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Why Not Mississippi 'Foreign Aid'?

By James Reston.

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WASHINGTON — When the United States Commission on Civil Rights proposes that the state of Mississippi be treated like a foreign power, it is fairly obvious that something is seriously wrong.

The commission does not say so directly, but it suggests that the President should do everything in his power "to withhold federal funds from the state of Mississippi, until the state of Mississippi demonstrates its compliance with the Constitution and laws of the United States."

This, of course, is a popular procedure in handling unco-operative foreign nations under the foreign aid act. If they refuse to do what Washington wants there is always a cry here to cut or eliminate their funds; but until now there has been little support for treating states of the Union like rebellious children.

THERE ARE at least two reasons for taking a skeptical view of this proposal:

● First, it is wrong in principle.

● Second, it wouldn't work. Mississippi is in trouble today partly because it is so isolated in mind and spirit from

the rest of the nation, and partly because it is so poor. The effect of the commission's proposals, if accepted by Congress, would probably not be to bring the state to heel, but merely to increase both its poverty and its isolation, and to deepen the tragedy even more.

Mississippi's annual per capita income in 1961 was \$1,233—lowest in the nation, \$420 less than the average for the Southeastern states, and \$1,032 lower than the national average.

It is divided between white and black, between the dry and radical hills and the wet and conservative delta. In 1960, the state had 915,700 Negroes, 43 per cent of its population. This is the highest percentage of Negroes of any state in the Union.

HALF OF THE population of the state over 25 have had fewer than nine years in school; and in 1956, Mississippi abolished its 138-year-old compulsory education law as a device to avoid racial integration in the public schools. The average annual salary for full-time faculty professors at the University of Mississippi is \$6,683. At the University of Alabama it is \$7,934 and at the University of California, \$11,130.

It is true, as the Civil Rights commission says, that Mississip-

pi gets more from the federal government than it pays in taxes. Per capita income tax collection in 1960, for example, was only \$129.95 in Mississippi. The latest figures for fiscal year 1962 indicate that the federal government received from all sources in Mississippi only 270 million dollars, while the payments of the federal government to Mississippians, as calculated by the commission, exceeded 650 million in the same period.

The commission's reaction to this is not only to encourage cutting off federal aid until Mississippi meets the President's view of the state's constitutional duty, but to oppose federal contracts to the state as well.

ABOUT THE commission's objectives there is regional argument in Washington, but about its proposed means of achieving those ends there is a great deal of national opposition. As a matter of fact, there is much to be said for the opposite of the commission's punitive recommendations, not to reward Mississippi for its rebellious spirit, but to bring her closer into the prevailing discussion and economic well-being of the nation as a whole.

Ironically, Washington has a policy for most of the underdeveloped areas of the world ex-

cept her own. The way to bring along the "underdeveloped nations," this government believes, is to provide them with "development grants" and "technical assistance," and "investment guarantees," and a cataract of teachers, technicians and industrialists.

We preach "interdependence" and "partnership" among the Atlantic nations. We have a Peace corps composed of many of our finest young teachers and technicians all over the world and an Alliance for Progress in Latin America.

OUR FELLOW-COUNTRYMEN in Mississippi will not thank us for the analogy, but many of their problems in both the hills and the delta are similar to the problems of the underdeveloped nations.

Maybe the commission is right, that persuasion has failed and only punitive power will prevail. But maybe not. It could be in the end that we need an Alliance for Progress in Mississippi, a People-to-People program, more student exchanges, more technicians bringing the new scientific revolution to the state, more interdependence, more "partnership," and more "technical assistance."

After all, we have tried "military assistance" without much effect.