

anne braden

mississippi

MERIDIAN, Miss.,-----The most horrifying aspect of the tragic disappearance of Mike Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney is that if it had been Chaney alone the nation might never have heard of the case.

Chaney is the Negro in the trio, and is a Mississippian. Goodman and Schwerner were white and from the North.

In a sense, that is what the Mississippi Summer Project is all about. Almost a thousand brave young people are putting their lives on the line as the price for getting the nation to look at Mississippi and to see what has long been happening there.

For it is a sad fact, it is a horrifying fact, that the disappearance and even the murder of a Mississippi Negro is not news.

For decades past, Mississippi Negroes have quietly disappeared and been openly murdered, and no one outside of Mississippi ever knew or cared.

In recent years such incidents have been documented and detailed in written reports, statements, and brochures; news releases have been issued by civil-rights organization; still

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very few noticed.

For example: In August, 1962, the York Gazette & Daily published an article telling about atrocities in Mississippi and how students were working there in spite of them. One Italian publication reprinted the article and the same material appeared in the Southern Patriot; otherwise nobody seemed to care.

For example: Robert Moses, who leads civil-rights work in Mississippi, testified before the Mississippi State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that five Negroes had been murdered by racists in southwest Mississippi in recent months. Some newspapers printed this, many did not--in virtually none was it considered big news.

For example: this same State Advisory Committee, made up entirely of Mississippians, white and Negro, issued a shocking report in early 1963 stating that "terror hangs over the Negro in Mississippi." Few people in the rest of the nation ever read about it.

For example: The Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council last year published a documented report on 64 instances of violence and intimidation against Negroes in Mississippi since 1961--shootings, beatings, unjust arrests, and killings. This year the report was reissued after being updated with the addition of 86 incidents. For the most part the nation looked the other way.

These are the sensational atrocities. The even far-reaching terror that prevails for most Mississippi Negroes every day of

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their lives also goes unnoticed elsewhere. This is the way of life that condemns the Negroes of this state to a shorter life expectancy than the white man, to a starvation-level income (the median for the state among Negroes in 1960 was \$606 annually), to a childhood without education or hope, and an adult life of frustration and emptiness. All this is not news to the press and broadcasting media.

But when Goodman and Schwerner disappeared, Mississippi was suddenly ~~front-page~~ front-page news all over the nation.

~~These are the people who planned~~

Those who planned the Mississippi summer project knew it would be that way. Not that they planned or wanted anyone to meet with tragedy. I know the SNCC leaders working in Mississippi well, and they are gentle, sensitive people whose greatest burden is not that they are risking their own lives every moment but that they bear the tremendous responsibility for leadership of a movement that is risking other lives. But they knew and calculated on the fact that the very presence of many white students in Mississippi would involve the nation in that state's affairs as it has not been before.

Student volunteers training at Oxford, Ohio, in preparation for work in Mississippi this summer were told frankly that this was part of their reason for being there.

This was not all, of course. The Mississippi Summer Project was designed to establish a network of educational programs and community centers across the state, and to encourage voter-registration work and political organization.

This is what the civil-rights forces would really like the

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freedom to build in peace; this is what would accomplish their long-range goals. They would like to avoid the sensational news if possible. As Robert Moses told some of the volunteers before they left their Ohio training center:

"You are not going down there to try to be heroes.. You are heroes enough just going into the state. This is not a Freedom Ride. The point is to stay out of jail if you possibly can, and don't put yourself in any unnecessarily dangerous situation. You have a job to do. If each of you can leave behind you three people who are stronger than before, this will be 3000 more people we will have to work with next year. This is your job."

But the realities of life in Mississippi being what they are, civil-rights leaders know they are not going to be allowed to carry out this very constructive and democratic program in peace. They know they face terror--and they are determined that they will no longer face it without the nation knowing about it. Hence the dual purpose of the students in Mississippi.

It is the theory of many, Mississippi civil-rights leaders that it is not that Americans are hopelessly callous, but that they simply don't know what is going on.

It is comforting to all of us who are white if this so. But I think we must also face the fact that there is something horribly sick about a country in which the disappearance of two white men is news whereas the murder of numerous Negroes has not been.

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During the Mississippi training program in Ohio, one of the speakers was John Doar, of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Justice Department. He told the students there was really no other the Federal government could do to protect them because of the relationship of federal-state police powers. The students reacted in controlled fury, and challenged him by quoting the law and constitutional arguments to support their contention that the Federal Government has the power to act.

Since Doar is probably one of the most conscientious people on this question in the Justice Department, Robert Moses interrupted to suggest that the students were misdirecting their fire and that it was not just Doar and not just the Justice Department that were at fault. He pointed out that Harvard University, from whence many of the volunteers come, is the largest stockholder in Mid-South Utilities, holding company for Mississippi Power and Light, one of the most powerful forces in the state, on whose board sit several White Citizens Council leaders.

Moses' point was that we are all---the whole nation---deeply involved in the crimes of Mississippi. This is what three young men, two white and one Negro, may have paid with their lives to make us see.

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