented by the numerous opportunities that I had to talk to people as we were canvassing. I believe that the regular formal and scientific type interview would have limited value because the Negroes here are usually too afraid to talk about these matters. It is necessary to build up confidence, and this is best achieved by several visits rather than by one long formal confrontation.

The difficulties in obtaining an accurate account of intimidation are numerous. Two of the chief obstacles are fear and exaggeration. Fear far exceeds exaggeration in importance in Mississippi. Sometimes we interviewed all afternoon with few results except that we were informed again and again that nothing was wrong here by Negroes who were too scared to open up.

There is information that some Negroes believe the civil rights movement is progressing forward too slowly. These Negroes are armed and are prepared to engage in a more violent approach. There is a rifle group in Mound Bayou, and there is some evidence that one also exists outside Shawon Sullivan's plantation near Skenes. Some of the more violently-oriented Negroes channeled their energies in non-violent directions when the Freedom Riders came in 1960. Just as the violence against Negro children in Birmingham was instrumental in changing public opinion so that the 1964 Civil Rights Bill could become law, so the violent-like Negroes of pre-1964 have become a courageous force behind a non-violent civil rights movement.

Fear grows like an overflowing river as you move out of the path of the movement into the areas where no projects have been established. Although threats are more like lightning in nature than anything else for they are easily visible and followed by thunder, it is nevertheless true, that they cause many restless nights. The low-class Southern White sometimes makes the Mississippi atmosphere crackle with hostility as he spews forth from his manslaughter consciousness. Rednecks ~~aborn~~ on the downtown streets and teenage delinquents rear by in cars and hurl curses at the challengers to "the Southern way of life".

While the reaction of the public to new forms of direct action usually appears partially hysterical as in the case of the New York stall-ins, the reaction of the white Mississippi South to the coming of the summer recruits reached hysterical proportions. There were rumors that 30,000 invaders were coming into the state. Fear of this invasion is tied up with the white Southerner's feeling that Negroes will mix with whites socially, and no longer look up to the whites. So it is not surprising that after the summer program was announced, there was an increase of rifles being carried in the white's trucks. When we moved into Mississippi there were rumors that we would be stopped at the borders and be beaten up. Indicative of this feeling was the instruction to COFO voter registration workers to "know all the roads out of town."

Intimidation is surely a potent force in Mississippi making Mississippi into a totalitarian society, governed by actual and potential threats of violence. The mythology of violence is necessary to an understanding of the actuality of violence. The two are intimately intertwined in the Negro mind. Some Negroes have never seen violence; or

so they say; but often their not saying so is merely a reflection of a fear of revealing matters which may cause them further trouble. While it is true that between 1882 and 1959 there were 578 lynchings; it is recognized that lynchings have decreased; but this may be related to a proportional increase of shootings. Fear is promoted by threats perhaps much more than by actual violence simply because of the uncountable number of times threats are made, and because of the nature of fear which feeds on uncertainty. As threats increase, uncertainty increases causing a proportionate increase in fear. The closed Mississippi society is characterized by a low industrialization level, very real economic fears, and the fear of industrialization because of accompanying unionism and the eventual need to integrate the work force.

Violence usually occurs in the early stages of the growth of the movement in a town. The movement began in the Delta of Mississippi, of which Bolivar and Sunflower are a part, in 1962. But very little was completed in Bolivar prior to the coming of the summer volunteers. Why then has there been relatively so little violence this summer?

Violence has decreased this summer due to the genuine threat of Negro power, and due to the presence of Northern Civil Rights Workers and the Northern Press. The Whites have and do push the Negro until he asserts himself, and then the Whites usually give in. Hence I would strongly urge that recruits be brought to Mississippi for this fall. Contact anyone you know who might be interested and ask them to write SNCC. Along with the recruits there is need for full press coverage to discourage violence and fully report any that occurs. Letters should be written to influential persons. Unless action is taken I believe that long repressed violence built up over a summer of tension will emerge again this fall. Already the upper class whites are finding it necessary to restrain the poor whites from violence. We now know that the KKK meets every Friday and also have information or rumor on the formation of a White Council to keep Negroes from getting jobs. If the whites become violent this Fall, the Negroes may react in kind. It will be tragic if this long-suppressed people is forced to retaliate, for with retaliation there is always injustice.

Sincerely,

George Robbins
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COFO Community Center
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or Jones, Michigan after
August 21, 1964

P.S. Please write Democratic Delegates to support the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.