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## The Kind of Words That Make a Man a Target

Hodding Carter

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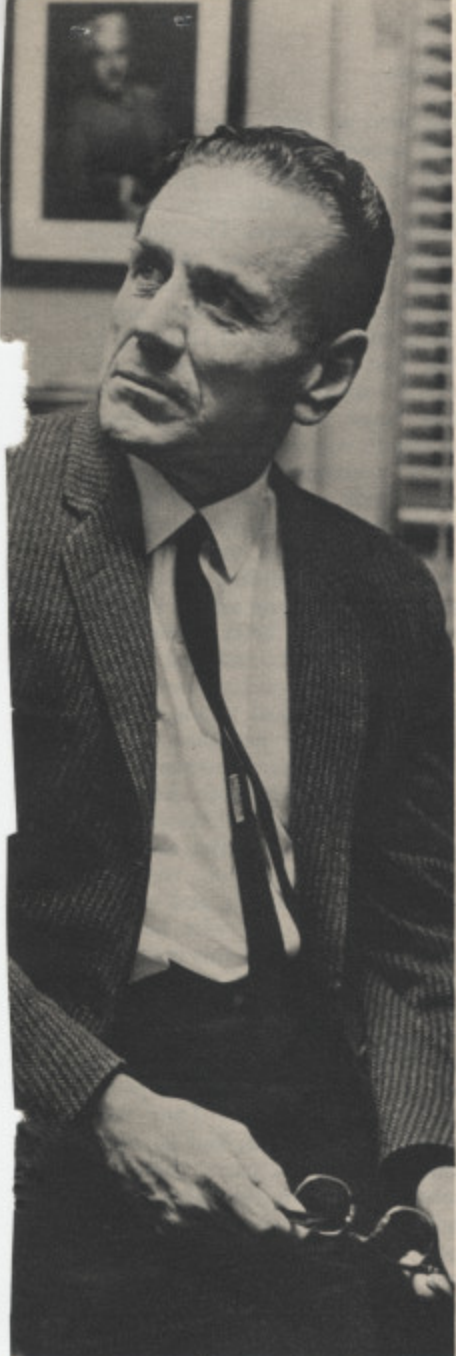
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AMERICA'S MOST SECRET ROOM

First Photographs

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## The Kind of Words That Make a Man a Target

BY HODDING CARTER

■ THIS IS about Jim Silver—Dr. James W. Silver, Ph.D.—who, when this is read, may or may not still be teaching history at the University of Mississippi. If he isn't, it will be because after 28 years some implausibly outrageous people will have had their way.

They think they have Jim Silver over a barrel now because during the academic year 1962-1963, he treated as a human being James Meredith, the first known Negro to attend and graduate from Ole Miss, and because of the now-famous speech he made at Asheville, North Carolina, on November 7, 1963, as the retiring president of the Southern Historical Association.

That carefully documented address (see box on page 38) is a masterpiece of academic invective, historical summation, and moral indictment, all directed at some of the more odorous individuals and aspects of Mississippi. As a way of

telling some politicians to go to hell without actually saying so, it is also a masterpiece.

Not every one of his fellow citizens who is currently cussing him out has read the talk or even a news report of it. The title was enough: "Mississippi—the Closed Society."

Jim Silver is my friend, which may give these comments a certain bias, though I hope not. We have considerable in common. We are the same age, and neither of us is Mississippi born. Jim compounded this latter error by first seeing the light of day in Rochester, New York, back in 1907. Twelve years later his parents moved to Southern Pines, North Carolina, where he grew up. But he is still a Yankee to a lot of us born and raised sons of Dixie. Jim was graduated from the University of North Carolina and won his doctorate in history from Vanderbilt. But that can't erase the stain.

WE BOTH CAME to Mississippi by choice 28 years ago, and by choice we have remained. We both like immensely the communities in which we live, he in lovely Oxford and I in the river town of Greenville, which is the spiritual oasis of our state. We both are doing what we like to do, he as a teacher, I as a newspaper publisher and writer.

Just about every time the Mississippi legislature meets, some consecrated solons denounce us as dangerous radicals. I suspect that up until a year ago Jim enjoyed it. He is not as carefree now. The change came after two men were slain and hundreds of others were injured in the campus rioting that followed the federally ordered admission of a lone Negro to the university. Some-

thing died in Jim Silver then and partly caused his Asheville talk.

On the personal side, Jim Silver has an unusually attractive family. His wife is Margaret Thompson of Montgomery, Alabama, whom his family and friends call Dutch. She is a beautiful woman. Jim might have been kicked out of Ole Miss in 1938, just two years after he got there, for speaking some kind words about wage and hour legislation. But Dutch was successfully tutoring sundry members of the football team, which made at least half of the Silver couple indispensable.

Dutch and Jim are rightfully proud of their children: Bill, who was Harvard '62 and who is now an Army lieutenant; Betty, a Wellesley undergraduate who married during the Christmas holidays last year; and 10-year-old Gail, whose Oxford schoolmates have not directed toward her their elders' resentment.

It's about time now to get down to some particulars, such as why Jim Silver likes it at Ole Miss, and why he ate and played golf with the Negro James Meredith, and why he made that talk, and why he isn't happy today. Most of this is tied up with the fact that he has never learned to keep his mouth shut, in or out of the classrooms in which he has challenged and jolted and angered and inspired some 5000 young people over the years. They were mostly Mississippians, and he made them think about more than just those courses in American and southern history, which are his principal fields. More than incidentally, most of the vocal defenders of Jim Silver today were once among the 5000 students. But since a large number of these alumni have left

Mississippi, as do too many of her college graduates, the voices are not as influential as, for example, that of the state representative who brought 12 charges, including apostasy and subversion, against Jim. Jim made a fool of him and went on teaching. That was some time back, and a man's good luck can't hold out forever.

Jim Silver liked Oxford from the beginning. "You don't stay in a place twenty-eight years if you don't," he says. "I like the tempo and most of the people and my job. My family has liked Oxford, too. It's home. And I've added to my own education immeasurably by meeting, as chairman of our speakers' bureau, hundreds of internationally noted men over the years."

From his earliest days at Oxford, Jim was known as a sardonically humorous man who delighted in debate and in needling people who needed it. Back in those days and for years afterward, Jim golfed a lot and fished and coached the university's tennis team. At six feet one and 185 pounds, he could have passed for a football player himself, and football is a game he likes. He was one of the first persons to take slow-motion movies of football games for the use of the coaching staff, a general practice now. He and Dutch got about quite a bit, and their cottage just off the campus was a stimulating rendezvous for many a student and faculty member. In those days a great many Oxford people liked them, even though the townsmen were sometimes puzzled about what was going on in his classrooms.

Jim Silver has been more widely admired elsewhere as a teacher. He

#### THE AUTHOR

Hodding Carter was born in Louisiana. After attending college in the North, he returned there to found a newspaper in Hammond and fight Huey Long. After the Kingfish was assassinated, Mr. Carter moved to Greenville, Mississippi, where he founded a new daily paper. Later, after a merger, he became the owner of the *Delta Democrat-Times* in Greenville.

He quickly became known as one of the small but unflinching band of southern newspaper editors aligned against the extreme segregationists. His editorials won him a Pulitzer Prize and the bitter enmity of many of his fellow Mississippians.

has lectured at Harvard, Emory, the University of Virginia, the University of Oregon, and the University of Missouri, among other places, and the Silvers spent a year at Aberdeen University in Scotland where he was a Fulbright scholar. His standing among his colleagues is high, and his occasional historical essays are both scholarly and provocative. Despite his unpopularity with the legislators, he has seemed a man whom it was impossible to dislodge. That is, until recent months. For after the riot that turned the Ole Miss campus into a bloody shambles, some unpleasant things began happening to the Silver family.

This is the story as Jim tells it. "To back up a little, if I can be labeled, I am probably more of a

## DR. SILVER'S HISTORY-MAKING SPEECH

The following are excerpts from the address delivered by Dr. James W. Silver before the Southern Historical Association in Asheville, North Carolina, on November 7, 1963:

- The search for historical truth has become a casualty in embattled Mississippi where neither the Governor nor the legislature, in their hot pursuit of interposition, indicate any awareness that Mississippians were Americans before they were Southerners. . . . The striking parallel between people and events of the 1850s and the 1950s brings home the consciousness that Mississippi has been on the defensive against inevitable social change for more than a century, and that for some years before the Civil War it had developed a closed society with an orthodoxy accepted by nearly everybody in the state. The all-pervading doctrine then and now has been white supremacy, whether achieved through slavery or segregation, rationalized by a professed adherence to states' rights and bolstered by religious fundamentalism.
- Every Mississippi politician not only denies the validity of the 14th Amendment, but in his heart hungers for the negative days of the Articles of Confederation. Governor Barnett, whose personal constitution stops with the 10th Amendment, is conveniently ignorant of the incompatibility of states' rights and modern industrialization.
- There seems to be some confusion in the minds of the state's lawyers and jurists as to whether Mississippians must obey the law of the land as interpreted by the federal courts. Dean Robert J. Farley of the Ole Miss Law School repeatedly warned in public that lawyers were acting irresponsibly in permitting by their silence the Citizens Council and irreconcilable politicians to interpret the law for them. The chief dereliction came in allowing the people of Mississippi to believe that they could get away with an outright defiance of the courts. "We as Mississippians," declared Judge [Thomas] Brady in 1959, "will not bow down to a court of nine old men whose hearts are as black as their robes."

conservative than anything else. Leaders of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee say I'm an Uncle Tommer. As far left as I've gone is to tell people that I believe the Constitution and federal courts should be respected and obeyed. Sure, I've tried to teach history, not Southern myths, to my students, but

that's no crime." A good many legislators think it is.

What finally got Jim Silver really fired up was the rioting and the aftermath on the campus. And it has been his reaction to the tragedy that has made his critics more determined than ever to get him.

"I got mad," he recalls. "Those

federal marshals were fighting for their lives and the politicians and some Mississippi newsmen lied about them. This campus was terrorized. The rooms of students suspected of being sympathetic toward Meredith and against the state administration were ransacked. Some students were roughed up. Of the handful who acted friendly toward Meredith not one was in college by the end of the year. One boy who ate with him left in a hurry that same night and never came back. And he was a Mississippian.

"I just had to prove that someone could be decent to that poor guy and last. So I played golf with him a few times, and ate with him in the school cafeteria, and talked with him a lot. I would have done it for any harassed student. I found out that Meredith was a fine young fellow. Believe it or not, he's basically a states' righter and believes in all the Horatio Alger virtues. He doesn't smoke or drink. He is working to better his people. And he's an almost mystical crusader. The shared meals and golf brought immediate reaction.

"Some long-time friends even stopped speaking to me. Every now and then when I walk to town, a car will slow down and somebody will call something like 'You god-damn nigger-loving S.O.B. We'll get you!' We received so many obscene and threatening anonymous phone calls that we stopped answering. Once I sat up with a shotgun after a telephone threat that sounded like business. The calls slowed down for a few months. But the talk in Asheville started a new round."

A year of harassment and the rising tempers of Mississippi politicians

and citizens were probably the immediate inspirations for the controversial speech. In their annual Christmas letter of 1963, Jim and Dutch explained briefly why he wrote and delivered it: "Perhaps out of both anger and sadness there developed a compulsion to tell the recent Ole Miss story with a background, as honestly as possible, to try to counter some of the frauds that have been deliberately perpetrated on an unsuspecting public."

AFTER THE TALK was delivered and made public, Jim became known to many, many thousands of people who had never heard of him before. The national news magazines and the *New York Times* and other metropolitan papers gave unusual space to it. But it was all but disregarded by the papers back home. The Jackson, Mississippi, *Clarion-Ledger*, one of the most over-zealously racist papers in the South, reported simply that Dr. Silver had abused the State of Mississippi.

If telling some unpalatable truths adds up to abuse, that's precisely what Jim Silver did. The 135-page manuscript, which he trimmed somewhat for delivery, is on its way to becoming a minor historical classic. Harcourt Brace and World, Inc., will publish it as a hard-cover book this spring. By the hundreds, history teachers and librarians and laymen, both in and out of the South, have asked for copies. And the striking part of it all is that the text is simply a factual account of past and present that adds up to the evident truth that Mississippi is "a closed society." In that society it is economically, socially, and politically

near-suicidal to step out of line in matters relating to race or to the Mississippi politicians' concept that the state and not the federal government should be supreme in any field in which they might collide.

And Jim Silver told them off in Asheville. He really did.

So what's going to happen now?

My guess is nothing much, at least for a while, if only because some Mississippians in and out of politics are saner and have longer memories than do others. They recall that the university and all other state-operated institutions of higher learning were discredited some 35 years ago by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools because of the late Sen. Theodore G. Bilbo's infamous meddling with the system. This time Ole Miss got into hot water again and, until early December, was in effect kept on probation by the Southern Association. In the past year, some 50 full-time faculty members have quit, and, regrettably, the student body is smaller this year by nine per cent. On the hopeful side, the State Board of Institutions of Higher Learning is made up in the main of decent men who don't want the image of the state and the university made any uglier. Because they serve under staggered appointments, no Governor can easily dominate the board. The chancellor, or president, a capable administrator whom time and events have bruised, doesn't want Jim Silver fired, and, from

obviously good motives, he is trying to portray Jim as "just one of those campus eccentrics who can be found anywhere."

Jim Silver himself does not believe that either the chancellor or the trustees will move against him. He is not so sure of the legislature, which has more than its share of demagogues, small-minded time-servers, and buffoons whose idea of good clean fun is to take after any teacher, newspaper editor, or other citizen who shouts back at the pack.

"Often I'm asked what do I think I'm doing, and why," Jim Silver says. "Here's my reason. I believe that we're in for real trouble in Mississippi unless our people wake up. I'm no extremist. I just believe in equality before the law, and I'm damn tired of hearing that Governor Ross Barnett speaks for Mississippi. He doesn't. Plenty of people in Mississippi agree with me. I think a little shock treatment, which is what my talk was, is good for our souls. Just getting the thing off my chest made me feel better."

But his belief in the therapeutic value of such shock treatment doesn't explain Dr. James W. Silver, Ph.D., not when you know about the threatening phone calls and letters and the ostracism. Jim Silver just happens to be a pigheaded and brave man who keeps on fighting from the most vulnerable of fortresses, a classroom in a state-supported university. Our state could use a thousand like him. ■■

## NUMBERS GAME

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■ IN ENGLAND some of the best people get letters after their names; in America they get numbers.