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Citadel of the Citizens Council

While other Southern states move toward at least token desegregation, in Mississippi the diehard white-supremacists are firmly in control.

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NOVEMBER 12, 1961

By HODDING CARTER III

GREENVILLE, Miss.

THE roll-call of Southern communities which have begun at least token public-school integration in response to Federal court prodding was significantly lengthened this fall with the peaceful desegregation of schools in Dallas, Memphis and Atlanta. In the last two cities, massive resistance on the secondary school level in the Deep South was shattered for the first time. While the number of children involved was not impressive, the psychological effect on the rest of the Black Belt South was immense.

But one state, which shares with Alabama and South Carolina the distinction of maintaining total segregation at all levels in the public schools, shows no signs of yielding to a process most white Southerners have grudgingly begun to accept as inevitable. The state is Mississippi. After seven years of mounting pressure, it is still virtually impossible to find any public manifestations of the fatalism many whites are privately expressing.

As the pressure has intensified, in fact, Mississippi resistance has tended to stiffen rather than crumble. It is the one Southern state which showed a completely unified front in defying the recent Interstate Commerce Commission ruling on the desegregation of interstate facilities. State laws were invoked in every city to preserve segregation in the local waiting rooms and terminal restaurants, and although the Justice Department promptly asked Federal courts for a restraining order, there was little doubt that resistance will be maintained until the last legal maneuver is exhausted.

The observer would be hard pressed to find a major chink in Mississippi's segregationist forces. There is a handful of white dissidents, and there is a growing number of Negro militants, but neither is formed into a strength that can influence greatly. Support for the continuation of segregation in Mississippi is pervasive, sometimes subtle and immensely strong. To a high degree it is vested in the Citizens Council.

IT is difficult to explain to an outsider just how powerful a force this white-supremacy group has become. Perhaps the hardest point to grasp is that the Citizens Council in Mississippi—no matter how dubious its aims, repugnant its methods or despicable its philosophy—is not made up of hooded figures meeting furtively in back alleys.

Its leadership is drawn not from the pool hall but from the country club. Its membership generally exhibits the attitudes of the middle and upper classes rather than of the poor white. And its aims are not couched in violent language but in the careful embroidery of states rights and constitutionalism.

In fact, when the first Council was formed seven years ago by a group of community leaders in the Delta town of Indianola, one central purpose was to retain control of resistance to desegregation in the hands of the "better people." Then, it was a semi-secret society. Today, membership in the Citizens Council has come to be akin to membership in the Rotary or Lions Club. It is such an accepted mark of distinction, in fact, that many candidates for public or organizational office carefully add their participation in the Council to their listings of civic enterprises in which they have engaged.

The Council's control of the state was formalized in August, 1959. In that month, Ross Barnett—against the opposition of Mississippi's two living ex-Governors and all but one of the state's daily newspapers, but with the all-out support of the Council—won a landslide victory in the Democratic primary runoff for Governor.

Since then, the Council has all but completed the construction of a political machine whose power is publicly unchallenged by any major state official. One of its dramatic accomplishments was the narrow victory scored last November by a slate of Presidential "free electors" who eventually cast the state's eight Electoral College votes for Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia.

FAR more important to the Council's purposes, however, and better illustrative of its grip on the state government, was the decision by the State Sovereignty Commission in late 1960 to donate \$5,000 a month from state tax money to support the Council's radio and television program, Citizens Council Forum. The members of the commission, formed by the Legislature in 1956 "to protect the sovereignty of the state of Mississippi," include the Governor, and are nearly to a man Council members.

The grant, combined with a lump-sum donation of \$20,000, has brought the Council nearly \$100,000 from the public treasury. Although an internal power struggle in the Sovereignty Commission resulted in a \$500-a-month cut in the donation, no one seriously believes the commission will eliminate it altogether in the near future.

There are many other examples of the Council's influence in the state government. Perhaps most significant is the fact that William Simmons, editor of the Council's newspaper and administrator of the state Council association, has become a constant companion of Governor Barnett, traveling with him when he makes out-of-state talks (many of which Simmons reputedly writes) and sitting in as an "observer" at most meetings of the Sovereignty Commission.

During the last regular session of the legislature in 1960, that body acted as little more than a rubber stamp for bills which had Council endorsement. One gave local congregations the right to secede from their parent churches, taking church property with them, if they found themselves in conflict with the national denominations' doctrines. It was passed despite claims that it violated the constitutional separation of church and state. And many of Governor Barnett's major appointments were of men who were on the Council's state board of directors.

Individual Councils vary from town to town, but the general pattern is much the (Continued on Page 125)

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same. One may screen new members more rigorously than another; some are relatively inactive. Most hold annual membership drives during which they make heavy use of newspaper advertising. One Council advertised that a prospective member need merely "walk into the bank." In another town, a membership application could be filled out at the local hotel. In countless restaurants across the state, Citizens Council literature can be picked up with the toothpicks at the cashier's counter.

The local organization's president is invariably a prominent citizen, and the board of directors is drawn largely from the community's Who's Who. When meetings are held, which isn't often, the same rough form of Roberts Rules of Order followed in most civic clubs is observed. The chairman begins by calling on a minister—most often a Baptist—for a prayer. Committee reports, if any, are heard, and the main business of the evening follows.

AS often as not, the meeting will be open to the public, and will feature a main speaker and several lesser lights. The featured attraction inevitably urges continued adherence to segregation and states' rights, lashes the Supreme Court, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, church groups, "liberals" and "moderates," and invariably ends with a call for a united front of dues-paying members to stem the tide of change.

At a closed meeting, the main order of business may be anything from a discussion of

the difficulties of collecting dues to the formulation of a plan to deal with a local white or Negro "trouble-maker." One or two hotheads will jump up and let loose with impassioned speeches calling for radical and immediate action—usually a midnight call on the offender. The conservatives then will make themselves heard, calm down the firebrands and smother the proposal.

AS a result of the perpetuation of conservative control, no act of racial violence in Mississippi has ever been directly connected to the Citizens Council. Those incidents that have occurred may be indirectly traceable to the climate engendered by the Council, but it is a theoretical relationship. The Council has found it doesn't need to operate that way to get results.

Initially, the use of economic pressure against dissenting whites and Negroes was the main weapon, and to some extent it is still used, particularly against Negroes. But as the Council has developed it has found that the isolation of moderate and liberal whites from the rest of the white community and the complete destruction of interracial communication are infinitely more productive and far easier to accomplish.

To a degree which is hard to convey to someone who does not live in Mississippi, the Citizens Council has managed to divert the antipathy of most white Mississippians for integration into a mold which includes the total rejection of any deviation from the status quo. Blind adherence to "our way of life" is the unending refrain of the Citizens Council's (Continued on Following Page)



Negro student and National Guardsman on a Freedom Ride through Mississippi. "Mississippi shows no signs of yielding to a process most white Southerners have grudgingly begun to accept as inevitable."

(over)

(Continued from Preceding Page) newspapers, its leaders and most of its estimated 80,000 members. Since this slogan touches a theme which has been central to Mississippi history since the Civil War, the approach is highly successful.

There are numerous examples of the price demanded for failure to walk in the Council-enforced lockstep. Several years ago, a minister chose to defend two white men accused of being "integrationists" at a Citizens Council-inspired mass meeting held to demand they leave the county. Within a few months, the pastor was deprived of his church by a unanimous vote of its governing board. Other ministers across the state got the message.

IN the same county, the woman editor of a small weekly has battled the Council since the day it was organized. When a whispering campaign and advertising boycott failed to drive her out of business, a group of Citizens Council leaders started another newspaper. She has managed to survive, thanks almost entirely to her own gutty determination not to go under, but again the point was made and duly noted by other newspaper men tempted to oppose the Council.

The primary technique of isolation is simply a variation of the big lie. Those who don't go along with the Council are tarred over and over, in public and private, with the same old phrases which most Southerners still dread. The dissenter is a "nigger lover," a "nest fouler," a "scalawag," or a "renegade white." When the charges are repeated often enough in Mississippi's present climate of opinion, they begin to stick, and the non-conformist becomes the local pariah.

Lately, a new weapon has been added to the Council's arsenal. Professional anti-Communists have been brought into the state, usually under Sovereignty Commission auspices, and while they deal chiefly with the alleged Communist penetration of every facet of American life, they earn their fee in Mississippi by implying that those who challenge the segregationist line are members of the Communist apparatus. This, too, has been effective in neutralizing the Council's opponents, for Mississippians are no less prone to see a Communist behind every demand for change than are many of their fellow Americans.

TODAY, after Memphis and Atlanta and Dallas, the Council is stronger than ever in Mississippi. Paradoxically, it has been reinvigorated as the struggle has moved closer to the state. And certain events within the state, although they will lead in the long run to the destruction of the cause the Council supports, also have had the effect of giving

the Council an immediate shot in the arm.

In the past six months, Mississippi has experienced for the first time sit-ins, voter registration drives, Freedom Riders, Federal vote suits and court action for the desegregation of the state university. The Council has hastened to capitalize on each.

Nothing, however, has been as much of a godsend to the Council as the continued forays of the Freedom Riders. Even while their exploits were focusing national attention on segregation in interstate facilities in the South, Council leaders were singling out the "friction riders" as a convenient symbol of "outside interference." The success with which officials in the capital city of Jackson kept the segregation lid on while maintaining law and order as hundreds of Freedom Riders poured into the city was made-to-order propaganda for the Council, which has always promised that segregation could be preserved without violence.

IN fact, from the moment it was clear the Freedom Riders were coming to Mississippi after their violence-packed journey through Alabama, the Council took the lead in urging public order, while its spokesmen poured out a steady stream of vituperation upon the organizations and individuals connected with the group. As each new busload arrived in Jackson, Council membership efforts intensified and, if its leaders are to be believed, Council membership grew.

The same was true in south Mississippi after Negro registration attempts resulted in beatings recently. In counties where the Council had been either dormant or nonexistent, new units sprang up overnight. Revitalization was reported in other areas where there were no incidents, but where Council leaders spurred organization or activation as

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GOVERNOR—Ross Barnett won office with Citizens Council support.



CITIZENS COUNCIL—Meeting in Jackson, its members represent the "better people."

(Continued from Preceding Page) a means of preventing Negro civil-rights activity.

Through it all, the simple, single Council line has been: if we will only organize, maintain our solidarity and fight the good fight, we can still win.

Robert Patterson, a Delta planter who was one of the founders and is now secretary of the Citizens Council, sounded the call for all Council supporters after Memphis desegregated. In a letter to the editor of a Memphis newspaper, Patterson wrote:

"To be subjected to integration is one thing, but to submit to it is quite another. If we are subjected to it, we can resist it, contain it and eventually expel it, but if we submit to it and accept it, in my opinion the destruction is likely to be permanent and irrevocable."

THE Council is infinitely strengthened in Mississippi by the fact that the state is still basically agrarian, made up of small communities and towns in which the dissenter can find few allies. There is no large metropolitan center here, no Memphis or New Orleans or Atlanta. The largest city is Jackson (population: 145,000), and there the Council has been most successful at organizing. The city's three dailies either echo the Council's beliefs or remain silent. It is almost impossible to find a business or professional man who is not at least a nominal Council member. It just isn't good business not to belong.

None of this is to say that as the reverses begin, as the Federal courts strike down one after another of the state's segregation laws, the Council will be able to stem the tide. It has not been able to do so elsewhere and will not be able to here. What this does mean, however, is that in Mississippi as in no other state there will

be continued fierce resistance long after the first battle is lost. And in Mississippi, the final alternative of a statewide school closing in the face of a desegregation decree is one which is most likely to be used.

There is opposition to the Citizens Council in Mississippi, and the total conformity it would like is still far from realized. But the white opposition for the most part has been belated, isolated and ineffective. Every time there has been a chance that internal opposition might coalesce, events, usually originating from outside the state, have diverted public attention and exerted strong pressure for white solidarity—as in the case of the Freedom Riders. If the Council was one of the chief beneficiaries in Mississippi of their efforts, the moderates were the chief losers.

Perhaps the best chance the Council's opponents had for an issue around which they could rally involved Billy Barton, a University of Mississippi undergraduate, and native of the state, who disclosed last spring that the Sovereignty Commission had built up a secret dossier on his private life which contained a number of lies and innuendoes about his alleged role in the "integrationist apparatus," most of them supplied by a high Citizens Council source. Barton charged that the misinformation was being used by state officials in an attempt to insure his defeat in the campus election for editor of the university newspaper.

MOST Mississippians were shocked by the Barton case, which carried with it the obvious implication that other files were being compiled by the commission's agents in a manner reminiscent of a police state. But the combination of time, Barton's defeat

in the election (ironically enough by an opponent who was considered more "liberal" on the race issue), and the advent of the Freedom Riders were sufficient to blur the issue.

The spurt of civil rights activity has had one positive effect, of course. The Negro community, which makes up almost half the state's population, is far more militant as a result of the events of the past half year.

YET it is just this spirit, when it is publicly expressed by words or deeds, which feeds the Council's mill. Here, at home, is the very threat its spokesmen have been warning of for seven years. White Mississippians may be unable to see the obvious point that the process of change had reached the state despite the Council, but they are quick to embrace any group which promises a reversal of the trend. This promise the Council supplies.

There are several reasonable conjectures about what the future holds. There can be little doubt that the Citizens Council in Mississippi is going to get stronger before it gets weaker. The peak of the crisis has not been reached, and the Council feeds on crisis. Already it is marshaling its forces to support school closure when the inevitable court decree is handed down.

Whether it can rally as wide support once the defeats begin to register is doubtful, and if violence develops on a large scale the Council is sure to lose many of its supporters from the upper economic and social strata. But with tradition behind it, and with the political influence it now has, only the most optimistic could contend that the Citizens Council will not be a potent force in Mississippi in the foreseeable future.



DAY AT THE FAIR—Jackson, Miss., police (one with a leashed dog) disperse Negroes who protested segregation at the state fair.

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