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STANDING IN THE SHADOWS: AFRICAN AMERICAN INFORMANTS AND
ALLIES OF THE MISSISSIPPI STATE SOVEREIGNTY COMMISSION

by

Cynthia Jones Sadler

A Dissertation

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Abstract

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This dissertation addressed the use of African American informants and allies of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission during the Civil Rights Movement.

Following the *Brown v Board of Education* decision in 1954, Mississippi initiated various measures to maintain segregated schools and uphold its southern traditions. Among them was the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, a state-funded agency created in 1956 whose primary purpose was to uphold state's rights and maintain segregation. Dubbed the "segregation watchdog," the agency had an investigative division that used political and civic leaders, law enforcement entities, private detective agencies, and informants which constituted an informal network of spies located in every county in Mississippi.

Using the Sovereignty Commission records and varied primary and secondary sources, this research revealed that the typical African American informant was a middle-class male in a professional or highly regarded occupation such as an educator, minister or newspaper publisher. Further, it found that informants used the same educational, civic, fraternal and religious institutions to gain and disseminate information as those utilized by civil rights activists to advance the Movement. As informants, they spied on individuals, infiltrated civil rights organizations, and promoted segregation. Collectively, they used their positions and influence within the black community to alter or repress the direction of the Movement. While their motives may never be fully understood, it is arguable that some entered into alliances with the Sovereignty Commission due to

existing systems of patronage and paternalism. Though they held positions in which they could lead and inspire, they chose to stand in the shadows of one of the most pivotal periods in American history.

The Commission ceased operations in 1973 and expended more than \$1.5 million. While the agency symbolized Mississippi's primary state-funded mechanism to maintain the "closed society," it was not an isolated entity but an archetype for southern resistance. Other southern states including Arkansas, Alabama and Louisiana used Mississippi as a model to establish similar commissions. As a whole, these commissions were a southern phenomenon that circumvented the principles of a democratic society to serve the needs of the elite while subjugating and co-opting the majority-black population.

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Introduction

A good informant is a jewel to be highly prized [prized] and protected because if nothing else to remain true to the promise you no doubt made to him, plus the fact that when you expose him you are closing the door to further information.¹

Informants have been used throughout time to obtain information. In *Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal*, Harvard law professor Randall Kennedy discussed the use of informants among African American populations. He defined a “sellout” as a person who was “trusted because of his perceived membership in a given group—trusted until he shows his ‘true colors’, by which time he has often done harm to those who viewed him as a kinsman or fellow citizen.”² While African American civil rights activists confronted opposition from the regimes of power, they also faced betrayal from within their own race. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized that “there are Negroes who will never fight for freedom. There are Negroes who will seek profit for themselves alone from the struggle. There are even some Negroes who will cooperate with their oppressors.”³ Further, Marcus Garvey earlier held that “the traitors among the Negro race are generally found among the men highest placed in education and society, the fellows who call themselves leaders.”⁴

Though there is extensive scholarship concerning the Civil Rights Movement, there is an absence of research concerning the roles played by African Americans who

¹ Memorandum to Sovereignty Commission from John D. Sullivan date 4 March 1964, MSSC SCR# 3-74A-0-6-1-1-1 to 3-74A-0-6-2-1-1.

² Randall Kennedy, *Sellout*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008), 5.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 44-45.

⁴ Kennedy, 44.

opposed the movement. Historian Charles Eagles noted that “civil rights scholars [had] created an imbalance [in the literature] by neglecting the movement’s opponents,” particularly African Americans who did not participate in or support the struggle for equal rights.⁵ In an analysis of social movements, sociologist Gary T. Marx noted that “there has been hardly any attention paid to the activist whose allegiance lies not with the movement, but whose role instead is to create internal dissention, gain information and/or provoke a group of illegal activities that would then justify official action and possibly turn public sentiment against [the movement].”⁶ As information-gatherers or agent provocateurs who attempted to influence the direction of the group, they served as mechanisms that could potentially contain, prolong, alter or repress the movement.⁷ An examination of these sideline activists places them in the larger civil rights discourse and challenges perceptions that the struggle for equal rights and liberties was a commonly shared goal.

This discussion of African Americans who opposed the Civil Rights Movement is examined within a framework of the socio-cultural, political and economic climate of Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s. During these periods, Mississippi, similar to other states in the Deep South, clung to inherent racist practices that developed during Reconstruction and continued through the modern era. Jim Crow laws and entrenched southern customs ensured that each race knew their respective place in the hierarchy.

From the time little southern children take their first step they learn their ritual, for Southern Tradition leads them through its intricate movements.

⁵ Charles Eagles, “Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era,” *Journal of Southern History* 66 (2000): 842-843.

⁶Gary T. Marx, “Thoughts on a Neglected Category of Social Movement Participant,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 80 (1974): 403.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 403-404.

And some if their faces are dark, learn to bend, hat in hand; and others, if their faces are white, learn to hold their heads high. ... So we learned the dance that crippled the human spirit, we who were white and we who were colored, day by day, hour by hour, year by year until the movements were reflexes and made for the rest of our lives without thinking. ... Southern Tradition taught well: we learned our way of life by doing. ... And you learned never, never, to get out of step, for this was a precision dance which you must do with deadly accuracy.⁸

The crippling dance was skillfully orchestrated by a minority planter aristocracy and white middle class who benefited economically, socially, and politically from a generational caste system that subjugated the majority-black population. The racially imbalanced system could not have survived unless “members of both races played their well-defined caste roles with inerrant consistency and an almost exaggerated vigor.”⁹ For nearly a century, Mississippi was a “closed society” whose pervading doctrine was white supremacy based on state rights and religious fundamentalism.¹⁰ When challenged by outsiders, “the society tightly closes its ranks, becomes inflexible and stubborn, and lets no scruple, legal or ethical, stand in the way of the orthodoxy.”¹¹ The mutually accepted caste system created a “plantation mentality” that perpetuated “white domination and black subservience ... reminiscent of slavery and sharecropping.”¹² The “plantation technique” when employed by whites was “most efficient in respect to discipline and policing [blacks and] has survived, more or less, despite the formal abolition of the

⁸ Lillian E. Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961): 96.

⁹ James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 153.

¹⁰ James Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963): 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 2.

institution of slavery.”¹³ For the most part, the majority of blacks in Mississippi lived physically and mentally in the shadow of the plantation.

The works of scholars such as C. Vann Woodard, Adam Fairclough, John Dittmer, Julius E. Thompson, Leon Litwack, Neil R. McMillen and Charles S. Johnson lead the discussion of African American life in the South.¹⁴ Their works demonstrated that Mississippi--perhaps more than any other southern state--presented overwhelming challenges for African Americans. Generally, they were faced with the lowest paying menial jobs, unequal educational facilities, substandard housing and harsh penalties in the judicial system. Further, Mississippi enacted voting statutes that severely restricted opportunities for African Americans to participate in electoral processes that could eliminate racial, social and economic disparities. In addition to literacy, residency and poll tax requirements, individuals who wanted to exercise their right to vote had to complete a lengthy 20-question registration application in the presence of a registrar. After a series of demographic questions, the applicant had to transcribe and interpret a section of the Mississippi Constitution and write a statement regarding their understanding of the duties and obligations of citizenship. Registrars had been known to ask applicants a series of unreasonable questions during the registration process. For example, in Hattiesburg, the registrar asked African American applicants questions such

¹³ Charles S. Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 210.

¹⁴ Extensive information on African American life in the South can be found in: C. Vann Woodard, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) and *Better Day Coming* (New York: Viking Press, 2001); John Dittmer, *Local People* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind* (New York: Knopf, 1998), Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and Charles S. Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

as “How many bubbles are in a bar of soap?” and “What is the due process of law?”¹⁵ Registrars, at their own discretion, decided whether the applicant was qualified to vote. In 1950, there were 990,282 African Americans living in Mississippi, representing forty-five percent of the 2,178,914 total population.¹⁶ Of the total voting age population in 1955, there were only 21,502 (or 4.2%) registered African Americans voters in the state in comparison to 423,456 (or 59.6%) registered whites.¹⁷ Mississippi, which had the highest percentage of African American residents in the country, had the lowest percentage of registered voters. Although the low levels of black participation in the electoral process can be attributed to rigid registration statutes, African Americans were subjected to threats, violence and economic reprisals when they attempted to exercise their right to vote. Disenfranchisement, which was essential to maintaining white supremacy, assured the continued subordination of African Americans in Mississippi.¹⁸

In addition to living in a segregated society that effectively used legal and legislative systems to suppress their civil rights, African Americans were keenly aware that any action contesting southern traditions had severe and often deadly consequences. Yet, in spite of these adversities, some African Americans, particularly the middle class, prospered economically and socially due to the patronage and paternalism of influential whites. In assessing the opposing forces within the black community, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. found that there were “a few middle class Negroes, who because of a degree of

¹⁵ “Along the N.A.A.C.P. Battle: Suffrage,” *The Crisis*, June - July 1952.

¹⁶ Mississippi Power & Light Company Economic Research Department, Mississippi Statistical Summary of Population, February 1983, 2.

¹⁷ McMillen, 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit from segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses.”¹⁹ Medgar Evers, NAACP Field Secretary in Mississippi, noted that blacks who had the capacity to “lead our people out of the present state ... are content with things as they are because of the personal profit that they receive from segregation and human misery.”²⁰ His wife, Myrlie, voiced a similar opinion:

In a segregated society there was always room for a few Negroes willing and able to justify their racial treason to work in the interest of the white man. ... One could live a lifetime of such service to segregation and not be found out, for almost invariably those Negroes who, for services rendered, had the ear of important or powerful whites were the very ones who, in the Negro community, were turned to for help in time of need.²¹

Azmie Moore, president of the Cleveland NAACP branch, echoed their sentiments: “The Negroes with money are in a world of their own here in the state of Mississippi. They live to themselves and they don’t want things to change, they are happy ... they are not interested in the freedom of the common Negro.”²² A plantation tenant plainly expressed conditions for the majority of blacks regardless of their class: “When you work on the white man’s place, you have to do what he says or treat, trade and travel.”²³ With certainty, Mississippi was indeed the “white man’s place.” Middle-class blacks who were

¹⁹ Ibid., 86-87.

²⁰ Evers-Williams and Marable, 147.

²¹ Myrlie Evers Williams and William Peters, *For Us the Living* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 148.

²² Dittmer, 72.

²³ Johnson, 121.

dependent upon whites retreated from controversy and traded favors to maintain their status.

This dissertation addresses the relationship between African Americans who were informants and allies of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, a state-funded agency created in 1956 to uphold state's rights. House Bill No. 880 authorized the Commission "to do and perform any and all acts and things deemed necessary and proper to protect the sovereignty of the State of Mississippi, and her sister states, from encroachment" by any branch, department or agency of the federal government.²⁴ It further provided the Commission with the latitude to use its funds and resources to cooperate with other states, commissions, agencies, organizations and individuals who might assist in carrying out its objectives and purposes. Though the bill did not mention segregation, its meaning was clear – the state had the legal and legislative authority to handle the "Negro problem" without interference from the federal government. MSSC did not accomplish this monumental task alone. It had assistance from informants, political and civic leaders, law enforcement agencies, and citizens constituting an information network located in every county in the state. MSSC used "informant" to designate any individual who provided information "of value in protecting the sovereignty of this state and preserving segregation in the public institutions."²⁵ Generally, these individuals were classified in the Commission files as informants and assigned an identification number.

²⁴ Mississippi Legislature Regular Session 1956, House Bill 880, MSSC SCR# 7-2-0-1-1-1-1 to 7-2-0-1-3-1-1.

²⁵ Organization and Administration: State Sovereignty Commission, MSSC SCR# 99-210-0-6-2-1-1. Each Sovereignty Commission Record (SCR) is assigned a file number by the Mississippi Department of Archives & History.

Whereas the majority of white informants did not have to fear discovery, African American informants tried to maintain a level of secrecy to protect their identity. By virtue of their ethnicity and position in the black community, they were used to spy on individuals, infiltrate civil rights organizations, and promote segregation. While MSSC used sinister tactics to achieve its objectives, it is arguable that some African Americans entered into alliances with the agency due to existing systems of patronage and paternalism that obligated allegiance and participation. The typical African American informant was a middle-class male in a professional or highly regarded occupation. Informants frequently used the same educational, civic, fraternal and religious institutions to gain information as those utilized by civil rights activists to advance the Movement. While some were paid on a regular basis, others, who did not benefit financially, were rewarded through continued patronage from influential whites. In the black community, these gentlemen were described as “Uncle Toms” or “Toms,” a term historically used to describe a subservient African American or one who wanted to curry the favor of whites. It was difficult to determine the total number of African American informants used by the Commission. Those who were paid directly from MSSC were identified in the files. Others who remained anonymous served as informants to law enforcement officers, civic leaders or elected officials. Additionally, MSSC worked with at least five detective agencies that maintained informants whose identities were unknown to the Commission. Many of the informants used by detective agencies served as operatives who integrated into civil rights organizations such as SNCC, COFO and CORE. Myrlie Evers-Williams, widow of Medgar Evers, estimated that there were “probably hundreds – maybe

thousands – of Mississippi Negroes who were actually bought and paid for by the whites in various communities.”²⁶

This discussion is organized within a framework reflective of the professions of primary African American informants – educators, ministers, and newspaper editors. It is done in this manner for two reasons: (1) men in these professions were typically used by the MSSC due to their positions and influence in the black community; and (2) these men had resources and networks that could simultaneously advance their own personal agendas and the objectives of the Commission. Of the African American informants in the Commission files, the nine case studies discussed in this research contained the most documentation. They were selected because they had a relationship with MSSC over an extended period of time or provided information or a service that could potentially influence the Civil Rights Movement. Further, they had existing relationships with white authority figures and generally adopted a segregationist philosophy that supported maintaining the status quo. Aligning themselves with MSSC appeared a seamless transition since many of their white patrons had direct ties to the Commission. The educators include B L Bell, superintendent of black schools in Bolivar County; John Boyd, president of Alcorn State College; Jacob Reddix, president of Jackson State College; and James White, president of Mississippi Valley State College. The ministers include H. H. Humes, president of the Mississippi Baptist State Convention and editor of the *Delta Leader* and M. L. Young, president of the Mutual Association of Colored People South. The newspaper editors include Percy Greene and Joseph Albright of the *Jackson Advocate* and John Jones of the *Community Citizen*. Collectively, they provided

²⁶ Evers-Williams and Peters, 148.

information to MSSC that was used to monitor movement activities, maintain extensive files on individuals and organizations, and supplement investigative reports. Some informants even used their position and authority to influence and curtail the actions of activists. Though they held positions in which they could lead and inspire, they chose to stand in the shadows of one of the most pivotal periods in American history.

The inclusion of African American informants in mainstream historical discourse seems even more relevant in light of the recent exposure of acclaimed civil rights photographer Ernest Withers as a paid informant for the FBI's domestic intelligence program. From 1968 to 1970, as confidential informant ME 338-R, Withers regularly provided FBI agents with information and photographs regarding the civil rights and anti-war movements in Memphis. As a photojournalist and trusted figure within the movement, he had almost unrestricted access to strategy meetings, civil rights leaders, and suspected black militants. Historian David Garrow described Withers as "the perfect source" for the FBI because "he could go everywhere with a perfect, obvious professional purpose."²⁷ With camera in hand, Withers captured iconic images that "helped advance the cause of civil rights by putting a human face on the movement's leaders and its soldiers."²⁸ After all, who would question the motives and actions of a man who was so openly accepted within the inner circle of the Civil Rights Movement?

In contrast to Withers, African American informants and allies of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission were not members of the inner circle. Instead they excluded themselves from the movement by maintaining favorable relationships with white decision-making authorities. As segregationists, they functioned in outer circles

²⁷ Marc Perrusquia, "Double Exposure," *Commercial Appeal*, 12 September 2010.

²⁸ "A legacy undiminished," *Commercial Appeal*, 12 September 2010.

that placed them opposite civil rights activists. As informants, they served as trustworthy and reliable allies of the white elite.

While the absence of historical discourse on African American informants may be attributed to a lack of source material, it could also indicate the preference of scholars to present the Civil Rights Movement in light of the heroes and heroines who shaped and defined the period. Although informants cannot be viewed within the same light, they nonetheless cast undisclosed shadows on the Movement. The Sovereignty Commission files represent tangible public records documenting the roles of African American informants in Mississippi. The digitized 134,000-page collection maintained by the Mississippi Department of Archives & History formed the basis of primary sources for this dissertation. As a source of historical research, the files are the archetype of the use of states' rights to usurp the civil liberties of an entire segment of its population. Additional primary sources were found in the archives of universities and colleges, state archival documents, oral histories, interviews, and newspapers and periodicals of the period.

Though there is limited scholarship on the Sovereignty Commission, the majority of works examined its operations and policies and subsequent influence on other agencies and socio-cultural movements. Within most of these publications, the roles of African American informants are marginalized. Few scholars have explored the complexities of the dual lives of African American informants.

Dixie's Dirty Secrets, by journalist James Dickerson, is a forty-year investigative history of how the government, the media and the mob conspired to fight integration and the Vietnam Antiwar Movement. In describing how actions in the South impacted the

nation, he exposed the symbiotic relationships between the Sovereignty Commission, the FBI, the Federation of Constitutional Government, the Dixie Mafia, the Memphis Cartel, and the Citizens' Council. While these agencies were separate entities, they shared similar motives, subversive strategies, and channels of information resulting in a forty-year betrayal of the public trust. Although most of these organizations no longer exist, Dickerson insisted that the remnants of them are alive and well—"the baton has often passed from father to son, from storefront to corporation, over a geographic area that has remained unchanged."²⁹ He attributed the atrocities committed in this country from the 1950s to the 1970s to a massive conspiracy by governments, media and influential individuals in Mississippi, Tennessee and Louisiana.

In a second book, *Devil's Sanctuary: An Eyewitness History of Mississippi Hate Crimes*, co-authors Dickerson and Alex A. Alston, Jr. recounted the dark days of the state's past when injustices against African Americans and other dissenters were supported by a belief in southern values and sanctioned by a state government that defied federal authority. In discussing the Sovereignty Commission and its relationships with the FBI, the Federation for Constitutional Government, the Ku Klux Klan and the Citizens' Council, they interwove their eyewitness experiences while growing up in Mississippi during its most turbulent period. In retrospect, they realized that in order for the immense numbers of infractions to occur "every institution in the state charged with leadership had to fail--the news media, the churches, the legal profession, and all three branches of government."³⁰ As some of the perpetrators remain unpunished and

²⁹ James Dickerson, *Dixie's Dirty Secrets* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 228.

³⁰ Alex A. Alston, Jr. and James L. Dickerson, *Devil's Sanctuary* (Illinois: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009), 319.

unscathed, Mississippi “is busily redacting its past ... like an animal covering up its wastes in a befouled nest.”³¹ Yet, no amount of creative editing can polish the state’s tarnished history. Dickerson and Alston concluded that Mississippi’s challenge lies in unveiling its injustices so that they will never be repeated.

Joseph Crespino, author of *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*, suggested that although segregationists vowed never to accept integration, whites in positions of power and influence initiated “strategic accommodation” or “practical segregation” as a realistic approach to “maintain good relations with local African Americans and minimize outside attention and federal interference.”³² Practical segregationists realized that granting token concessions to African Americans and making slow, moderate changes “was the only way to have some stake in controlling where, when, and how desegregation would actually occur.”³³ White elites were able to preserve their priorities and project an image of moderation and accommodation. Crespino described the Sovereignty Commission as an agency that evolved from “segregation watchdog” to “racial troubleshooter.” The Commission used “racial troubleshooting” to deter African American activism and reduce the defiant and violent actions of extremist groups. This transformation was due in part to the state’s effort to promote industrial and economic development during a period characterized by boycotts and demonstrations. Mississippi has historically been regarded as a state out-of-step with the rest of the nation. In contrast to this perception, Crespino linked the 1960s

³¹ Ibid., 331.

³² Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), 19.

³³ Ibid., 19.

Civil Rights Movement to the Conservatism Movement in the 1980s. He argued that since the 1960s, white Mississippians contributed significantly to the conservative counterrevolution in American politics. In reaction to liberal social reforms, white Mississippians went in search of another country—a more conservative Christian nation. The values they upheld resonated throughout the country to individuals who wanted to preserve fundamental American freedoms.

Mississippi's Defiant Years, written by former Sovereignty Commission director Erle Johnston, is the only published work by an individual who was intimately involved in the day-to-day operations of MSSC. Spanning a twenty-year period (1953 to 1973), Johnston recounted his personal experiences during the Civil Rights Movement. In his early months as Commission director, he admitted “using investigators and informants to acquire information on planned marches, boycotts, demonstrations, etc. that sometimes could be avoided or nullified when law enforcement agencies were notified in advance and were prepared.”³⁴ In retrospect, Johnston stated he “thought, then, like so many others, that segregation was best for both races because most of my contacts with Negroes indicated that they were satisfied as long as they were not mistreated. Perhaps, as it later turned out, they were telling me what I wanted to hear.”³⁵ In his epilogue, he discussed the closing of the files and litigation efforts to unseal the documents. During an interview with *New Yorker* reporter Calvin Trillin in 1994, Johnston stated that he had nothing to fear because the files would portray him as a practical segregationist rather than an authentic hater. At the time of his death in 1995, the files remained sealed. When

³⁴ Erle Johnston, *Mississippi's Defiant Years 1953-1973*. (Forest, MS: Lake Harbor Publishers, 1990): xix.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 401.

they were opened, there were over 1,000 documents revealing his “practical” actions during his eight-year tenure with the Commission. His conciliatory acts in the latter part of his life reflected that he wanted to be remembered as an advocate for human rights rather than a contributor to Mississippi’s segregated society. Johnston dedicated the book to civil rights activists Aaron Henry and Charles Evers, whom he described as “worthy adversaries during the defiant years.”³⁶ Crispino described Johnston’s memoir as a “racial conversion narrative” by a man “who struggled to reconcile his passion for Dixiecrat politics with the distinct impression that he had been on the wrong side of history.”³⁷

When attorney W. Glenn Watts wrote *The Sovereignty Files: The Real Story*, the files were still sealed. Using the papers of former Governor Paul Johnson and privately-owned documents, he discussed the subversive strategies used by MSSC, the Citizens’ Council and Ku Klux Klan to hinder the Civil Rights Movement. Watts charged that the “rear guard action” used by the Commission to gather and disseminate misleading and erroneous information made the agency culpable for the physical threats and deaths that occurred in Mississippi, particularly during Freedom Summer in 1964.³⁸

In *Reconstituting Whiteness: The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission*, sociologist Jenny Irons examined the agency’s unrelenting and unapologetic efforts to uphold whiteness as a racial identity and a position of privilege and power. Based on the assumption that race is a social construct, she examined how whiteness was established,

³⁶ Ibid., xxviii.

³⁷ Crispino, 269.

³⁸ W. Glenn Watts, *The Sovereignty Files* (Jackson: Town Square Books, 1999).

negotiated and sustained during the Civil Rights Movement. Irons described MSSC as a vehicle through which scholars can better understand the connection between whiteness, socio-cultural control and legitimized state repression. Through collaborations with other pro-segregation organizations to control resources and maintain privilege, MSSC constituted a state-organized defense of white supremacy. Among African American populations, MSSC affirmed whiteness by praising and rewarding “good Negroes” who did not challenge the status quo. In examining their roles as informants, Irons found their increased use paralleled the development and growth of civil rights organizations and activities.³⁹

The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States' Rights by Yasuhiro Katagiri was the first work regarding MSSC written by a historian. As a chronological narrative, the book demonstrated how culture, politics, economics and religion were used to circumvent federal legislation and constitutional rights. Katagiri linked the beginnings of MSSC and the mind-set that created it to the establishment of the Legal Educational Advisory Committee charged with equalizing Mississippi's school system and reactionary responses to *Brown v Board of Education*. In relating the agency's seventeen-year history, he focused on policy-making and how these policies were implemented on state and local levels. In doing so, he showed that the agency worked in conjunction with pro-segregation organizations and government officials to institute reactionary policies that led to civil rights infringements for African Americans and other pro-integrationists. Katagiri devoted an entire chapter to the efforts of the agency to mobilize African Americans as informants. In describing their involvement

³⁹ Jenny Irons, *Reconstituting Whiteness* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010).

with MSCC, he found that they had two roles: monitoring the activities of the NAACP and other civil rights organizations and scrutinizing each other to ensure reliability. He did not discuss their lives beyond their association with the agency.⁴⁰

In contributing to the discussion of the Civil Rights Movement and African American life in Mississippi, this dissertation used a different lens to view a historical period whose undercurrents were as significant as the period itself. It attempts to answer the following questions: In what manner did African Americans assist the Sovereignty Commission? How did they impact the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi? Were the informants willing participants, shrewd negotiators, or pawns in the movement to maintain segregation? Were the actions of these informants known to their families and associates? And what were the consequences of their actions?

Chapter One, “With All Deliberate Speed,” discusses the socio-cultural and political impact of *Brown v. Board of Education* in the Deep South. Mississippi and other southern states rallied to find ways to circumvent the desegregation of their schools and the foreseeable integration of southern society. The new Civil War was not just a battle for the schools; it was a battle to maintain the southern way of life. Southerners armed themselves with increased legislation and pro-segregation organizations. Southern states used interposition, states’ rights and sovereignty to legally challenge the Supreme Court and prevent federal intrusion. The new army was not hooded vigilantes but respectable politicians, state and city officials, and civic and business leaders. With the signing of the Southern Manifesto, the creation of the Federation for Constitutional Government, and the formation of Citizens’ Councils, southern states embarked on a “great crusade” to

⁴⁰ Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).

preserve the racial heritage, culture and institutions of the Anglo-Saxon race. In Mississippi—the lynchpin for maintaining southern segregation—the crusade was led by the State Sovereignty Commission.

Chapter Two, “Teaching Jim Crow,” traces the measures used in Mississippi to maintain segregated schools following the *Brown* decision. African American educators in administrative positions faced a dual dilemma: deference to the white power structure that controlled educational policies and funding and maintaining a semblance of leadership in the black community. Most became adept at functioning within these two worlds without undermining the Civil Rights Movement. Others, who supported the status quo for varied reasons, formed alliances with white politicians, civic leaders and the Commission. African American school principals reported on Movement activities within their school districts and the community. African American college presidents prohibited Movement activities on their campuses and dissuaded blacks from seeking admission to white colleges and universities. By and large, they publicly advocated segregation and encouraged African Americans to remain within their own educational, cultural and social institutions.

Chapter Three, “Let the Church Say Amen,” examines the relationship between the Commission and African American ministers. The southern black church served as the institutional center of the Movement due to its ability to garner and influence large masses of people. For black churches and ministers who supported the Movement, it was a holy crusade to gain equal rights for African Americans. In contrast to other southern states, African American religious leaders in Mississippi—particularly in the Delta—were noticeably absent from the forefront during the initial stages of the Movement. Due to

fear of reprisals from whites, some ministers took a conciliatory attitude toward civil rights. In addition to preventing civil rights activities within the church, they frequently used their pulpits as platforms to discourage members from challenging segregation. Ministers who served as informants disclosed information regarding Movement activities within civil rights organizations, ministerial associations and the black community.

Chapter Four, "Editorializing the Black Press," explores the manner in which MSSC used the black press to disseminate information and propaganda to the black community. While key concerns during this period were segregation, lynching and voting rights, these issues seldom made the headlines in the Mississippi black press. Instead, editors published soft news such as sports, entertainment, religion, and social events because they relied on white businesses and patrons for advertising revenues. Further, editors often held other middle-class positions in the community such as ministers, teachers, or physicians which would be jeopardized if they challenged segregation. In soliciting the support of the black press, MSSC utilized newspapers whose editorial policies endorsed segregation. Editors were encouraged to publish editorials and news stories that discredited or minimized the Movement. Further, some editors functioned as paid informants and reported on civil rights activities in their respective cities and adjoining small towns.

Chapter Five, "Coming to Terms with the Past," examines the extent to which Mississippi and other southern states initiated measures to hinder desegregation and civil rights. MSSC did not function as an isolated southern entity. It served as a model for the creation of other sovereignty commissions in the Deep South.

Chapter 1

With All Deliberate Speed: The Rush to Maintain Segregation

There is a powerful, well oiled engine in the South seeking to pull the states of the region back into the past. The terminus of the line is labeled 'States Rights' but it might better be identified for what is: anarchy, the ending of the Federal government's interest in the constitutional rights of American citizens.¹

After nearly two years of arguments and deliberations, the U. S. Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* on May 17, 1954. In delivering the Court's opinion, Chief Justice Earl Warren stated, "In approaching this problem, we cannot turn back the clock to 1868, when the Amendment was adopted, or even to 1896 when *Plessy v. Ferguson* was written. We must consider public education in light of its full development and present place in American life throughout the nation."² The Court unanimously ruled that "separate but equal" doctrine did not apply in the field of public education. On the same day, Virginia Senator Harry F. Byrd issued a press statement describing the decision "as the most serious blow that has yet been struck against the rights of the states in a matter vitally affecting their authority and welfare."³ Two days later, Mississippi Congressman John Bell Williams stood on the House floor and declared May 17 as "Black Monday." On May 27, Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland, known as the "Voice of the South," addressed the U. S. Senate stating that "segregation is not

¹ Frederick Routh and Paul Anthony, "Southern Resistance Forces," *Phylon Quarterly* 18:1 (1957), 50.

² National Center for Public Policy, Supreme Court of the United States, "Brown v. Board of Education," <http://www.nationalcenter.org/brown.html> [accessed 2 August 2010].

³ Virginia Center of Digital History at the University of Virginia, Television News of the Civil Rights Era 1950 -1970, "Statement by Senator Harry F. Byrd (D-Va.) May 17, 1954," <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/civilrightstv/documents/images/1954Byrd.jpg> [accessed 2 August 2010].

discrimination... It is desired and supported by the vast majority of the members of both races in the South, who dwell side by side under harmonious conditions.”⁴

Within weeks, Circuit Judge Thomas P. Brady of Mississippi delivered an address before the Greenwood Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution. He declared that “It was on Black Monday that the judicial branch of our government usurped the sacred privilege and right of the respective states of this union to educate their youth.”⁵ Brady’s speech was later expanded into a book that became the new Bible for resistance forces in the Deep South. The ninety-two page treatise was infused with racial stereotypes, condemnations of the Supreme Court, interpretations of the U. S. Constitution, and pseudo-Christian doctrine. In analyzing the new crisis resulting from the *Brown* decision, Brady offered fifteen solutions that included election of Supreme Court Justices by popular vote, abolition of public schools, economic boycotts against blacks, and the creation of a forty-ninth state to be inhabited solely by blacks. His most far-reaching solution was the establishment of the “National Federation of Sovereign States of America” as a governing body to coordinate the resistance efforts of various state organizations. Unlike the “nefarious Ku Klux Klan,” these would be law-abiding organizations that could withstand public scrutiny. Brady concluded by stating that the Supreme Court decision was detrimental to every citizen in the United States.⁶ *Black Monday* was the epithet that resonated throughout the South.

On May 31, 1955 the Supreme Court handed down *Brown II* calling for “a prompt and reasonable start” of school desegregation “with all deliberate speed.” Mississippi

⁴ Tom Brady, *Black Monday* (Jackson: Citizens’ Council of America, 1955), 42.

⁵ *Ibid.*, forward.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 67-90.

and other southern states rallied to find ways to circumvent the decision and the foreseeable integration of southern society. According to the Southern Education Reporting Service (SER), the South mounted a civil war to convince the nation that desegregation would never work and should be indefinitely or forever postponed. On February 25, 1956, Byrd publicly called for massive resistance of the Supreme Court decision stating: "If we can organize the Southern States for massive resistance to this order I think that in time the rest of the country will realize that racial integration is not going to be accepted in the South."⁷ In the three-year period following *Brown*, public schools in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia remained segregated. The NAACP initiated over 100 school integration suits. Southern states retaliated by approving at least 136 legislative acts to counter school desegregation. SERS estimated that at least fifty pro-segregation organizations organized throughout the South with an estimated 315,000 membership. Resistance movements followed a "predictable pattern of action and reaction." When blacks filed petitions or lawsuits for school integration, whites organized to create a united front against it.⁸

White southerners embarked on a campaign of respectable racism upheld by middle-class collective attitudes that cited cultural differences rather than prejudice as the justification for segregated schools. If southerners could not turn back the clock, they

⁷ Library of Virginia, "The State Responds: Massive Resistance," <http://www.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/brown/resistance.htm> (26 July 2010).

⁸ Don Shoemaker, ed., *With All Deliberate Speed* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957): 19, 102, 130. The Southern Education Reporting Service was founded in 1954 by newspaper editors and educators to report state-by-state facts on desegregation. Routh and Anthony, 51-52.

were steadfast in their determination to stop it. As for Mississippi, it was determined to remain a “closed society.”

Citizens’ Council

During a November 1953 meeting at a local school in Indianola, Robert B. Patterson, manager and farmer on the 1,585-acre Saints Rest Plantation in Sunflower County, listened attentively as a Mississippi state legislator discussed the likelihood that the Supreme Court would rule in favor of desegregation. Unsettled by the possibility that his children would have to attend schools with blacks, Patterson wrote a passionate letter to southern politicians and acquaintances about the impending crisis vowing “to gladly lay down [his] life to prevent mongrelization.”⁹ Despite Patterson’s attempts to mobilize people around his cause, they were generally disinterested. Some believed school desegregation was inevitable. Others could not imagine defying the Supreme Court.

Following the *Brown* decision, Patterson found inspiration after reading *Black Monday* and decided to devote his life to resisting desegregation. Undaunted by previous unsuccessful attempts, he talked to others in Indianola about the need for organized resistance. On July 11, 1954, fourteen civic leaders and businessmen met at the home of Dave Hawkins, manager of the cotton compress, to discuss a plan of action. The group included the mayor, the sheriff, a banker, a farmer, a dentist, a gin operator, a druggist, a farm equipment dealer, a hardware merchant, and two automobile dealers.¹⁰ The following week a public meeting was held in City Hall with Tom Brady as the key

⁹ John Bartlow Martin, *The Deep South Says “Never”* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1957), 1-2.

¹⁰ According to a photograph in the 11 August 1968 edition of the *Clarion-Ledger*, the fourteen original founders of the Citizens’ Council were Ed Britt, Arthur Clark, Jr., Alton East, Dink Gibson, Sr., Billy Gist, Dave Hawkins, W. M. Hemphill, Bill Hendon, Jim Metcalf, Herman Moore, Robert Patterson, Mayor Tom Pitts, Dr. J. C. Shirley, and Frank Tindall.

speaker. With approximately 75-100 townspeople in attendance, Indianola officially formed the first Citizens' Council. Officers included banker Herman Moore as president, attorney Arthur Clark as vice-president, Dave Hawkins as treasurer, and Robert Patterson as secretary. The Council established four committees—Membership and Finance, Legal Advisory, Political and Elections, and Information and Education. Patterson and others who supported the Council “felt like integration would utterly destroy everything we valued. We didn't feel the Supreme Court had the right to come into the state and forcibly cause the schools which were supported by the taxpayers of Mississippi to be integrated and therefore destroyed.”¹¹ They envisioned a grass-roots organization with sufficient influence to sway public opinion and persuade the Supreme Court to reverse its decision.

Shortly thereafter, Indianola members divided into teams and visited other counties to expand its base of support. With assistance from members of middle-class service and civic clubs, the initial work of the Council teams was shrouded in secrecy.

There has been no publicity and we suggest to each group that they keep it out of the papers and off the air. The news has trickled out, just as we had expected and hoped it would. The Negroes know that we are organizing, but he [sic] does not know what we plan to do. The best thing, we think, is to put him where he has stayed for 40 years and keep him guessing and continue our efforts.¹²

When the leading citizens agreed to sponsor a Council in their community, a public meeting was held during which speakers delivered a scripted fiery message that stirred emotions and created a sense of urgency:

¹¹ Martin, 3.

¹² Hodding Carter III, *The South Strikes Back* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1959), 34.

School integration is the first step toward racial intermarriage. When the NAACP petitioned the Court for integration, it was to open the bedroom doors of white women to Negro men.

I want to know if you will join me, to make this organization one of the most powerful in the United States, approving total segregation only, and frowning on the moderates and pussyfooters who think that the Supreme Court edict is an inevitable way of life that we must crawl on our knees and accept!¹³

Within six weeks, Councils were organized in seventeen counties. On October 12, 1954, the various Councils organized into a state organization, the Association of Citizens' Councils of Mississippi. The headquarters, which served as an information center and coordinated state-wide activities, was initially in Winona and later relocated to Jackson. William J. Simmons, who organized the Jackson Council, served as state administrator; Robert Patterson served as executive secretary. According to its 1956 Annual Report, ACCM had 80,000 members and Councils established in every Congressional District of the State.¹⁴

Standing on states' rights and racial integrity, Councils quickly spread throughout the South operating autonomously with their own by-laws, boards of directors, executive officers and state offices. Capitalizing on its growth and momentum, sixty-five delegates from eleven southern states met at the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans on April 7, 1956 to organize the various state Councils into an interstate group, the Citizens' Councils of America. A unanimously adopted resolution stated that the purpose of CCA was "preservation of the natural reserved rights of the people of the States ... and for

¹³ Erle Johnston, *Mississippi's Defiant Years 1953-1973* (Forest, MS: Lake Harbor Publishers, 1990), 14.

¹⁴ Second Annual Report, Association of Citizens Councils of Mississippi, August 1956, in Citizens' Council Collection, University of Mississippi J. D. Williams Library, Department of Archives & Special Collections.

maintenance of our States' Rights to regulate public health, morals, marriage, education, peace and good order in the States under the Constitution of the United States.¹⁵ During its second meeting on October 12, CCA developed a blueprint for victory. It included increasing counter-attacks against the NAACP and similar race-mixing groups, encouraging people to organize to protect separate schools and other social institutions, using interposition to protect sovereign rights from unconstitutional federal mandates, and presenting a national front for constitutional government and freedom of personal association. As a national organization, CCA had a two-fold purpose: strength through unity and strength through local responsibility. Consequently, it exhibited a united front supported by local councils with a civic responsibility to maintain a segregated south.

While CCA officially shunned violence as a method of coercion, it used economic, social, and political pressure on “agitators” who dissented from its ideology. Mississippi State Representative Fred Jones suggested tactics to be used by the Council: “We can accomplish our purposes largely with economic pressure in dealing with members of the Negro race who are not cooperating, and with members of the white race who fail to cooperate, we can apply social and political pressure.”¹⁶ Though the severity of these tactics varied, they were used indiscriminately throughout the South by the various Councils and individual members. The strength and control of the Citizens’ Council in Mississippi was described by Mississippi journalist Hodding Carter as a “wave of terror” sweeping through the South.¹⁷

¹⁵ “Citizens’ Councils Formed Into National Organization At Historic April Meeting,” *The Citizens’ Council*, May 1956, 1. http://www.citizenscouncils.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=newspaper&file=3-Apr56-Jun56.swf [accessed 3 August 2010].

¹⁶ *Clarion-Ledger*, 24 October 1954.

¹⁷ Hodding Carter, “A Wave Of Terror Threatens The South,” *Look*, 22 March 1955, 32-36.

Blacks faced reprisals for signing school desegregation petitions, belonging to the NAACP, and exercising their right to vote. A Council member stated, “The white people in this control the money, and this is an advantage the council will use in a fight to legally maintain segregation of the races. We intend to make it difficult, if not impossible, for any Negro who advocates desegregation to find and hold a job, get credit, or renew a mortgage. We’ll force the troublemakers out.”¹⁸ When fifty-three blacks signed a petition for school desegregation in Yazoo City, the local Council placed an ad in the *Yazoo City Herald* listing their names and addresses. Signs listing their names were also placed in store windows and other public spaces. Fifty-one of the petitioners lost their jobs or businesses. Gus Courts, co-founder of the Belzoni NAACP branch, was warned by a Council member to remove his name from the voting registration books or risk eviction from his grocery store. When Courts refused, he was not evicted but his rent was increased. Unable to pay the increase, he moved his store to another location. He was then visited by the Council leader who showed him a list of ninety-five registered black voters that was distributed to local white employers. Almost all of the registrants lost their jobs and could not find other employment. After he was wounded when shots were fired into his store, Courts left Belzoni and moved to Chicago. Reprisals were so devastating that Dr. T. R. M. Howard, founder of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, mounted a campaign to raise funds because of the “tremendous economic

¹⁸ Martin, 25.

pressure coupled with the constant threat of physical violence that's being applied by the White Citizens' Council of Mississippi upon Mississippi Negroes.”¹⁹

Though CCA insisted it was a not a political organization, it had considerable influence on southern politics. In addition to encouraging members to become registered voters, it advised them to vote for public officials, school board leaders, and governing church bodies who resisted integration. Few politicians, especially those in the Deep South, could be elected without Council support. Most openly joined the Council, sanctioned its agenda, and sought its endorsement as candidates who stood firm on segregation. With support from the Mississippi Council, Ross Barnett, who had lost two previous gubernatorial elections, won a landslide victory in 1959. During a rally in New Orleans, Governor Barnett proudly proclaimed, “I have been a Citizen’s Council member since the early days. I hope every single white southerner will join with me in becoming a member of this fine organization. The Citizens’ Councils are fighting your fight – they deserve your support.”²⁰ The Mississippi Council was instrumental in the passage of state constitutional amendments that raised voter qualifications and gave the legislature the power to abolish public schools in order to prevent racial integration. A state legislator explained that he voted for a Council-endorsed resolution because “the hot eyes of Bill Simmons were watching. If we had voted against the resolution he would have branded us.”²¹

¹⁹ T. R. M. Howard Interview, 1956, http://www.trmhoward.com/T.R.M._Howard/Audio_+_Video.html (accessed 25 July 2010).

²⁰ “Strength Through Unity.” Citizens’ Council Rally, New Orleans, 7 March 1960, pages 2, 15, in Citizens’ Council Collection, University of Mississippi J. D. Williams Library, Department of Archives & Special Collections.

²¹ William B. Street, “Leaders of Citizens Councils Face Lean Times,” *Commercial Appeal*, 17 October 1964.

In addition to economic pressure, moderate whites faced isolation from the community. Governor Herman Talmadge of Georgia described how to treat the white “scalawags” who did not stand up for segregation, “Don’t admit them to your homes. Don’t let them eat at your table. Don’t let them trade at your store or filling station.”²² In Holmes County, Mississippi, Dr. David Minter and Eugene Cox managed Providence Farm, a 2,600 acre co-operative farm sponsored by the Presbyterian Church. Serving both whites and blacks, Providence Farm contained a clinic, a small store and a credit union. When it was believed that Minter and Cox favored integration, a mass meeting of 700 men who were mostly Council members met to excommunicate them from the community. Although they denied promoting social integration at the farm, all of the men except two voted for excommunication. Minter and Cox initially refused to leave Holmes County. However, after months of threats and boycotts, Minter moved to Tucson, Arizona and Cox relocated to Memphis, Tennessee. Harold Fleming of the Southern Regional Council, a racially diverse organization that supported desegregation, found that pressure on moderates was more severe in small towns and rural areas. “Your children may suffer. Your neighbors won’t let their kids play with yours. It may be rumored that you’re a Communist because you’ve been known to mix and mingle. You develop a sense of alienation ... from the society in which you live.”²³ In its 1956 Annual Report, the Mississippi Council described the effectiveness of its tactics against moderates: “Only rarely is there a white voice raised in the press, the pulpit and the universities suggesting some forthright movement toward desegregation.... the white

²² Alfred Maund, “Grass-Roots Racism: White Council at Work,” *The Nation*, 21 July 1955, 71.

²³ John B. Martin, “The Deep South Says Never,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 6 July 1957, 84.

man who speaks out directly for prompt integration is virtually a sideshow freak.”²⁴ With a southern bloc and supporters outside the South, CCA had approximately 250,000 members in fifteen states. As the largest and most powerful pro-segregation organization in the country, it was a formidable adversary for anyone who opposed its ideology.

Federation for Constitutional Government

The last week of December 1955 in Memphis was not especially newsworthy. Retail businesses braced for after-Christmas sales. Grocers offered five-cent-per-pound specials on hog’s head and black-eyed peas for the traditional New Year’s feast. Patricia Ann Cowden of Raleigh, North Carolina was named the 1956 Maid of Cotton by Memphis Cotton Carnival. And WREC-TV with the largest receiver antenna in the Mid-South was scheduled to begin broadcasting from downtown Memphis. While these events were of regional interest, a secret meeting of influential southern politicians and business leaders at the Peabody Hotel soon captured national attention.

On December 28 and 29, thirty-five representatives from twelve southern states convened to formally establish the Federation for Constitutional Government, an organization to counter desegregation efforts and other measures that would destroy the original intent of the United States Constitution. Formative meetings began a year earlier in December 1954 when key organizers met in Atlanta to agree upon a general approach for the Federation. During a second meeting in January 1955 in Jackson, the group outlined its major objectives which included promoting constitutional government, preserving the sovereign rights of states, and securing the nomination of like-minded

²⁴ Fourth Annual Report, Association of Citizens Councils of Mississippi, July 1958, in Citizens’ Council Collection, University of Mississippi, Department of Archives & Special Collections.

political candidates.²⁵ The purpose of the Memphis meeting was to elect an executive committee and develop the constitution and by-laws. John U. Barr, a New Orleans industrialist and organizer of the Dixiecrat movement in Louisiana, was elected chairman. Though there was interest from northern states, Barr emphasized that, “This organization is restricted to the South now, but we have found supporters all over the nation. We’ve kept this thing under wraps until we knew our strength.”²⁶ The strength of FCG rested on collaborative relationships with the Citizens’ Council of America and other pro-segregation organizations. Further, FCG had an 100-member advisory council that included members of Congress, former governors, state legislators, judges, and ranking officials of the Citizens’ Council. Forty-nine advisory council members held either a state or national office.

In delivering an intense keynote address, Mississippi Senator James Eastland considered the gathering a great crusade to restore the control of the government to the people:

It will be a people’s organization ... to fight the Court, to fight the CIO, to fight the NAACP and to fight all those conscienceless pressure groups who are attempting our destruction. Defeat means death, the death of our Southern culture and our aspirations as an Anglo-Saxon people.

Generations of Southerners yet unborn will cherish our memory because they will realize that the fight we now wage will have preserved for them their untainted racial heritage, their culture and the institutions of the Anglo-Saxon race.²⁷

²⁵ “Fact Sheet on Conservative Federation,” *Congressional Quarterly News Features*, 24 February 1956, 2.

²⁶ James Gunter, “Unit Formed Here To Co-Ordinate Aims Of Southern Groups,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 29 December 1955.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

It was a rallying call for southern states to establish watchdog commissions capable of going head-to-head with the federal government—something akin to a secret police force answerable only to good white men of the South.”²⁸ Standing firm on segregation, FCG issued an official statement declaring that the Supreme Court Decision “placed an impossible burden upon the southern states. The convictions and feelings of southern people make it impossible for [them] to comply with the decision.”²⁹ The South would not retreat.

Congressman Rivers introduced a resolution to endorse the Virginia proposal for interposition to nullify and void Supreme Court decisions in the area of race. Adopted unanimously, it urged other southern states to “immediately utilize the Resolutions, Declarations and Acts of Interposition made available to them by the Legislatures, or the people, of their respective states.”³⁰ In a previous joint statement supporting interposition, Senator Eastland, Congressman John Bell Williams, and Judge Brady told the media:

The Black Monday decision rendered by the Supreme Court constitutes the most dangerous abrogation of the sovereign rights of the States of this Union ever perpetrated by any branch of our Federal Government.

We think the Southern States should carefully consider the doctrine and the precedents that a state has the legal right of interposition to void and hold for naught the deliberate, dangerous and palpable infractions of the Constitution committed by the Supreme Court. Do not the states have the right to defend that sovereignty?³¹

²⁸ James Dickerson, *Dixie's Dirty Secrets* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 5.

²⁹ Congressional Quarterly News Features, 2.

³⁰ “Southern Governors: The People Expect You To Act,” Federation for Constitutional Government, New Orleans, LA, in Farris Bryant Papers, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Box 8.

³¹ “Interposition – A Plan for Action Now,” *The Citizens' Council*. October 1955, 1.

On February 29, 1956, the Mississippi Legislature passed a unanimous vote to adopt interposition declaring that the state had not “delegated to the Federal Government its right to educate and nurture its youth and its power and right of control over its schools, colleges, educational and the public institutions and facilities...”³² Mississippi further declared that “it would take all appropriate measures available ... to void this illegal encroachment upon our rights, and we do hereby urge our sister states to take prompt and deliberate action...”³³ When the resolution was called to a final vote, a spontaneous group of House members began to sing “Dixie.” Every member in the Senate and House, a total of 177 legislators, voted for the resolution.³⁴ By 1957, ten southern states with the exception of North Carolina had passed Resolutions and Acts of Interposition.³⁵ With the passage of these legislations, southern states had a legal mechanism to use to impede desegregation in its schools and other public spaces.

FCG represented the first combined effort of southern states to use states’ rights and sovereignty as a foundation to circumvent *Brown* and uphold existing separate but equal doctrines. It demonstrated that the united South was a powerful force against social change. On the surface, it was viewed as a regional pro-segregation organization. To appeal to interests outside the South, FCG broadened its scope to include other issues that might infringe upon the constitutional rights of all states. Its greater vision included establishing a national headquarters in Washington, D.C. to coordinate nationwide

³² Laws of the State of Mississippi, 1956 Regular Session, 741.

³³ *Ibid.*, 744.

³⁴ W. F. Minor, “Mississippi Gives Okay on Interposition,” *Times-Picayune*, 29 February 1956.

³⁵ “Interposition – The Neglected Weapon,” Federation for Constitutional Government, University of Florida, Farris Bryant Papers, Campaign for Governor, Box 8.

patriotic activities, conduct research, prepare legal briefs, disseminate information, and lobby its political agenda.

Southern Manifesto

Senator Strom Thurmond, one of the most outspoken critics of *Brown*, considered the Supreme Court ruling a judicial attempt to destroy the southern way of life. In a speech before the Virginia Bar Association on August 6, 1955, Thurmond pledged to “fight against every effort to enact legislations I believe to be discriminatory against the greatest minority group in this nation—white people of the south—who have been subjected to abuse worthy of the dictators.”³⁶ He mounted a personal campaign to reverse the decision based on the premise that neither the Supreme Court nor the federal government had the legal right to interfere with States’ rights and practices.

Following the creation of the Federation for Constitutional Government, Thurmond conceived of a declaration to unite Southern politicians in a concerted effort to resist *Brown* and preserve segregation. The declaration commonly known as the “Southern Manifesto” was designed to coerce political moderates who wavered on desegregation to take a stand, send a bold message to the Supreme Court, and demonstrate to the North that the South was determined to defy the Court. Due to the defiant language in his initial drafts, Thurmond found limited support among his colleagues. When Senator Henry Byrd—the recognized leader of Virginia politics—endorsed the declaration, Thurmond found an ally who shared his passion for maintaining the traditions of the South. During a meeting of the southern caucus on February 12, 1956, Richard Russell (Georgia), Sam Ervin (North Carolina) and John Stennis

³⁶ Strom Thurmond, “The Supreme Court and the Constitution,” *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 1 October 1955, 32.

(Mississippi) were selected as a subcommittee to revise earlier drafts. The sixth and final draft, which was more moderate in tone, was written by Thurmond, Russell, Stennis, J. William Fulbright (Arkansas) and Price Daniel (Texas). It did not contain any racially-based statements commonly used to support segregation.

Standing on the Senate floor on March 12, 1956, Georgia Senator Walter George, President pro tempore, read the “Declaration of Constitutional Principles” (or “Southern Manifesto”) into the Congressional Record. Virginia Congressman Howard Smith, Chairman of the House Rules Committee, read the identical declaration on the House floor. Signed by 101 of the south’s 128 senators and congressmen, it politicized defiance of the Supreme Court by denouncing *Brown* as “unwarranted” and “a clear abuse of judicial power” that encroached on rights of states.³⁷ The Manifesto stated that the decision was “destroying the amicable relations between the white and Negro races that have been created through 90 years of patient effort by the good people of both races.”³⁸ It further declared that the actions of the Justices were based on their personal political and social ideas rather than the original intent of the Constitution and other legal precedents. While the document had neither legal standing nor required congressional action, the signers pledged to use “all lawful means” to reverse the Court decision or prevent its implementation.

A great deal of pressure was placed on southern Democrats to sign the Manifesto. Congressman Carl Elliott recalled that “When this Manifesto came along, neither those colleagues nor my constituents back in Alabama cared about moderation. You were

³⁷ Clemson University, “The Southern Manifesto,” <http://strom.clemson.edu/strom/manifesto.html> [accessed 26 July 2010].

³⁸ Ibid.

either with them or against them. And if you were against them, you were gone. Voted out. Politically excommunicated.”³⁹ Tennessee Senator Al Gore, Sr. who refused to sign the Manifesto found there was “powerful political pressure throughout the South to denounce the Supreme Court decisions and to assert state rights as superior to Supreme Court decisions.”⁴⁰ He described the declaration as “the most spurious, inane, insulting document of a political nature claiming to be legally founded” that he had ever read.⁴¹ In addition to Gore, other southerner Democrats who did not sign the declaration included Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson (Texas), House Speaker Sam Rayburn (Texas), Senator Estes Kefauver (Tennessee), and Congressman Albert Thomas (Texas). Every legislator from Mississippi signed the Manifesto.

Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission

During his January 1956 inaugural address, Governor James P. Coleman stated that segregation must be maintained “in accordance with those customs which the experience of ninety years has taught us ... I have not the slightest fear that four years hence when my successor assumes his official oath that the separation of races in Mississippi will be left intact.”⁴² His words echoed the views of his constituency who believed that segregation was not only constitutional but also ordained by religious

³⁹ Carl Elliott, Sr. and Michael D’Orso, *The Cost of Courage* (New York: Bantam Double Dell Publishing Group, 1992), 181.

⁴⁰ University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Southern Oral History Program Collection, “Oral History Interview with Al Gore, Sr.,” http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/A-0321-2/excerpts/excerpt_3139.html [accessed 26 July 2010].

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Bureau of Governmental Research, *Inaugural Address of the Governors of Mississippi: 1890-1980* (Mississippi: University of Mississippi, 1980), 308.

ideologies. For over ninety years, Mississippi had circumvented the fourteenth and fifteenth constitutional amendments that granted citizenship and voting rights to African Americans. According to interpretation by the State, *Plessy v Ferguson* provided the legal foundation (*de jure* segregation) to institute separate but equal statutes that governed almost every aspect of life. Mississippi also practiced *de facto* segregation whereby “social practices, political acts, economic circumstances, or public policy result in the separation of people by race or ethnicity even though no laws require or authorize racial separation.”⁴³ Through Jim Crow laws and understood customs, both black and white Mississippians created a culture that sustained the “closed society.”

With the interposition resolution in place, House Speaker Walter Sillers and other key Mississippi legislators worked toward cementing the state’s right to challenge federally mandated desegregation. Considering the climate, it seemed that passage of a bill to protect the state from encroachment by the federal government would be an easy task. However, when Sillers and fifty-eight state representatives introduced House Bill 880 on March 20 to create a sovereignty commission, there was some apprehension.

Representative William Winter admitted

There were a lot of unanswered questions in the minds of many of us about the effects of this legislation. The idea was presented initially as a public relations project designed to try to present Mississippi’s case to the nation in a favorable light. I feared, along with others, that in the frenzy and paranoias that began to envelope the state, the Commission might be used in ways that would be regarded later as offensive and an invasion of privacy ... there was much doubt about where this kind of legislation would lead us, particularly should the agency fall under domination of an organization like the Citizens’ Councils.⁴⁴

⁴³ MSN Encarta, “Segregation in the United States,” http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia/761580651/segregation_in_the_united_states.html [assessed 10 August 2008].

⁴⁴ Johnston, 49.

Winter and his colleagues had legitimate concerns since many of the supporters of the bill had close ties to the Citizens' Council. With an investigative division, the sovereignty commission had the authority to "subpoena and examine witnesses, to require the appearance of any persons, and the production [surrender] of any books, records, papers or documents" deemed necessary for its investigations.⁴⁵ Failure to comply could result in a monetary fine or a maximum of six months imprisonment according to the discretion of the commission. Though its intentions were understood, the language of the skillfully crafted bill did not mention segregation or integration. In the final vote of 140 members of the House, ninety-one voted in favor of the bill, twenty-three voted against it, and twenty-six abstained or were absent. It was adopted unanimously by all forty-nine members of the Senate. Coleman, who considered himself moderate on racial issues, had some reservations about the bill. However, he signed it into law on March 29 because he felt the State Legislature would have overturned his veto. Further, he planned "to appoint sound, stable citizens, and no fire-eaters ... [and use the commission] in every available way to avoid strife and possible bloodshed."⁴⁶

The twelve-member governing body of Commissioners included four ex-officio officers: the governor, the lieutenant governor, the Speaker of the House, and the attorney general. Other members included the President of the Senate, two members from the State Senate, three members from the House of Representatives, and three citizens representing each Mississippi Supreme Court district. With a \$250,000 two-year appropriation, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission was the official agency

⁴⁵ Laws of the State of Mississippi, 1956, 521.

⁴⁶ Johnston, 49-50.

designated to maintain segregation throughout the Magnolia state. MSCC marked the beginning of tangible efforts by the Federation for Constitutional Government to establish state-funded organizations to challenge the Supreme Court and the federal government.⁴⁷

In the months following the signing of the bill, Coleman created the infrastructure of the sovereignty commission. By late April, the first Commission members were appointed. In addition to the Governor, they included Lieutenant Governor Carroll Gartin, Attorney General Joe Patterson, Speaker of the House Walter Sillers, Senators William G. Burgin, Jr. and Earl Evans, Representatives William H. Johnson, Jr., George P. Cossar, and Joe Hopkins, and attorneys Hugh N. Clayton, Will S. Henley, and George J. Thornton.

During organizational meetings in May, the Commissioners established three departments within the agency: administrative, publicity, and investigative. The administrative department, which was basically the agency director, managed day-to-day operations and served as executive secretary for the Commission. The publicity department prepared and disseminated publications concerning encroachment upon state sovereignty, race relations, and segregation. The investigative department developed sources of information and obtained facts that would protect the sovereignty of the state and preserve segregation. At his discretion, Coleman could employ special investigators who were only known to him and worked solely under his direction. He appointed Representative Ney Gore, Jr., as director with a salary of \$7,200 per year. He also appointed Hal DeCell, editor of the *Deer Creek Pilot* newspaper and his former publicity manager, as public relations director with an annual salary of \$6,500. Leonard C. Hicks,

⁴⁷ Alston and Dickerson, 31.

former chief of the State Highway Patrol, became the chief investigator at \$6,000 per year. At \$3,300 each per year, Mildred Curry was hired as the secretary and Ruby Weeks was hired as the stenographer. With this modest staff, MSSC offices were conveniently located in the Capitol Building on the same floor with the Governor.⁴⁸ Since the agency was charged with protecting the segregated life in Mississippi, it was dubbed by the media as the “segregation watchdog.”⁴⁹

Though Coleman was a firm segregationist, he preferred a conciliatory approach to maintain peace between the races. As the chairman of the Commission, he directed the agency toward using public relations and other non-confrontational methods to preserve the social order. Based on the premise that Mississippi was “misunderstood and misrepresented,” MSSC embarked on an ambitious publicity campaign to improve the state’s image. Gore contended that if the true facts concerning the situation in Mississippi were disseminated to “opinion-molding-media throughout the Nation,” there would be “an increased understanding of Mississippi, of her problems and her people [and] lead to a more compatible situation for all concerned.”⁵⁰ To present the facts, MSSC disseminated numerous informational documents. “Don’t Stone Her Until You Hear Her Side” dispelled “antagonistic falsehoods and/or misrepresentations” of Mississippi written by press outside the South.⁵¹ It emphasized that continued accusations against the state and its people led to the creation of the MSSC Public

⁴⁸ Ney Gore to Frank W. Ellis, 5 September 1956, MSSC SCR# 97-19-0-6-2-1-1.

⁴⁹ “Sovereignty Board Is At Full Strength,” *Commercial Appeal*, 2 October 1958.

⁵⁰ Questions/Answers for Ney Gore, 22 August 1956, MSCC SCR# 99-40-0-156-1-1-1.

⁵¹ “*Don’t Stone Her Until You Hear Her Side*,” October 1956, Mississippi State Sovereignty Collection, University of Mississippi, J.D. Williams Library, Department of Special Collections & Archives.

Relations Department “to aid in the dissemination of the truth about Mississippi to fair-minded citizens of the nation.”⁵² Another leaflet, “Fact Sheet on the Economic Status of the Negro in Mississippi,” summarized the amount and value of land owned by blacks, the number of black teachers and their total annual salaries, and the various occupations held by blacks. These and similar documents which portrayed a positive image of the State were widely distributed through direct mail to media outlets across the country.

As a seasoned editor, DeCell was keenly aware of the importance of making contacts and developing relationships. He believed that “a big factor in the preservation of Mississippi’s customs and its sovereignty as a state [was] the need to win more friends and create a better understanding of the true state of affairs existing in Mississippi among the citizens outside the South.”⁵³ Consequently, he made numerous trips to cultivate relationships with northern editorial and news associations, broadcast news journalists, and publicity officials. While attending the New England Press Association convention in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, DeCell arranged a one-week expense-paid tour of Mississippi from October 6 to 14 for twenty New England publishers and editors. The group included seven editors from Massachusetts, five from Connecticut, three from New Hampshire, two each from Vermont and Maine, and one from New York. MSSC “intended to provide these grass-roots editors and publishers with a background of factual information about Mississippi, in order that they might in the future have some basis for objective and fair treatment of Mississippi news.”⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Hal DeCell to Governor Coleman, circa 25 May 1956, MSSC SCR# 99-9-0-12-2-1-1.

⁵⁴ Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, *Report To The People*, (Jackson: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, 1956), 1.

When Governor Coleman welcomed them to the State, he explained that segregation in Mississippi would continue “for at least the next 50 years. We don’t intend to obey the Supreme Court’s decision because it is not based on law. There is no tension or malice or ill will between the races.”⁵⁵ He jokingly remarked that Mississippi wanted “to get word to the rest of the country that we don’t fry Negroes and eat them for breakfast.”⁵⁶ The tour was strategically planned to include manufacturing and agricultural industries, schools and colleges, and meetings with community leaders, civic officials, and educators. As their tour guide, DeCell assured them that “we will show you whatever you want to see. We will not try to cover up anything because we have nothing to cover up.”⁵⁷

Through scripted discussions and speeches interwoven with southern hospitality, the editors repeatedly heard the familiar adages: “Mississippi had no Negro problem” and “The Negro is content.” However, during informal conversations with both black and white Mississippians, they found contradictory statements and developed contrasting viewpoints about the Magnolia State. Curtis Johnson of *The New Era* in Connecticut realized that “in Mississippi the Negro is considered less than a man - a second rate being in some limbo between an animal and a human.”⁵⁸ Robert Baram of *The Boston Globe* in Massachusetts was told “You northerners don’t understand the Negro as we [whites] do ... We take care of him and treat him like the child he is. When he is sick we help him

⁵⁵ “The Press: On the Spot,” *Time*, 22 October 1956.

⁵⁶ *Report To The People*, 6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

and when he is broke we give him money. That's the way he wants it."⁵⁹ When Richard P. Lewis of *The Journal-Transcript* in New Hampshire visited Mississippi Vocational College, he was told by a black student, "I don't want to be treated like a white man. I want to be treated like a man."⁶⁰ Alfred Ball, of the *Woodhaven Observer* in New York, found that whites were not only friendly to blacks but guided and guarded them. He concluded that "Mississippi has no problem that can't be solved over a period of years."⁶¹ William R. Rotch of the *Milford Cabinet* and *Wilton Journal* in New Hampshire was excited, inspired and sickened by what he saw. In private talks with blacks, they reminded him that "it is our tax money, too, which is bringing you down here. If you go home and write that the negro is happy in Mississippi you will have let down the colored man in his struggle for dignity."⁶² Though none of the editors openly endorsed segregation, most reached the same conclusion—the majority of white Mississippians were steadfast in maintaining a segregated society and most blacks were eager for change. As for the future, a black man in Natchez said he had hope, but saw "a long, dry, dusty road ahead."⁶³

By and large, MSCC considered the New England tour a success due to the amount of publicity it generated for the State. DeCell reported that the tour received wide-spread news coverage in southern newspapers, was featured on national television

⁵⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁶¹ Tour Comments in Direct Question on Segregation, circa October 1956, MSCC SCR# 99-12-0-39-1-1-1.

⁶² William B. Rotch, "I Was Excited and Inspired – And Also Sickened by What I Saw in Mississippi," *Commercial Appeal*, 18 October 1956.

⁶³ William B. Rotch, "Cotton, Cordiality and Conflict," *New South*, March 1957, 9.

and radio news programs, and was carried on the United Press and Associate Press wire services. When the articles were printed in northern newspapers, MSCC compiled them into “Report to the People,” a thirty-page booklet with a cover photo of Coleman and the editors standing on the steps of the Governor’s Mansion in Jackson. The total cost of the tour was \$2,007.56, an average of \$200 per editor.⁶⁴

MSSC public relations efforts were strategically planned and carefully orchestrated. To disseminate its message via the print media, the agency elicited support from newspapers that editorially supported segregation. Among those were the *West Point Daily Leader*, the *Jackson Daily News*, the *Holmes County Herald*, the *Hattiesburg American*, and the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*. To reach the black community, it entered into financial agreements with three black-owned newspapers: the *Jackson Advocate*, the *Delta Leader*, and the *Community Citizenship*. MSCC provided accommodating newspapers with editorials, suggestions for lead stories, and advertising revenue on a regular basis. Editorials and articles by black editors supporting segregation were frequently reprinted and distributed by MSCC to the northern press and other media outlets. Working in collusion with key newspapers in the state and other parts of the country, MSSC manipulated the news to distort the true face of segregation in Mississippi. Though there is no evidence to suggest the exact number of print media that accepted the agency’s doctrine, MSCC nonetheless maintained a mailing list of thousands of newspapers and media outlets across the country. Between May 1956 and October

⁶⁴ New England Tour Expense Report, undated, circa October 1956, MSSC SCR# 99-12-0-37-1-1-1.

1957, MSSC distributed over 200,000 pieces of direct mail to newspapers, radio and television stations, and state legislators outside the South.⁶⁵

Early MSSC investigative efforts focused on collecting data, developing sources for information, and establishing relationships with law enforcement officials and civic leaders throughout the state. When former FBI agent Zack Van Landingham was hired as the second investigator in October 1959, he instituted an elaborate filing and cataloging system based on methods used by the FBI.⁶⁶ The agency collected all decisions of the Supreme and federal courts which were adverse to states' rights, sovereignty and segregation. In addition to maintaining a publicity file on every county in the state, it maintained files on segregation laws, integration issues and racial incidents in every state. MSSC considered pro-integration organizations as the greatest threat to the State. "Investigations [were] continually conducted with reference to the NAACP and its affiliate organizations, the Negro Regional Leadership Council, the Progressive Voters' League, The Ministerial Improvement Association, and the Southern Christian Ministers Conference of Mississippi."⁶⁷ Investigators traveled across the state to locate NAACP chapters and identify "negro agitators." With "eyes and ears" in all eighty-two counties, MSSC established an informal network of informants who readily provided information regarding racial matters and integration issues. In the black community, the

⁶⁵ State Sovereignty Commission Report to the Members of the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi, undated, circa November 1957, MSSC SCR# 7-0-1-29-2-1-1.

⁶⁶Zack Van Landingham to Director, 5 June 1959, MSSC SCR# 7-0-1-2-2-1-1. Each file was assigned a code: 1-race agitator; 2-integration organizations; 3-(Name) school integration; 4-civil rights election; 5-civil rights violence; 6-miscellaneous (inquiry concerning); 7-administrative office; 8-administrative personnel; 9-administrative informant; 10-publicity (general); 11-criminal cases; 12-speeches; and 13-subversive.

⁶⁷ Report to the Mississippi State Legislature on Activities of the State Sovereignty Commission, 3 December 1959, MSSC SCR#7-3-0-5-6-1-1.

“eyes and ears” were “level-headed negro citizens” who opposed the NAACP and helped “maintain the status quo of the races.”⁶⁸ Usually, these individuals were conservative educators, ministers, and newspaper editors who faced considerable losses if they challenged the white orthodoxy.

Using a campaign platform of racial epithets and vows to maintain segregated schools, Ross Barnett was elected governor in 1960. In a meeting of southern governors in Columbia, South Carolina on January 29, Barnett urged southern leaders to unite in an aggressive campaign to defend themselves against their common enemy. He suggested they follow Mississippi’s example by creating “special agencies in each Southern state to coordinate this battle, and finance our efforts with public funds.”⁶⁹ These agencies would work in cooperation with similar pro-segregation groups and organizations such as the Citizens’ Council. Barnett regarded the Councils as the “one capable and responsible organization through which our people are making their strength felt through unity.”⁷⁰ With Barnett as both governor and Council member, the Mississippi Citizens’ Council had a powerful ally who supported its agenda and aggressive tactics.

The Councils’ influence in State government was evident during the 1960 regular session of the legislature when the “body acted as little more than a rubber stamp for bills which had the Council endorsement.”⁷¹ Twenty-one new bills to preserve segregation were signed into law by Barnett. Laws prohibiting obstruction of public sidewalks,

⁶⁸ State Sovereignty Commission, 13 July 1959, MSSC SCR# 7-0-1-56-11-1-1 to 7-0-1-56-12-1-1.

⁶⁹ “Highlights from Jan. 29 ‘Southern Unity’ Address by Mississippi Gov. Ross Barnett at Columbia, S.C.,” *Citizens’ Council*, February 1960, 3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Hodding Carter III, “Citadel of the Citizens Council,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 12, 1961, 23.

streets and highways were used to curtail marches, demonstrations, and sit-ins. A recreational statute was passed allowing the Governor to close public parks to prevent desegregation. To hinder school integration, Boards of Trustees were authorized to close any or all schools if it was in the best interest of enrolled students or preserved peace, tranquility and order in the school or district. On February 2 in Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 115, Council Administrator William J. Simmons, Barnett's close friend and advisor, was commended for his "great contribution to the South in its present struggle for a better national understanding of our position."⁷² Before the close of session in May, the legislature approved a \$350,000 biennial appropriation to the Commission, an increase of \$200,000 from the previous year.⁷³ The additional funds could be used by the Commission "in cooperating with other Southern states in advertising and disseminating true information about the State, the South and race relations."⁷⁴

In contrast to Coleman, Barnett took a "hard hand" in the operations of the Commission. He planned "to take the offensive in [the] fight to maintain the southern way of life ... and employ the Sovereignty Commission in every way to promote southern unity."⁷⁵ Within months after taking office, Barnett reorganized the agency beginning with a newly formed Commission board, some of whom were members of the Citizens' Council. Commission members included Lieutenant Governor Paul B. Johnson,

⁷² LSM, 1960, 870.

⁷³ State Sovereignty Commission Statement of Appropriated Funds and Unexpended Balances, circa 30 June 1972, MSSC SCR# 97-58-0-22-1-1-1. The Commission budget was decreased to \$150,000 during the previous biennial legislative session. It was speculated that the decrease was a retaliatory measure by some legislators because the Commission refused to provide funds to the Citizens' Council in 1958.

⁷⁴ Senate Bill 1661, 13 March 1960, MSSC SCR# 7-0-1-110-1-1-1.

⁷⁵ Charles M. Hills, "New Sovereignty Group to Meet, Take 'Offensive'," *Clarion-Ledger*, 13 March 1960 in MSSC SCR# 7-0-1-107-1-1-1.

Jr., House Speaker Walter Sillers, Attorney General Joe Patterson, Senators Earl Evans and George Yarbrough, Representatives Edwin W. Hawkins, Sr., William Johnson, Joseph G. Moss, and attorneys Aubrey H. Bell, Jesse E. Stockstill, and Thomas H. Watkins. Barnett appointed Albert Jones, a veteran law enforcement officer and former president of the Mississippi Sheriff's Association, as director with an annual salary of \$9,000. Erle Johnston, publisher of the *Scott County Times* and Barnett's campaign publicity manager, was employed part-time as public relations director with a salary of \$250 per month. The investigative department was expanded to five investigators assigned to specific counties.

During a closed Commission meeting in July, Simmons requested funds for the Citizens' Council *Forum*, a weekly television and radio program featuring topical interviews with conservative leaders and politicians. The Commission unanimously approved an immediate grant of \$20,000 and thereafter \$5,000 monthly allocations.⁷⁶ At the direction of Barnett, Jones issued a press statement on July 7 announcing that grant. The funds were awarded to the Council because it "offered the best possible means of presenting the case for State Sovereignty and Constitutional Government to the nation" through its broadcasts on "316 television and radio stations in 40 states."⁷⁷ Jones further stated that the *Forum* deserved the "active financial support of all patriotic Mississippians who should realize the urgent need for counter-acting the one-sided stream of propaganda leveled at the South by most national news media."⁷⁸ The Sovereignty Commission, as

⁷⁶ From June 1960 to December 1964, the Sovereignty Commission contributed \$193,500 to the Citizens' Council. MSSC SCR# 99-30-46-1-1-1 to 99-30-46-2-1-1.

⁷⁷ Albert Jones to Lt. Governor Paul Johnson, 7 July 1960, MSSC SCR# 7-0-1-148-1-1-1 to 7-0-1-148-2-1-1-1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Representative Winter had feared four years earlier, became an extended arm of the Citizens' Council.

Although the law that created the Commission authorized the agency to combine funds and resources with other organizations to fulfill its objectives, the grant was steeped in controversy. The day following the announcement, NAACP Field Executive Medgar Evers charged that "the Sovereignty Commission's actions made every Negro and white citizen in the state a ... substantial contributor to an organization whose prime objective is to keep Negroes 'second class' citizens in this nation of plenty."⁷⁹ In a July 12 editorial, Hodding Carter of the *Delta Democrat Times* described the grant as a "\$20,000 tax grab" affirming that the "Citizens' Council is calling the shots" in the Barnett Administration.⁸⁰ On July 17, the NAACP issued a statement further condemning the grant:

The Board of Directors of the Mississippi State Conference of N.A.A.C.P. Branches deplors the actions of the State Sovereignty Commission, an agency of the State of Mississippi, in granting \$20,000 in public funds to the private organization - White Citizens Council. The Board unanimously approved taking steps toward legal action against this crime perpetrated on the State Treasury and the Negro and White citizens of the State of Mississippi. We seek the cooperation of all other citizens who are outraged by this travesty against the law to join hands with us in seeking to cause an immediate halt to this type of conduct.⁸¹

Mass protests by the NAACP were held on July 22 in Clarksdale, Greenville and Jackson. Although MSCC faced protests, adverse public opinion and negative media

⁷⁹ "Meeting Planned in Protest of Donations," *Delta Democrat Times*, 8 July 1960, in MSSC SCR#9-11-1-46-1-1-1.

⁸⁰ Hodding Carter, "\$20,000 Tax Grab," *Delta Democrat Times*, 8 July 1960, in MSSC SCR# 7-0-1-151-1-1-1.

⁸¹ Myrlie Evers-Williams and Manning Marable, eds., *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 191-192.

coverage, it refused to sever its financial ties to the Council. Barnett and like-minded politicians rallied to support continuation of the funds based on the original decision of the 1960 state legislative session.

To supplement the *Forum*, Barnett initiated a Speakers Bureau to “to tell the nation about the TRUE situation in this state – how people live and cooperate together, for mutual progress, under a segregated society.”⁸² Johnston, as public relations director, was charged with developing and implementing the Bureau. To do so, he wrote civic leaders, politicians, public officials and college presidents and asked one question: “What would you say in about fifty to one hundred words, in support of segregation in the South, if you were asked to appear before a Northern audience?”⁸³ From those responses, he drafted a thirty-minute talk suitable for civic and rotary clubs. To solicit speaking engagements, pamphlets with a personal message from Barnett were mailed to clubs and organizations in the North and a “letter to the editor” was mailed to 200 northern newspapers.

Using a transcript prepared by Johnston, volunteer speakers comprised of judges, attorneys, legislators, and teachers discussed segregation, the dual school system, the *Brown* decision and the Constitution. Speakers were also given approved responses to questions that might be asked in discussions following the presentations. If they were asked if the killers of Emmett Till would ever be captured, the speakers responded, “I don’t know. This was an example of violence that we deplore. We consider it an unsolved crime, just as other states have unsolved crimes.” In regard to the lynching of

⁸² “Mississippi is Ready. Are You Curious?,” MSSC SCR# 99-140-0-11-1-1-1 to 99-140-0-11-3-1-1.

⁸³ Erle Johnston, *I Rolled With Ross* (Baton Rouge: Moran Publishing Company, 1980), 27.

Mack Parker, speakers stated that “he was taken out of his jail cell and killed because the continual court delays had shattered confidence in the courts, if a Negro was a defendant, and federal judges set aside state laws.” When questioned about the Freedom Riders, speakers replied that “they came into Mississippi to seek violence ... They accomplished nothing, and were treated with respect, except for one incident by a hot-head.”

Generally, responses were vague enough to answer the questions without presenting a negative image of the state.⁸⁴

The first speaker was Judge O. H. Barnett, the governor’s cousin. Accompanied by Johnston, Barnett spoke to over two hundred business and civic leaders on July 12 at the Kiwanis Club in Pipestone, Minnesota. The speaking engagement was also broadcast on the local radio station. To capitalize on Barnett’s speech and influence the November presidential election, Johnston asked Dave Hart, editor of the *Pikestone County Star*, to publish twelve copies of a “special issue” with the editorial heading, “Mississippi Is Being Watched.” Written by Johnston, the editorial read in part:

The eyes of the nation will be watching Mississippi on November 8 because results of the election may indicate a new viewpoint on segregation ... Many residents of Pikestone, as a result of his [Barnett] talk, had a new image of Mississippi and a new sympathy and understanding for their problems, and how they are solving them with cooperation of both races ... Both candidates for president, Richard Nixon and John Kennedy, have endorsed strong civil rights platforms to which Mississippians are opposed. However, Kennedy’s approach is far more drastic than Nixon’s. Kennedy makes it clear he will move into Mississippi and integrate churches, lunch counters, beaches, swimming pools, and schools.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Questions Asked and Answers Given by Sovereignty Commission Volunteer Speakers, MSSC SCR# 99-139-0-7-1-1-1 to 99-139-0-7-5-1-1.

⁸⁵ Johnston, *I Rolled With Ross*, 29-30.

No one in Pikestone read the “special issue,” but it was reprinted and widely distributed in Mississippi. The Sovereignty Commission “exploited it all over the state, adding the obnoxiousness from the Republican party and promoting the unpledged electors.”⁸⁶

In December, Dobbs-Maynard Advertising Company completed *The Message from Mississippi*, a pro-states’ rights and pro-segregation propaganda film. At a cost of \$29,779.64, the twenty-seven minute documentary was filmed primarily in Forest, Mississippi, Johnston’s home town. While the film acknowledged the existence of segregation, it illustrated that blacks and whites could progress socially, culturally and economically in a segregated society. Through scenes and interviews guided by a narrator, the film depicted the harmony among both races. The narrator explained that since Mississippi had a forty-five percent “colored” population, it was “unlike the situation in most states in the nation.” The situation “brought problems and created challenges.” Segregation evolved as a “social system under which both races retain their identities and achieve their own destinies without either race forcing itself upon the other.” In praise of the system, conservative black and white leaders recounted the mutual respect and cooperation between the races. Forest Mayor J. E. Calhoun pointed out that “even though we are segregated in schools, churches, and other activities ... we have more contact with each other in business and community projects than the two races might have in so-called ‘integrated’ areas.” Jack Tubb, State Superintendent of Education, T. H. Naylor, executive secretary of the Education Finance Commission, and E. R. Jobe, executive secretary of the Board of Trustees for Institutions of Higher Learning provided commentary regarding the dual education system and improvements

⁸⁶ Ibid., 28. With Governor Barnett’s approval, the editorial was used to sway unpledged electors against Kennedy. Additional accounts of this editorial arrangement can be found in Erle Johnston’s Oral History in the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage.

in education for blacks. In his remarks, Governor Barnett reiterated “the progress, mutual respect . . . and understanding between the white and colored races in Mississippi.” He asserted that blacks in Mississippi preferred a segregated society. He concluded by saying “We will work out our problems to the best advantage of all citizens.” After a preview by Commission members on December 15, a private showing was held on December 20 for industrialists, bankers and the press who praised the film’s “content and arrangement.” Dobbs-Maynard conducted a state-by-state analysis of television stations in densely-populated areas. They estimated that the film could reach 37,529,000 viewers or 27.9 percent of the total U. S. population in a twelve-state area for a cost of \$52,704.89 over a twenty-month period, an average monthly expenditure of \$2,650.⁸⁷

In a report to the Commissioners and the Mississippi Legislature, Albert Jones summarized the agency’s activities from May 1960 to December 1961. The investigative department made 482 investigations relative to integration, voting rights, and racial agitators. Investigators, who were well-known by state, county and city authorities, provided assistance when needed in matters related to subversive behavior and racial violence. Investigators also developed close relationships with investigative committees in other southern states to maintain united sovereignty in the South. In the public relations department, the Speakers Bureau had made forty-five presentations in thirteen states. *The Message from Mississippi* had been shown sixty-nine times in twenty-seven

⁸⁷ Katagiri, 82-84. Since Kitagiri has a copy of “The Message from Mississippi,” he provided a detailed narrative account of the film’s content. Dave Maddux, “\$29,000 Film To Tell Story of Segregation,” *State Times*, 16 December 1960 in MSSC SCR# 7-0-2-60-1-1-1. “*The Message from Mississippi*,” MSSC SCR# 7-0-2-92-1-1-1 to 7-0-2-92-22-1-1.

states. A newly formed Education and Information program distributed approximately 100,000 pieces of anti-Communist literature to schools, colleges and civic clubs.⁸⁸

In the years to follow, the Commission continued to impede integration and maintain white orthodoxy. As the Civil Rights Movement intensified throughout the state, MSCC strengthened its network of informants, increased its investigations, maintained almost constant surveillance of members of civil rights organizations, and lobbied against civil rights legislation. The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission became the second “wave of terror” sweeping through the State—a well-oiled machine powered by interposition, sovereignty and states’ rights.

⁸⁸ To the Members of the State Sovereignty Commission and to the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi, 5 July 1962, MSSC SCR# 7-3-0-12-1-1-1 to 7-3-0-12-5-1-1.

Chapter 2

Teaching Jim Crow

“Dependency made teachers vulnerable to manipulation by whites. Politicians expected black teachers to discourage militancy or radicalism. They called upon teachers to “represent” the black community in the expectation that they would toe the line. They asked teachers to be their eyes and ears within the black community, even to act as spies and informers.”¹

Historically, public education for blacks in Mississippi developed in a Jim Crow system that disproportionately provided more resources to support white schools. As early as 1899, Mississippi Superintendent of Education Andrew Kincannon summarized the foreseeable future of education in the state: “It will be readily admitted by every white man in Mississippi that our public school system is designed primarily for the welfare of the white children of the state, and incidentally for the negro children.”² This practice of incidental education for blacks in public schools continued for decades. Black educators were faced with lower salaries, inadequate facilities, and a lack of resources. Yet, as the pillars of the black middle class, they stood at a crossroads between teaching equality and functioning in a society filled with inequalities.

For over fifty years, Mississippi operated a dual education system that was wholly separate but never equal. While statewide pupil enrollment for black and white students was almost equal during the 1951-52 school year, there were 3,143 more white teachers than black. The student-teacher ratios were 28:1 for white teachers and 40:1 for black teachers. With an annual salary of \$1,091, black teachers earned fifty-one percent less

¹ Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 15.

² Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 72.

than their white counterparts. The state spent \$117.43 for each white student and only \$35.27 for each black student. These stark inequalities and impending desegregation prompted the state to reexamine its education system.³

In 1952, while attorneys were arguing the constitutionality of segregation in public education before the Supreme Court, the Mississippi state legislature was debating school equalization as a strategy to influence the Court's decision. The Legislative Recess Education Committee was created to examine the state's school laws, programs and policies and make recommendations to the legislature that allowed for continued segregation. Based on LREC recommendations, the November 1953 special legislative session approved measures to equalize teacher salaries, student-teacher ratios, school buildings and facilities, transportation, and educational opportunities.⁴

Although the state was committed to equalization, it would not commit to a level of implementation until after the Supreme Court rendered its decision. If the decision favored continued segregation, the state would initiate limited equalization. However, if the Court ruled in favor of desegregation, Mississippi was prepared to abolish its school system. One month before the decision, the legislature created the Legal Educational Advisory Committee "to formulate a plan or plans of legislation, prepare drafts of suggested laws, and recommend courses of action" whereby the State could "maintain separate education and separate schools for the white and colored races."⁵ The twenty-five member all-white committee was chaired by the governor. When the *Brown* decision

³ Mississippi State Department of Education, Statistical Data 1957-58, 6, 7, 36. James W. Loewen and Charles Sallis, eds., *Mississippi: Conflict and Change* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 247.

⁴ Charles S. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 53-54.

⁵ LSM 1954, House Concurrent Resolution No. 54, 585-587.

was announced in May 1954, Governor White stated “We shall resist ... by every legal means at our command.”⁶

Determined to maintain separate schools, Governor White sought black support for a voluntary segregation plan. In early July, he met with key conservative black leaders who supported equalization: Percy Greene, editor of the *Jackson Advocate*; Rev. H. H. Humes, president of the General Baptist State Convention and editor of the *Delta Leader*; three college president—James H. White of Mississippi Valley College, Jacob Reddix of Jackson State College, and Jesse R. Otis of Alcorn College; and three school principals -N. R. Burger, John D. Boyd, and Edward S. Bishop. For their promised support from the black community, Governor White pledged to initiate an aggressive building plan to eliminate the disparity between black and white schools. Upon their recommendation, he scheduled a statewide meeting for July 30 and invited ninety-four black leaders to discuss the voluntary plan with LEAC.⁷

To present a united front, a majority of the black leaders met at the Farrish Street Baptist Church in Jackson the night before the meeting. During the six-hour gathering, the group was basically divided into two factions: educators and other conservatives who theoretically supported *Brown* but wanted to accept equalization and those who endorsed the NAACP’s position for immediate school integration. After heated arguments, chiefly between Greene, Howard and Humes, the group voted almost unanimously to support the Supreme Court decision. Businessman Earl W. Banks was selected to make remarks on behalf of the group. The hour before the Friday morning meeting, John Boyd, H. H. Humes and James White met with the governor and disclosed the results of the meeting

⁶ Loewen and Sallis, 251.

⁷ Bolton, 61-62. “Miss. Leaders, Gov. White Talk,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 July 1954.

at the church. Realizing that his voluntary segregation plan may be rejected, Governor White wanted to cancel the meeting but it had already been widely publicized. Earlier that month, he had boasted, “This is going to be my meeting and I want the press there.”⁸

At the beginning of the meeting, Governor White told the delegation, “You need have no fear of expressing your feelings and your beliefs, say what you think and no one will take issue with you.”⁹ Presiding over the meeting, House Speaker Walter Sillers made lengthy remarks about Legal Educational Advisory Committee and the state constitution. At every pause of his speech, Banks eagerly raised his hand to be recognized. When he was finally acknowledged, Banks read the prepared opening statement emphatically declaring that “respect for the law is the foundation of a free democratic society” and “we can do no other than to endorse and abide by the decision” of the Supreme Court.¹⁰ The declaration, which called for the appointment of blacks to all policy-making boards, emphasized that the only solution was to consolidate and integrate the present schools on all levels. When Banks concluded, members of the delegation jumped to their feet and yelled “Freedom! Freedom.”¹¹

Speaker after speaker reiterated the group’s position against segregation. Howard, who was the most vocal, said the issue could not be settled “by decree, or by a committee

⁸ “White Talks Schools With Negroes; To Relax Curtain,” *Clarion Ledger*, 18 July 1954.

⁹ Transcript of Meeting of Mississippi Legal Educational Advisory Committee and School Officials. 12 August 1954. George Washington Owen Papers, MDAH, Box 3, Folder 10.

¹⁰ Transcript of Meeting of Legal Educational Advisory Committee and Negro Leaders, 30 July 1954, Walter Sillers Papers, Delta State University, Box 21, Folder 15. Other accounts of this meeting can be found in Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry: The Fire Ever Burning*, 88-91; Beito and Beito, *Black Maverick: T. R. M. Howard’s Fight for Civil Rights and Economic Power*, 91-95; Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 62-65; and numerous newspapers of the period.

¹¹ Aaron Henry with Constance Curry, *Aaron Henry: The Fire Ever Burning* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 90.

of one group going on behind closed doors—bringing the solution to the problem to the other group on a ‘take it or leave’ proposition.”¹² He stressed that “the Negroes who have come here today have not come to help work out any trick or plan to circumvent the decision of the Supreme Court ... we voted not to endorse any program of legal or voluntary segregation.”¹³ Even the governor’s allies—Percy Greene, James White, and John Boyd—did not break the momentum by supporting segregation. Instead, they talked about the immediate need to improve schools, black participation in policy-making decisions, and the importance of the Court decision.

John W. Jones, a newspaper editor and teacher from New Albany, was the only person who supported the governor. In the familiar deference to whites, Jones with his head bowed said, “Don’t let us be fooled now. White folks have been good to us all our lives. Let’s not kick them in the face.” In a “slow, quiet voice,” he continued, “I know it is better for us of the Negro race to go to our colored schools and churches and we will suffer if we continue this demand for integration.” When he finished praising the “good white folks,” a hush fell over the room. Ruby Stutts Lyells, president of the Negro Federation of Women’s Clubs, stood and said, “I could see in your faces while Mr. Jones spoke that many of you are sorry.” As she walked up and down the aisle pointing to Jones, she said, “But I am glad he spoke because he is an outstanding example of what we must be rid of - folks like him whose minds have been warped by segregation.”¹⁴

¹² Transcript of Meeting of Legal Educational Advisory Committee and Negro Leaders.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ University of Southern Mississippi Civil Rights Documentation Project, “Oral History with Dr. Aaron Henry, Prominent Civil Rights Worker,” <http://anna.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/ohhenryap.html> [accessed 15 August 2010].

In search of a voice of reason, Sillers called upon Humes, his “trustworthy ally.” Waiting for silence, Humes looked toward Sillers and said, “there ain’t no use in y’all being mad at us over this thing. It wasn’t us that made that decision. It was nine white men that made that decision.” Separate but equal would never have come into question “if Negroes were not going to school in buildings that you could look through the cracks in that floor and see Mother’s earth, and through the top—the roof of the house, and study astronomy.” As the crowd cheered, Sillers said, “This meeting is over.”¹⁵

Contrary to his opening remarks, Governor White took issue with the black delegation who stood against him and rejected voluntary segregation. He remarked, “I have completely lost confidence in the Negroes and will deal with the legislature hereafter. They have shown their true feelings.”¹⁶ Later that afternoon he met with LEAC members who expressed similar reactions to the morning meeting. R. M. Newton noted, “There is no cooperating with them. They want to be social equals in every way.”¹⁷ Icey Day stated, “I will never vote for new buildings unless we have a guarantee that Negroes won’t go to school with our children.”¹⁸ LEAC voted unanimously to support the governor in presenting a constitutional amendment to the state legislature to abolish the public school system. Specifically, the proposed amendment would “authorize the counties and school districts to abolish public schools, sell and dispose of school buildings, lands and other property, and make appropriation of public funds, and do such other acts and things deemed necessary to aid and assist educable children of this

¹⁵ Transcript of Meeting of Legal Educational Advisory Committee and Negro Leaders.

¹⁶ “May Ask Authority To Abolish Public System of Schools,” *Clarion Ledger*, 31 July 1954.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

state to secure an education.”¹⁹ If the amendment was approved, it had broad implications. For instance, the state would have to sell and dispose of 2,630 schools and their respective properties.²⁰ It would result in the job loss of 17,036 individuals employed as instructional personnel (superintendents, supervisors, principals, and teachers) as well as support staff and service providers.²¹ Most importantly, countless students would be deprived of an education. While the amendment made provisions for “educable children,” this in itself raises several questions. How will the state define “educable?” By whose authority and in what manner will children be deemed “educable?” And what are the future consequences for the children the state chooses not to educate? Considering the temperament of Governor White and LEAC, it is doubtful that a large number of blacks would be included within the group of “educable children.” Sillers, who served as LEAC chairman, aptly summarized the position of many Mississippi Delta leaders regarding educating blacks: “[T]he way to keep them satisfied with the low wages and the status quo was not to let them get too well educated.”²²

The amendment was approved during an extraordinary session of the state legislature. It passed in the House on September 10 with a vote of 10 to 14.²³ Six days later on September 16, it passed in the Senate a vote of 37 to 0.²⁴ Mississippians approved the amendment by a vote of 106,832 to 46,095 during a special election held on

¹⁹ Partial Report and Recommendations of Legal Educational Advisory Committee, 3 June 1954, Walter Sillers Papers, Box 60, Folder 12.

²⁰ Mississippi Department of Education, Statistical Data on School Session 1954-55, 21.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bolton, 71-72.

²³ *Journal of the House*, 1954 extraordinary session, 40.

²⁴ *Journal of the Senate*, 1954 extraordinary session, 67-68.

December 21.²⁵ Mississippi was now authorized to abolish its public school system.²⁶ In what seemed like a reprieve for southern states, the Supreme Court handed down another decision (*Brown II*) in May 1955 that rested implementation of desegregation with local authorities. Mississippi viewed the decision as a victory because the state was able to retain its segregated school system while proceeding at its own pace toward desegregation. When Mississippi created the Sovereignty Commission in 1956, it replaced the Legal Educational Advisory Committee as the official agency to maintain segregated schools.

In seeking allies among black educators, MSSC turned to conservatives who recognized that their continued positions and status were contingent upon maintaining separate school systems. In summarizing the compromising roles of black educators, NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers viewed them as Uncle Toms who were “given high educational posts, such as principals, superintendents, and even college presidents, to bolster their community prestige.”²⁷ Further, he considered the practice by state and county officials to name schools after black principals “a conspiracy” to maintain their status.”²⁸

Whites in positions of power expected black educators to conform to ideals that upheld southern traditions and instill these same ideals in their students. In a meeting with Van Landingham regarding black educators who could be used as informants, Euclid R. Jobe of the Board of Trustees of Institutions of Higher Learning had

²⁵ Don Shoemaker, *With All Deliberate Speed* (Harper & Brothers: New York, 1957), 98.

²⁷ Evers-Williams and Marable, 156.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

“considerable confidence” in John Boyd of Alcorn A & M College, Jacob Reddix of Jackson State College, and James White of Mississippi Valley College.²⁹ While an endorsement from Jobe did not necessarily mean these men would serve as informants, it indicated that he believed they could be called upon to provide a service to the Commission, particularly if it benefited their respective colleges. Black college presidents of state-funded institutions were constantly scrutinized by MSSC and the Board of Trustees to ensure that they conformed to the policies and ideals of the state. College presidents heeded MSSC’s advice by dismissing faculty and staff who were considered racial agitators, preventing student activism, and prohibiting political and civil rights activities on their campuses.³⁰ At a time when youth activism anchored the Civil Rights Movement, Boyd, Reddix and White stood as gatekeepers holding their students as hostages in a segregated system.

Commission investigators relied upon white school superintendents to provide them with referrals to black supervisors and principals who were reliable and could potentially serve as informants. While the files contained numerous documents on black educators identified as informants, many only provided minimal information or were used sporadically. For example, Needham Jones, superintendent of black schools in Stone County and president of the South Mississippi Negro Teachers Association, was only contacted once by MSSC investigator Van Landingham. During that encounter, “Jones expressed himself as against the NAACP policies of integrating the white schools” and firmly believed that “the interest of the negro lies along separate school

²⁹ Van Landingham to Commission Director, 28 August 1959, MSSC SCR# 2-52-0-16-1-1-1.

³⁰ Joy Ann Williamson, “Quacks, Quirks, Agitators and Communists,” *History of Higher Education Annual* 23 (2004): 54.

lines.”³¹ Jones also told Van Landingham that he had travelled to Gulfport to convince Clennon King to “leave the state as he was doing himself and no one else any good by his loud talk and antics.”³² Though Van Landingham thought he could “be of valuable help in maintaining segregation and keeping down racial tension,” Jones was not consistently used as an informant.³³ By far, B L Bell, superintendent of black schools in Bolivar County, was the most prolific informant among black educators.³⁴ In contrast to other informants who were contacted by MSSC investigators, Bell volunteered his services to the Commission.

B L Bell

B L Bell was born in 1908 in Silver City, a small community in Humphreys County, Mississippi. After graduating from the training (high) school at Jackson State College in 1926, he attended Morehouse College, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1930. He then came to Bolivar County where he began working in the public school system. Bell was considered “an erudite young Morehouse graduate who was to revolutionize the educational process for blacks in Cleveland.”³⁵ When the Cleveland Separate School District was created in 1939, Bell was named superintendent.

For most of his career, Bell was superintendent of black schools in Marigold, Boyle and Cleveland in Bolivar County. It was a position that provided him with

³¹ Van Landingham to Director, 11 August 1959, MSSC SCR# 9-14-0-2-1-1-2 to 9-14-0-2-2-1.

³² Ibid. King attempted to enroll in a PhD program at Ole Miss in 1958. He is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “B L” are not initials. It is was Bell’s first name.

³⁵ Linton Weeks, *Cleveland: A Centennial History, 1886-1986* (Cleveland: City of Cleveland, 1985), 180.

considerable authority and influence in the county, particularly in the black community. As such, Bell was a founding member of the Cleveland Negro Civic Club, the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, and the Greenville Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity. He was also associate editor of the *Delta Leader*, the weekly newspaper owned by H. H. Humes. Bell, who was very conscious of class, distanced himself and his family socially from working class blacks. His niece, Margaret Block, recalled that as a child “he didn’t let us come to his house. He didn’t even want his children to play with us because they were the black bourgeoisie and we were just common people.”³⁶ Yet, his middle class position was often usurped by the white planter class and a cotton economy that influenced almost every aspect of black life in the Delta. B L Bell, Jr. remembered when plantation owner Sam Long told his father: “Bell, you open them schools up, them nigger schools up, and when the cotton is ready to chop, you let them out. And when the time comes to pick, put them niggers back in the field.”³⁷

Prompted by Mississippi Valley College president James White, Bell wrote to Governor James P. Coleman on November 18, 1958, expressing his desire to work for the Sovereignty Commission. In congratulating the governor on his stand for segregation, the letter in part read:

Your method of approach to this problem certainly meets the approval of all Negroes of the thinking classes and those who think soundly. I believe I could be of great help to them as well as helping to bring about the goals which I believe I can see through your manifestations. Many white friends of mine here in this county know personally how that I have been able to get over to my people the best things for us.³⁸

³⁶ Margaret Block, interview by author, Cleveland, MS, 19 August 2010.

³⁷ B L Bell, Jr. oral history conducted by Kim Lacey Rogers and Owen Brooks, 4 March 1996, Delta Oral History Project, Tougaloo College, 25.

³⁸ Bell letter to Governor Coleman, MSSC SCR# 9-9-0-1-2-1-1 to 9-9-0-1-4-1-1.

In closing the letter, Bell listed the names of prominent whites who could speak on his behalf. Among them was House Speaker Sillers, A. H. Ramsey, Bolivar County Superintendent of Education, and state legislators Charles Jacobs and W. B. Alexander. One month later on December 18, Bell was assigned informant number 9-9-0 and assigned to Van Landingham.³⁹

On January 8, 1959, Van Landingham had his first meeting with B L Bell. As customary among investigators, he met with white officials to obtain background information about Bell. Law enforcement officials confirmed that Bell did not have a criminal record. Ramsey described him as a “white man’s negro” who was honest and trustworthy. During his meeting with Van Landingham, Bell disclosed information about the members and activities of the NAACP Chapter in Bolivar County. He assured Van Landingham that he would be able to secure information from certain individuals “who have big mouths and are unable to keep from talking.” He also discussed a previous meeting with other concerned, educated blacks who wanted to organize a secret society that would keep abreast of activities that were detrimental to the present way of life in Mississippi. With proper funding, Bell believed this society could provide valuable information to the Commission.⁴⁰ He felt MSSC should employ him at an annual salary of \$6,000 to travel throughout the state blocking the activities of the NAACP. In a memorandum to Governor Coleman, Van Landingham recommended that Bell be paid to

³⁹ Bell informant number, MSSC 99-201-0-341-1-1-1.

⁴⁰ Van Landingham to Governor Coleman, 12 January 1959, MSSC SCR# 2-10-0-6-1-1-1 to 2-10-0-6-3-1-1. Bell’s initial meeting with concerned black citizens was held on 2 March 1958 at the home of Fred Miller in Mound Bayou. The following persons were invited to attend the meeting: W. A. Higgins, B. F. McLaurin, O. M. McNair, Dr. J. White, E. S. Bishop, B. B. Jennings, J. W. Chambers, John L. Sullivan, R. E. Hunt, Dr. Lee Owens, Rev. J. H. Parker, Fred Miller, Amos Reese and C. J. Jones. MSSC SCR# 99-0-27-3-1-1.

organize his secret society. On January 15, MSSC “authorized the payment of up to \$100 a month for a period of three months to B. L. Bell for the purpose of setting up secret underground organization of Negroes to assist in maintaining segregation in Mississippi.”⁴¹

On January 18, Bell met with members of his fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi, in Greenville to discuss his secret organization. Present at the meeting was Fred Miller and Calvin J. Jones of Mound Bayou, George P. Maddox of Greenville, Andrew C. Isaac of Cleveland, B. F. McLaurin of Clarksdale, and Burnel E. Coulon of Itta Bena. These individuals would “funnel any information to him regarding any developments in the racial situation in any and all parts of the state.”⁴² He would then forward the information to MSSC which would decide the best strategy for handling the situation. Although Bell promised his fraternity brothers that their identities would remain secret, he disclosed their names to Van Landingham. He also did not inform them that he was working with the Sovereignty Commission.

Over the next several months, Bell worked to organize and expand his secret society. He believed his committee would “be a nucleus which, in the future, will be able to block the NAACP in its efforts to force integration in Mississippi.”⁴³ To move forward, his committee identified the various NAACP members and branches throughout the state. Believing that “the best way to reach the Negroes is through the various churches,” Bell and his committee members spoke regularly at church functions

⁴¹ Van Landingham to file, 15 January 1959, MSSC SCR #97-106-0-151-2-1-1.

⁴² Van Landingham to Commission Director, 26 January 1959, MSSC SCR# 9-9-0-11-1-1-1 to 9-9-0-11-3-1-1.

⁴³ Van Landingham to Commission Director, 26 January 1959, MSSC SCR# 9-9-0-12-1-1-1 to 9-9-0-12-2-1-1.

“stressing the fact that Negroes should want to remain segregated and develop their own culture and not want to be integrated with the whites in any respect.”⁴⁴ At the end of the three-month period, Bell’s secret organization did not materialize. The Commission files did not indicate why his organization failed. Oddly, at the same time Bell was organizing his informants, two members of his committee, Fred Miller and Rev. J. H. Parker, contacted Van Landingham to solicit funding for a similar organization. “Miller claimed credit for originating the plan approximately a year ago and holding a meeting in his home” after “he had sent out over 20 letters to Negroes whom he could trust over the state.”⁴⁵ Considering the extent of information they provided to Van Landingham regarding the NAACP, it is reasonable to assume that Miller and Parker found it more profitable for them to work directly with the Commission rather than with Bell. Van Landingham, who concluded that they were trying to undermine Bell, did not provide them with a definite answer to implement their plan. He continued to use Bell as an informant, paying him on average \$50 per month to report on the activities of the NAACP and other civil rights organizations.

In celebration of the fifth anniversary of the *Brown* decision, the national NAACP scheduled a mass meeting in Jackson for May 17 at the Masonic Temple on Lynch Street. The meeting included an address by Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the National NAACP. With assistance from Wilkins and Medgar Evers, the local organization intended to solidify plans for desegregating Hinds County-Jackson Area public schools. During a previous Commission meeting, Senator Earl Evans suggested using a “large

⁴⁴ Van Landingham to Commission Director, 9 March 1959, MSSC SCR# 9-15-0-2-1-1-1 to 9-15-0-2-3-1-1.

⁴⁵ Van Landingham to Director, 18 February 1959, MSSC SCR# 1-17-0-7-1-1-1 to 1-17-0-7-3-1-1-1. This is the same meeting Bell said he held to initiate his secret organization.

group or delegation of Negroes opposing the NAACP to parade or picket the meeting” carrying signs that read “Go Home Roy Wilkins, We Don’t Want You Stirring Up Trouble In Mississippi.” Van Landingham discussed this idea with Bell, who agreed it was a good idea, but felt that “Negroes hesitated to stick their necks out and be crucified or castigated by the NAACP publications in Negro papers over the nation.” Bell also pointed out that picketing the meeting would have little value in view of the recent Poplarville incident during which Mack Charles Parker was taken from jail by a mob and lynched for allegedly raping a white woman. The Commission discarded the idea of picketing, but increased its surveillance through collaboration with other agencies. In addition to Bell, Dr. Kirby Walker, superintendent of Public Schools, asked several black employees to attend and report on the meeting. Meady Pierce, Chief of Detectives in Jackson, assigned two plain-clothes detectives to the meeting and police officers recorded the license tag numbers of all attendees.⁴⁶

On the day of the meeting, Van Landingham and Attorney General Joe Patterson drove to the Masonic Temple to survey the area. Chief Pierce informed them that warrants had been sworn for the arrest of Wilkins and Evers. In talking with the Chief of Police, they found that Jackson Citizens’ Council member, Elmore Greaves, had sworn out the complaint against the two men “for defying a state ‘breach of peace’ law that forbade advocating integration.” They all agreed that “the law was unconstitutional, the arrests would never stick, and the incident would gain the NAACP a million dollars’ worth of publicity, while making the authorities in Mississippi look like morons.” When

⁴⁶ Van Landingham to Director, April 30 1959, MSSC SCR# 9-9-0-30-1-1-1. Van Landingham to Director, 6 May 1959, MSSC SCR# 2-5-2-47-1-1-1.

Greaves refused to withdraw the warrant, Patterson contacted Governor Coleman who intervened and had the warrant dismissed.⁴⁷

On May 25, Bell submitted a handwritten report to MSSC describing Wilkins' speech as "one of the old familiar ones agitative and full of sarcasm of the white people of Mississippi and at what he called the few Negro stooges."⁴⁸ Bell reported that he talked to Wilkins about school integration plans in Jackson and was told that the national office had not planned to get involved at the present time. Bell talked to his friends in the Jackson area who were NAACP supporters but they did not know of any immediate plans to start a racial incident. In his monthly NAACP report, Medgar Evers, who described the meeting as a "complete success," reported that Wilkins addressed a crowd of 2,500 to 2,900 and the event raised over \$4,200.⁴⁹

One of the Commission's most ambitious surveillance efforts involved the Southern Christian Ministers Conference in September 1959. The scheduled speakers included some of the most influential individuals in the Civil Rights Movement: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., president of Southern Christian Leadership Conference; Ella Baker, SCLC executive director; Rev. Glenn Smiley, national secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation; Rev. James Lawson, regional secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation; Dr. C. O. Simpkins, head of the Shreveport NAACP, and Samuel Williams, head of the Atlanta NAACP. The majority of the conference was held at Pearl

⁴⁷ Maryanne Vollers, *Ghosts of Mississippi* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 76-77.

⁴⁸ Bell's Report to Commission, MSSC SCR# 9-9-0-35-1-1-1 to SCR# 9-9-0-35-2-1-1.

⁴⁹ Evers-Williams and Marable, 139.

Street A.M.E Church in Jackson. Dr. King was scheduled to speak at 7:30 P. M. on September 23 at the Masonic Temple Auditorium.

Of the scheduled activities, MSSC was most interested in the mass meeting featuring King. William Simmons of the Citizens' Council suggested harassing the speakers and arresting King and Smiley. Chief Pierce, who wanted to use the same procedures employed during Wilkins' visit, felt that arrests would be viewed as denial of free speech and persecution. On September 16, Governor Coleman, Attorney General Patterson, Senator Evans and Van Landingham met in the governor's office to discuss other strategies. It was suggested that news coverage linking Smiley, who was white, to Communist activities might deter blacks from attending the meeting. A suggestion was also made to use a recording device to tape the meeting. The following day, Van Landingham met with Sam Ivy of the Mississippi Highway Patrol to secure a recording device. For it to be effective, Van Landingham had to have a space within one block of the auditorium. He contacted Kirby Walker, Superintendent of Jackson City Schools, who provided access to the Colored Schools Administration Building located near the temple. Dr. Walker also provided a key to the building and a black confidant to serve as a look-out so no one entered the room during the operation. Van Landingham contacted Bell who agreed to attend the meeting wearing the microphone.

On the day of the meeting, Van Landingham met with Bell at 11:00 A. M. to discuss the plan. At 6:45 P.M., Ivy and Van Landingham met Bell and placed the microphone in his pocket. After they dropped him in the vicinity of the meeting, they went to the Colored Schools Administration Building and set up the equipment. Sitting on the front row, Bell heard King praise "the fearless and dedicated leaders that have

stood in this state like courageous Davids amid the giants of resistance and the Goliaths of injustice” knowing “the possibilities of economic reprisals and bodily harm are much greater here than in any other section.”⁵⁰ In reminding the audience that the forces of resistance were still active, he said:

We must also realize that privileged groups never give up their privileges voluntarily. If we are victimized with the feeling that we can sit down comfortably by the wayside and wait for the white man to voluntarily give us our justly deserved freedom, we will be the victim of a dangerous illusion, which can only end up in tragic disillusion. If we are waiting for our rights to be given to us without any determined effort to gain them, I fear we will be waiting when our great grand children make their entrance on the stage of history.⁵¹

King further outlined eight specific steps blacks must take in order to make first class citizenship a reality. He concluded his speech with “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” After the meeting, Bell returned the microphone to Van Landingham and Ivy. They did not tell him that the reception was bad and the meeting was not recorded.

Bell’s continued attendance at NAACP meetings aroused suspicions. During a NAACP meeting in November, Evers stated that Van Landingham was “receiving reports from Negro informants all over the state.”⁵² In December, Amzie Moore, head of the Cleveland NAACP chapter, invited Bell to join the organization, but he hesitated believing the organization “might be trying to put him on the spot” to see if he would join. He discussed the matter with Van Landingham who advised him to “go along wholeheartedly with them in their program.” Bell believed “he would be able to work his way up into the top echelons of the organization in Mississippi, due to the lack of

⁵⁰ Clayborne Carson, Ralph Luker, and Penny A. Russell, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) 282.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁵² Van Landingham to Director, 9 November 1959, MSSC SCR #9-9-0-48-2-1-1.

leadership material.” Yet, he still hesitated due to anticipated pressures from his white friends and members of the Citizens’ Council. To protect himself, Bell considered filing affidavits with the Bolivar County Chancery Court and school board acknowledging that he was working on behalf of the Commission. Van Landingham did not support this idea because Bell’s involvement with MSSC would become a public record documenting that he worked with the state to investigate the NAACP. Further, the Bolivar County Board of Education decided it would not endorse Bell joining the NAACP because black teachers were prohibited from becoming members of the organization.⁵³

In January 1960, Bell was publicly accused of being an informant by NAACP state president Aaron Henry during a Regional Council of Negro Leadership meeting. Henry asked Bell to “make a statement as to where he stood before the entire group.”⁵⁴ Vehemently denying the charge, Bell challenged Henry to provide proof of his involvement with the Commission. After this incident, Van Landingham doubted that Bell could continue to investigate civil rights meetings because his presence would arouse suspicions. Undaunted, Bell found two other men, Reverends F. W. Fairman and E. E. Beamon, who attended some meetings and reported to him. Though his investigations of meetings were limited, Bell continued to monitor potential integration efforts and racial incidents. By late spring 1960, Bell felt secure enough in his association with MSSC to ask the agency to provide him a car and pay fees for his daughter’s college education.

⁵³ Van Landingham to Director, 4 December 1959, MSSC SCR# 9-9-0-52-1-1-1.

⁵⁴ Van Landingham to File, 26 January 1960, MSSC SCR# 9-9-0-55-1-1-1.

In June, Bell personally contacted Walter Sillers and informed him that NAACP leaders from Memphis were in Greenville, Grenada, Cleveland, Clarksdale, and Winona discussing plans to integrate Grenada Lake. Investigator Tom Scarbrough, who replaced Van Landingham, met with Bell in Cleveland. Following the meeting, Scarbrough doubted Bell as a trustworthy informant:

Information furnished by Bell should be closely analyzed as he did not give me any absolute facts pertaining to any individual or date, but strongly felt that he should be furnished a state car and expense account and salary so that he could travel among his race to combat any type of negro agitation. His desire to obtain this objective would be strong enough to where he might give misinformation concerning anything he might report.⁵⁵

Commission files indicated that Bell's association with the agency ended in May 1961. Based on the original payment arrangements, he was paid approximately \$675.00 over an eighteen-month period. In contrast to the files, Buford C. Holmes, Bell's longtime friend and confidant, stated that Bell worked for MSSC for five or six years because "his main mission was to try to get money from the Sovereignty Commission to put his kids through college."⁵⁶ Based on Holmes' recollections, Bell would have been an informant until at least 1963. If this is true, then the files documenting his activities after 1961 were either purged or lost. Bell died in May 1964 at the age of 56. Holmes, who was at his hospital bedside, recalled Bell's last words were "Lord, help me to shut my mouth."⁵⁷

An elementary school in Boyle was named in Bell's honor. In January 1990, the *Clarion-Ledger* published a series of feature stories, "Mississippi's Secret Past," about

⁵⁵ Investigative Report, 10 June 1960, MSSC SCR# 9-9-0-76-1-1-1 to 9-9-0-76-3-1-1.

⁵⁶ Holmes, interview by author, 31 March 2010. Bell had six children, four daughters and two sons. According to the 1957-58 Mississippi State Department of Education report, his approximate annual salary was \$4,075.

⁵⁷ Holmes, interview by author, 20 June 2010.

the Sovereignty Commission. In the article, “School bears name linked to agency,” it exposed Bell’s connection to MSSC. His daughter, Arlene Bell Davidson, stated she did not believe her father was an informant because “too many black people have respect for him.”⁵⁸ She believed he was using MSSC since they “were too poor for him to have done anything else.”⁵⁹ Further, Bell’s cousin, Lawrence Harris, Sr., said MSSC couldn’t have given Bell too much money because “he had to sell a lot of property to make ends meet.”⁶⁰ In contrast to his sister and uncle, Bell, Jr. believed his father was an informant because he “fought along with the Dixiecrats hard, tooth and nail to keep from integrating these schools.”⁶¹ As an activist in the Civil Rights Movement in the Delta, Margaret Block was not surprised he was an informant because she often saw him standing in the shadows at various COFO (Council of Federated Organizations) meetings in Cleveland, Ruleville and Jackson.

Bell’s disassociation from the working class was not uncommon among educated middle-class blacks who isolated themselves within their own socio-cultural institutions. Yet, his desire to maintain segregated schools can be viewed from several aspects: the desire for blacks to maintain control of their schools; fear of job loss among black teachers who may be deemed less qualified than their white counterparts; and concerns of losing his own position and status. Moreover, his life was paradoxical in that he ardently supported segregation while members of his extended family actively engaged in the Civil Rights Movement.

⁵⁸ Jerry Mitchell, “School bears name linked to agency,” *Clarion-Ledger*, 28 January 1990.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Bell, Jr. interview, 12.

John Dewey Boyd

Born in 1899 in Wilkinson County, J. D. Boyd received much of his education from public schools in Mississippi. After graduating from high school, he taught elementary school and later attended Alcorn College where he received a Bachelor of Science degree in 1931. For the next ten years, he held various educational positions in Sunflower and Marion counties. During the summers, he furthered his education and received a Master of Science degree in 1949 from University of Illinois. In 1951, he became superintendent of Utica Institute-Hinds Agricultural High School. During his administration, Utica was elevated to a junior college (now Hinds Community College) and became a tax-supported institution.

Boyd, who was a member of the Mississippi Teachers Association for over twenty years, served as president from 1952 to 1954. During its annual meeting in March 1953, he encouraged black educators to be patient regarding the state's equalization plan. In fall 1953, he convened a meeting of approximately 300 black leaders to gauge opinions regarding the impending *Brown* decision. The group adopted a resolution to support continued segregation only if it was upheld by the Supreme Court.⁶²

On January 16, 1954, Medgar Evers, an Alcorn graduate, applied for admission to the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) Law School. In September, his application was rejected based on technicalities concerning letters of recommendation. His immediate response was to request support from the NAACP to file a lawsuit against the university. In the event of legal action, MTA members raised funds through a special assessment to assist Evers. After an all-day meeting of the executive committee, Boyd refused to use

⁶² Bolton, 57.

the allocated funds to support a lawsuit, thus helping the state to maintain segregation in higher education. Instead of taking legal action against Ole Miss, NAACP officials convinced Evers to accept the position of field secretary.⁶³

Boyd assumed the presidency of Alcorn amid controversy. His predecessor, Dr. Jesse R. Otis, was engulfed in a student protest due to a series of news articles written in March 1957 by history professor Clennon King. In one article published in the *Jackson State Times*, King described the NAACP as the “National Association for the Agitation of Colored People,” accusing the organization of doing “nothing in the South to ease racial tensions.”⁶⁴ Students who characterized King as an Uncle Tom demanded his immediate dismissal. When Otis refused to take a definitive stand against King, protests escalated to a point that 549 students boycotted all classes. The Sovereignty Commission assumed that the protests were caused by faculty members or outside pressure. To learn more information, the Commission considered sending H. H. Humes to meet with the students “to determine exactly who sparked the incident” and then exploit “the use of publicity in protection” of King.⁶⁵ The Commission had also been informed that a similar protest might spread to Mississippi Valley College. When a committee of the all-white Board of Trustees met with the student body, they threatened to close the school if students did not return to class. One student yelled out, “We don’t give a damn if you burn it down.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Evers-Williams and Marable, 33.

⁶⁴ “Mississippi Negro Speaks,” MSSC SCR# 1-28-0-64-5-1-1.

⁶⁵ DeCell to Ney Gore, Jr., 5 March 1957, MSSC SCR#1-28-0-67-1-1-1.

⁶⁶ Sansing, David, *The University of Mississippi: A Sesquicentennial History* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 276.

Unsettled by the defiance of the students, the trustees held an emergency meeting on March 9 during which they dismissed Otis, expelled the students and closed the college.⁶⁷

Boyd was appointed the new president upon a recommendation by Governor James P. Coleman, who also served as chairman of the Sovereignty Commission. By the time of his appointment, he was well-aligned with the white power structure in the state having demonstrated his support of segregation. The trustees considered Boyd “a safe appointment because he did not support the NAACP and had blocked the state’s black teachers’ association from backing lawsuits” to integrate Ole Miss.⁶⁸ He was given the “authority to bring the school back to normal, with dictatorial powers to admit or deny students whom he felt would or would not ‘conform’ to the general welfare of Alcorn College and the State of Mississippi.”⁶⁹ On May 1, Boyd presented King with a letter stating that his contract would not be renewed for the new school term. By the end of May, 539 of the 549 boycotting students were readmitted upon signing an agreement that they would not participate in future protests and abide by the rules of the college and board. The ten students who were considered leaders of the boycott were denied readmission.

Although Boyd was able to move the college forward, his presidency was plagued by student protests, boycotts and unrest. On Wednesday, October 25, 1959, students launched a protest against his disciplinary practices. Summoned to stop the protests, law enforcement officers maintained a 24-hour presence on the campus. Although Governor

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Eagles, Charles, *The Price of Defiance*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 85.

⁶⁹ Evers-Williams and Marable, 70.

Ross Barnett's visit to the campus on Friday was linked to the protests, he stated he met with Boyd to discuss school improvements. The next day, Boyd closed the campus for a three-day "cooling off period". When Scarbrough, now Commissioner of Public Safety, arrived at Alcorn, he informed the students that the "patrolmen's presence on the campus is a peaceful gesture and they are here for the purpose of preventing any acts of violence or vandalism."⁷⁰ More than 1,000 students were supervised by armed highway patrolmen and deputies as they evacuated the campus. When students returned to campus the following Wednesday, committees were established to improve relations between faculty and students. Dr. Jobe, of the State Board of Trustees, attributed the demonstrations to a lack of student recreational facilities and overcrowding. He announced plans to ask the state legislature for funds to build a student union building.⁷¹

Similar to other college campuses in the 1960s, Alcorn students engaged in a number of protests against the college administration. One of the most notable occurred in spring 1966 when students joined NAACP field director Charles Evers, brother of Medgar Evers, and off-campus demonstrators in an effort to oust Boyd as president. Evers, who was an Alcorn alumnus, publicly denounced Boyd's deference to whites and mismanagement of the college. "Boyd has got to go. We're going to get him sooner or later. He's only concerned with pleasing the white folks."⁷² Evers also accused Boyd of preventing faculty and students from participating in civil rights activities. In response, Boyd said, "There is no civil rights issue involved in this college. I think civil rights can

⁷⁰ "Trouble Closes Alcorn Houses," *Clarion-Ledger*, 25 October 1959, in MSSC SCR# 3-80-2-1-1-1.

⁷¹ "Alcorn Dispute 'Blamed' Placed," *Times-Picayune* in MSSC SCR# 3-80-0-6-1-1-1.

⁷² "Under Student Attack Again," *Jet*, 21 April 1966, 27.

be approached from more than one angle. I am trying to help the child prepare for the opportunities to come.”⁷³ Striking students, who generally agreed that Boyd dominated the entire school, were “primarily angry about the food, the infirmary, the grading system, the teachers, and the scholarship aid they say [was] only available to preferred students.”⁷⁴ Despite the vast numbers of students who demonstrated, former student Ulysses Buckner, chose not “to get caught up in the moment” and viewed Boyd’s actions as indicative “of the times in which we lived.”⁷⁵

When Boyd retired on June 30, 1969, over twenty-five years of his life had been in service to Alcorn, as a student, professor and president. During his eleven years as president, he increased student enrollment, recruited faculty with advanced degrees, improved the physical structure of the campus, and reorganized the academic curriculum. While his administrative style was often viewed as dictatorial and uncompromising, Boyd used the means available at the time to build an accredited educational institution for blacks. He was a creation of the white power structure and at times its most ardent representative.⁷⁶ Boyd died in October 1979 in Jefferson County, Mississippi. The campus library was named in his honor.

⁷³ Bill Crider, “Patrol Routs New March at Lorman,” *Clarion-Ledger*, 6 April 1966, in MSSC SCR# 3-80-0-19-1-1-1 to 3-80-0-19-2-1-1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Emilye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 227.

Jacob L. Reddix

Jacob Reddix was born in Vancleave, Mississippi on May 2, 1897. He received his early education at Bluff Creek Public School and Miller's Ferry Normal and Industrial Institute. His studies at Miller's Ferry were briefly interrupted during World War I when he joined the army in 1917. Following his discharge, he returned to school and graduated in 1920. Over the next seven years, Reddix worked as a teacher and varied other jobs until he completed his college education. In June 1927, he graduated from Lewis Institute in Chicago and accepted a teaching position at Roosevelt High school in Gary, Indiana. While teaching at Roosevelt, his interests in economics led to the establishment the Consumer Cooperative Trading Company, which became the largest black-owned grocery business in the United States. Reddix, who supported the ideology of Booker T. Washington, believed blacks "could lift the burden of economic exploitation from their backs by organizing a nationwide system of cooperative businesses through which they could produce and distribute to themselves and others, such consumer needs as food, clothing, household goods, and credit."⁷⁷

In 1939, Reddix was awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship to study economics at the University of Chicago. After a year, he was appointed Advisor of Cooperatives with the Department in the Agriculture. During a meeting with the Board of Trustees of the Rosenwald Fund, he learned that they had recommended him as president of Jackson College, a new teacher's college in Jackson, Mississippi. Meanwhile, Mississippi state legislators introduced House Bill No. 722 on May 6, 1940, to make the college a state-supported institution. When the bill was discussed on the House floor, a representative

⁷⁷ Jacob L. Reddix, *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1974), 119.

stated frankly that he was not interested in funding a college for blacks because “what a ‘Nigra’ needed to learn was how to work—how to run a middle buster.”⁷⁸ He presented a motion to change the name from Jackson College to Mississippi Negro Training School. The motion passed without argument. On July 22, 1940, Reddix met with the Mississippi State Board of Trustees in Jackson. Following the interview, Judge Jephtha Barbour, the board chairman, told him: “The board has just elected you the new president of Jackson College. The members felt that anybody who was born in the poorest county in Mississippi, under the conditions of the schools at that time, but who could get a good education and achieve what you have in spite of these handicaps, should be the president of our new college.”⁷⁹ Although the Rosenwald Foundation had committed up to \$105,000 in matching funds to the state for the college, the legislature only appropriated \$20,000 for the first biennium.

On August 8, 1940, Reddix became the fifth president of the college. After two months of preparation, the college opened with 108 students on October 2, 1940. The entire campus included only two dormitories and one academic building. School officials did not readily accept the name designated by the legislature and continued to refer to the institution as Jackson College. With support from Governor Paul B. Johnson and the state legislature, the institution transitioned from a two-year to a four-year teacher training college. In 1944, the name was changed to Jackson College for Negro Teachers. The first graduating class of twenty-nine women received Bachelor of Science degrees in education on May 29, 1944.

⁷⁸ Lelia Gaston Rhodes, *Jackson State University* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1979), 103. A middle buster is a plow that moves dirt to either side of a row of cotton.

⁷⁹ Reddix, 126.

Reddix wanted to make Jackson College more than a training school for black teachers; he envisioned a liberal arts university. Over the next decade, the curriculum was expanded to include arts and sciences and a graduate program in administration and supervision. In February 1956, Governor Coleman signed a bill changing the name of the school to Jackson State College. It was one month before the creation of the Sovereignty Commission. By now, Reddix was regarded by the governor and other influential whites as an individual who was amenable to maintaining the status quo.

Beginning in January 1961, MSSC sponsored a series of anti-Communism lectures in conjunction with the Paul Revere Ladies, a conservative organization with ties to the Citizens' Council. Myers G. Lowman, an "internationally recognized anti-communist, top researcher and compiler of public records of individuals associated with Communist activities" was chosen by the ladies to carry the message throughout the state.⁸⁰ In addition to speaking at various civic clubs and mass meetings, Lowman spoke at numerous high schools and colleges. In March 1961, he spoke at Jackson State. Sitting in the lecture hall, student Ruby Magee listened as Lowman told them "that all of the famous black people were communists."⁸¹ At that point, James Meredith, also a student, stood and asked, "Why would you come to a black school and tell us that all the black people that we respect are communists?"⁸² Inundated by questions from other students, Lowman quickly left the lecture hall. In the days to follow, there were lengthy discussions among students who believed the lecture was sponsored by the Citizens'

⁸⁰ Press Release, MSSC SCR# 7-0-2-69-1-1-1.

⁸¹ University of Southern Mississippi Civil Rights Documentation Project, "Interview with Ruby Magee," <http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/coh&CISOPTR=4847&REC=6> [accessed 15 September 2010].

⁸² Ibid.

Council. Magee viewed the incident as “a new era at Jackson State College because prior to that time students had hardly questioned their teachers and we never questioned visitors.”⁸³ Naomi Scrivner, the MSSC research clerk and chairperson of the Paul Revere Ladies, accompanied Lowman to Jackson State. In a report to MSSC, she wrote that Lowman was “well received by the President Reddix and the student body, with the exception of three students ... who displayed an attitude of belligerency.”⁸⁴ Scrivner, who considered her role in fighting Communism as a “lofty undertaking,” urged MSCC “to continue full support of the program until each of our State Institutions of Higher Learning have been reached, and until the entire state has been covered.”⁸⁵

On March 27, nine Tougaloo College students, who were members of the campus NAACP chapter, were arrested and detained for thirty-two hours for attempting to desegregate the white public library in downtown Jackson. It was the first attempt to integrate public facilities in Jackson. As the news of their protest and arrest reached the Jackson State campus, almost 700 hundred students, including Magee and Meredith, gathered in front of the school library in a demonstration of support. When Reddix approached the library, the group formed a tight circle with everyone holding hands as one student led a prayer. Meredith observed that “nobody paid any attention that the president was around, as far as responding to what he was saying. [He] was visibly upset by the fact that no one paid him any attention, he did what was part of the plan. He did

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Report of Mrs. Harry Scrivner of speaking engagements of Mr. Myers G. Lorman, 22 March 1961, MSSC SCR# 7-0-3-80-1-1-1 to 7-0-3-80-5-1-1.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

some foolish things.”⁸⁶ Realizing that he had little control over the situation, Reddix shoved his way through the crowd, reportedly pushing a female student who called him an Uncle Tom into a ditch. The students did not disperse until he threatened to expel them. The next day, the students continued the demonstration by boycotting classes. Later that afternoon, Walter Williams, president of the student government association, led a march of approximately fifty students carrying American flags to the city jail. However, before they could reach the jail, they were stopped by police with tear gas, clubs and police dogs. Williams, who was expelled for his participation, regarded the incident “as an attempt by the president to break down all organized efforts against segregation and other evils. I hold no resentment against him for I realize he did what he thought he had to do to maintain his position.”⁸⁷ In October 1961, Reddix dissolved the student government association. In defending his decision, he explained: “The real issue here is not segregation versus integration, but rather it’s over who’s going to run this college. I run this college and anyone here who doesn’t like the way I run it can leave.”⁸⁸

Reverend Ed King, the Tougaloo College chaplain, described the restraints placed on Jackson State students:

The Jackson State students had no academic freedom, no classroom freedom, and certainly no freedom as blacks to participate in the civil rights movement. The students would have been expelled. Ultimately it would have been due to state pressure, but actually it was due to the fears of the middle-class black leaders at Jackson State.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Tim Spofford, *Lynch Street* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1988), 7.

⁸⁷ “Student Says Reddix Did What He Had to Do,” *Jet*, 26 October 1961, 27.

⁸⁸ Alex Poinsett, “President’s Actions Chokes Off Anti-Segregation Activities,” *Jet*, 26 October 1961, 24.

⁸⁹ Spofford, 10.

As a private institution, the actions of Tougaloo College administrators and students were beyond the control of the state. Therefore, Tougaloo—along with privately owned Campbell College located adjacent to Jackson State—became centers of student activism in the Delta. By comparison, student involvement in political and social movements at Jackson State was sporadic and short-lived. The Board of Trustees viewed any type of student activism as a breach in their control of state-funded institutions.

Reddix acknowledged that his primary concern was keeping Jackson State open. To do so, he was dependent—both morally and financially—on the Board of Trustees. “His whip-cracking had broken a student boycott of classes, silenced public criticism of the president by the students, and practically ended their extra-curricular, anti-segregation excursions to downtown Jackson, Mississippi.”⁹⁰ When Medgar Evers was assassinated in June 1963, Reddix held classes as usual. Jackson State students were not allowed to join the hundreds of mourners who marched down Lynch Street.

In the midst of the 1960s protests, Reddix commented: “Ten years ago you couldn’t pay a Negro to go downtown and challenge the law the way he’s doing here now. And these Negroes now are even unafraid of guns staring them in the face”⁹¹ In retrospect, Reddix conceded that he was often criticized for never participating in organized protests. In devoting more than fifty years of his life “to the education and enlightenment of young people,” he believed he used the “means [he] had at his disposal” to contribute “to the training of young people for full participation as responsible citizens

⁹⁰ Poinsett, 24.

⁹¹ Evers-Williams and Marable, 287.

in a democracy.”⁹² Perhaps, he paralleled his work in education with the civil rights movement. His friend, Earl Banks, who viewed him as a “man who seized an opportunity and knew his limitations,” noted that Reddix had “to do some things that perhaps his conscience said was not the best thing to do” but they promoted, developed and expanded the college.⁹³

After 27 years of service to Jackson State College, Reddix retired on March 2, 1967. He died on May 8, 1973 at the age of 76. The following year, his wife published his memoirs, *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness*, a biblical reference to Ham who cried in the wilderness to make a highway for God. Reddix once said, “When you tell our story, don’t paint me as a Jesus or a wise man from the East. All I ask is that you tell the story as it is.”⁹⁴

James H. White

James Hester White was born April 13, 1903 in Gallatin, Tennessee. He received his high school and undergraduate education at Tennessee Agricultural and State College (now Tennessee State University), graduating in 1932 with a Bachelor of Science degree. In 1934, he received a Masters of Arts degree from Columbia University. From 1928 to 1948, he served as principal of Allen-White High School (formerly Hardeman County Training School). Although he was approached regarding the presidency of a new college for blacks in the Mississippi Delta, White accepted a two-year position as president of Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee in 1948. During his administration,

⁹² Reddix, 222.

⁹³ University of Southern Mississippi Civil Rights Documentation Project, “Oral History with Mr. Earl W. Banks,” <http://anna.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/ohbanksep.html>, [accessed 15 September 2010].

⁹⁴ “Student Says Reddix Did What He Had to Do,” 27.

Lane College became fully accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

In 1950, White became the first president of Mississippi Vocational College, located on 450 acres of a former cotton plantation just outside of Itta Bena. In accepting the position, he commented, “I am not worried about building this college. Soon the seared cotton stalks will be gone and there will be green grass, building, students, flowers and a fine faculty.”⁹⁵ On February 10, 1950, Governor Fielding Wright, members of the Board of Trustees, and hundreds of others gathered on the cotton patch for the groundbreaking ceremony. While the school was being built, White met with the governor and the State Building Commission to request funds to purchase buses to bring students to MVC. His request was strongly denied by Walter Sillers. After the meeting, White realized that “If I am to build that college by schedule and have the best as I am going to request, I must get this man on my side.”⁹⁶ After reading everything he could find on Sillers, White discovered they were both born on the same day. On April 13, 1951, White sent Sillers a dozen red roses. From that point forward, he had one of the most powerful men in the state as an ally and a friend.⁹⁷

When initial construction was completed, White was installed as president during an inaugural ceremony on December 6, 1953. During his address, he stated:

Our schools today must have reasons for doing everything they do, if not, it is merely a waste of time. They must have a goal, they must have convictions, they must have a philosophy. That must come from those who

⁹⁵ J. H. White, *Up From A Cotton Patch*, (Mississippi: Itta Bena, 1979), 41.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* Throughout the years, White continued the ritual of sending flowers to Sillers on his birthday. He described their friendship as one of the strongest relationships that was ever built between two men.

lead and those who follow. Any workable philosophy of education should include something of the idea of loyalty and devotion to the cause.⁹⁸

In addition to training teachers, the college was charged with providing vocational training in trades and industries such as carpentry, brick masonry, automobile and tractor mechanics, and welding.

Following the passage of *Brown*, White believed that developing conditions in the state placed blacks in a similar position as during Reconstruction. In talking with his white friends, he found they were totally against any type of integration and refused to abide by the Supreme Court decision. In conversations with blacks throughout the state, he found that ninety percent of them would be satisfied with segregated schools if the state built new facilities and equalized teacher salaries. Upon learning that Mississippi was planning to “freeze funds for future expansion” of black colleges, he advised the Board of Trustees that it would be a great mistake to discontinue funding for post-secondary education. White considered that this was the “time to build and enhance our Negroes and their schools rather than do the things that have been common in the past.”⁹⁹

Shortly after the Sovereignty Commission organized, White spoke at the Founders Day program for the 69th Anniversary of Mound Bayou on July 12, 1956. During his remarks, he encouraged blacks to remain in Mississippi rather than depending “upon bettering [their] conditions on foreign soils”. White further commented that blacks “look for green pastures in all sections of the country when green grass is knee high all around [them].” He stated: “I do not believe you are going to throw away your churches,

⁹⁸ “Knowledge and Truth,” J. H. White Inaugural Statement, President’s Papers, Mississippi Valley State College, J. H. White Library Archives.

⁹⁹ J. H. White letter to W. E. Turner, 7 June 1954, President’s Papers, Mississippi Valley State College, J. H. White Library Archives.

schools, hospitals, businesses, insurances, newspapers ... just to sit, eat and ride with a white person.” When the MSSC-sponsored New England Press Tour visited MVC, the reporters asked White his viewpoints on segregation. He answered that he was “interested principally in providing a good school for my people and improve their cultural and economic levels.”¹⁰⁰ Due to his public endorsement of segregation and praise for white officials, White, who was identified in the Commission files as informant number 9-20, was often hailed by MSCC as a black man who was content with life and conditions in Mississippi.¹⁰¹ MSSC printed one of his speeches as a pamphlet with the title, “*A Noted Negro Educator Speaks for Mississippi*,” and widely distributed it as part of its campaign to change the state’s image.¹⁰²

As a strict disciplinarian, White often reminded students “of their shortcomings in deportment.”¹⁰³ Students were expected to adhere to established rules that governed their attitude, behavior, dress, cleanliness, and courtesy to visitors. In February 1957, students saw a need for a student government association to represent their point of view. Of the 473 enrolled students, 260 signed a petition to form the association.¹⁰⁴ When their request was denied, the petitioners representing approximately 55 percent of the student body staged a 36-hour boycott against the administration. It was the first large-scale demonstration on a black college campus in Mississippi. A feature story in *Jet* attributed

¹⁰⁰ Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, Report to the People (Jackson: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, 1956), 17.

¹⁰¹ J. H. White Informant Number, MSSC SCR# 99-201-323-1-1-1.

¹⁰² “A Noted Negro Educator Speaks for Mississippi,” undated, MSSC SCR# 99-40-0-75-1-1-1 to 99-40-0-75-4-1-1-1.

¹⁰³ White, 110.

¹⁰⁴ DeCell to Ney Gore, 30 April 1957, MSSC SCR# 1-28-0-8-111.

the boycott to student disagreements with White's "Uncle Tom attitude and his public statements favorable to the State of Mississippi."¹⁰⁵ It ended peacefully when White and the Board of Trustees agreed to discuss the issue with the students. White submitted the names and addresses of the petitioners to the Sovereignty Commission.

In December 1958, White was complicit with MSCC in an insidious scheme involving Clyde Kennard, a young black man who applied for admission to Mississippi Southern College (now University of Southern Mississippi) in Hattiesburg. Twice denied admission to the all-white institution, Kennard publicly announced his plans to apply a third time. In a letter to the editor published in the *Hattiesburg American* on December 6, he discussed the consequences and costs of segregation. He wrote that state officials "spend much of their time and perhaps most of our money trying to convince the integrationists, and reassure the segregationists, that the policy of perpetual segregation is the wisest course for us to pursue, in spite of the tremendous cost of duplication."¹⁰⁶ He advocated adherence to the *Brown* decision and support of NAACP integration efforts since it was financially and physically impossible to create identical conditions of life for both races. Kennard's letter and intentions to desegregate MSC captured the attention of the Sovereignty Commission who sent Van Landingham to Hattiesburg. On December 9 and 10, he met with several black leaders - Rev. R. W. Woullard and educators N. R. Burger, C. E. Roy, and A. B. S. Todd. It was suggested that "since they were in favor of maintaining segregated schools," they could consider themselves "a committee to call on Clyde Kennard and persuade him that it was for the best interests of all concerned" for

¹⁰⁵ DeCell to Ney Gore, 14 March 1957, MSSC SCR# 3-0A-1-4-1-1-1.

¹⁰⁶ "Letter to the Editor," *Hattiesburg American*, 6 December 1958 in MSSC SCR# 1-27-0-6-22-1-1.

him to withdraw his application.¹⁰⁷ Van Landingham noted that in separate conversations with “committee” members, each stressed the need for a junior college for blacks in the Hattiesburg area. He believed this was the bargaining point they were using for their cooperation. While in Hattiesburg, Van Landingham met with Dudley W. Conner, an attorney and leader of the local Citizens’ Council. Conner offered to exert economic pressure upon Kennard to the point that he would leave town and never return.

On December 16, White, who had successfully persuaded Kennard to withdraw his earlier applications, met with Burger in Hattiesburg to discuss a strategy. He considered Kennard “intelligent, well educated” and “sincere in efforts to raise the standards of the Negro race.”¹⁰⁸ He suggested that Kennard accompanied by Dr. William McCain, president of MSC, meet with the governor and representatives of the Board of Trustees. Though there was little evidence to suggest this meeting occurred or which black leaders actually approached Kennard, he nonetheless withdrew his application in January 1959. In a letter to McCain, Kennard wrote: “Upon the honest advice of many competent people I have decided that to insist upon my right to enroll at Mississippi Southern College at this point perhaps would not be in the best interest of the general community.”¹⁰⁹

In August, Kennard informed McCain that he would be re-applying for fall admission. Van Landingham again turned to White for assistance. However, his suggestion to the Trustees that White go to Hattiesburg on their behalf was met with

¹⁰⁷ Van Landingham Investigative Report on Clyde Kennard, 17 December 1958, MSSC SCR# 127-0-6-1-1-1 to 1-27-0-6-37-1-1.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ “Negro Abandons Idea of Entering Southern,” *Wayne County News*, 8 January 1959 in MSSC SCR# 1-27-22-1-1-1.

reluctance. The trustees believed White “could harm himself more than any good he do.”¹¹⁰ They also knew that White “had some very bitter enemies among the white and colored races, especially in Leflore County.”¹¹¹ They “were willing for [him] to go to Hattiesburg provided he worked ‘behind the scenes’ and merely counseled and advised as to the steps to be taken.”¹¹² After a meeting with Burger in September, White reported to Van Landingham that they agreed to use individuals who had close relationships with Kennard to encourage him to withdraw his application. Further involvement by White in the Kennard case during this period was undocumented in the Commission files. Yet, MSCC in cooperation with state officials and others launched a contrived campaign that led to Kennard’s imprisonment and subsequent death.¹¹³ Kennard was framed, convicted, and sentenced to seven years imprisonment for stealing \$25 worth of chicken feed in November 1960. While in Parchment Prison, he was diagnosed with intestinal cancer. The state refused to release him for proper medical care. After a campaign initiated by Dick Gregory gained national attention, Kennard was released on January 30, 1963. However, his cancer had reached an advanced stage and he could not be cured. He died in Chicago on July 4, 1963 at the age of 36. A building on USM campus was named in his honor in 1993. Kennard was not exonerated until 2006, forty-three years after his death.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Van Landingham to Director, 28 August 1959, MSSC SCR# 2-70-14-1-1-1.

¹¹¹ Ibid

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Mississippi Historical Society, Mississippi History Now, “Clyde Kennard: A Little-Known Civil Rights Pioneer,” <http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/349/clyde-kennard-a-little-known-civil-rights-pioneer> [accessed 1 June 2011].

Similar to Boyd and Reddix, White experienced the student rebellions and campus unrests prevalent during the 1960s and 1970s. He viewed these developments as “detrimental to the best interests of the college and its students.”¹¹⁵ As an educator, White considered it his life mission to come to Mississippi and build an institution to serve the educational needs of blacks in the Delta. In describing the college as “the city that White built,”¹¹⁶ he proclaimed himself patriarch of a city that failed to modernize and adapt to a changing socio-political climate. Students yearned for more than an education that “taught respect for racial order and the proper limits of black aspirations.”¹¹⁷ They were eager for change.

During the week of February 3, 1969, student body president Wilhelm Joseph submitted a list of eighteen demands to college officials. Some of the demands included “required courses in black history, the addition of books by black authors in the school library, remedial courses in math and English, later hours for co-eds, and scheduling of prominent black speakers on campus.”¹¹⁸ By the end of the week, the administration had not responded to their demands. On the evening of February 9, students staged a sit-in in the gymnasium following a school dance. On other parts of the campus, a small group of students vandalized property in the administration building and dormitories. As the protest escalated, White contacted the Highway Patrol who assisted school officials in loading 198 students into buses for removal from the campus. They were suspended, but

¹¹⁵ White, 144.

¹¹⁶ White, 151.

¹¹⁷ Williamson, 50.

¹¹⁸ “Patrol Arrests 15 Students, Buses Away 198 Protesters,” *Commercial Appeal*, 10 February 1969 in MSSC SCR# 1-109-0-1-1-1

could return to campus without repercussions the next week. Fifteen students were arrested for vandalism.¹¹⁹

The following week, White arranged the release of arrested students who were not actually guilty of vandalism. While awaiting a response to their demands, approximately ninety percent of the student body boycotted classes. During an off-campus rally in Greenwood, Fannie Lou Hamer, one of White's severest critics, told students:

The time is out for the kind of compromising we have had to do for the last 350 years. The kind of education you are getting here at this college prepares you to teach only black children in the state of Mississippi because if you leave Mississippi, you have to get a mop doing a dust job 'cause you cannot qualify to do anything else. The fact is, people, that here at Mississippi State Valley College, you can get a fairly decent *high school* education.¹²⁰

The negotiation team included White, school officials, student leaders, and black law students from the University of Mississippi. Charles Evers, who encouraged the boycott, served as mediator. At the close of the negotiations, White and faculty committees agreed to ten of the eighteen student demands. The student government association explained that "the main grievance from the student body was that President White and his entire administration put too much emphasis on discipline to the neglect of education."¹²¹ White agreed to follow due process for disciplinary matters, increase scholarships, end administrative intimidation against students, and allow two students to serve on the faculty recruiting committee. Their second major grievance "called for the

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ "Fannie Lou Hamer Backs Boycotts," *Delta Democrat-Times*, 13 February 1969. The name of the college was changed to Mississippi Valley State College in 1964. The school is commonly referred to as "Mississippi Valley" or "Valley State."

¹²¹ Student Government Association Press Release, 12 February 1969, President's Papers, Mississippi Valley State College, J. H. White Library Archives.

administration to make studies at MSVC more meaning and relevant to blacks.”¹²² The administration agreed to offer more courses in black studies, make a course in black history a requirement if a majority of the students deemed it necessary, and add more books by contemporary black authors to the school library. Further, the administration agreed to permit students to serve on policy-making committees and “to support any and all political organizations as long it remained within the guidelines of the college.”¹²³ With their primary grievances settled, students ended the boycott and classes resumed.

Because of the incident at Mississippi Valley, the Sovereignty Commission grew concerned “over the radical student activity” occurring on state college and university campuses. It passed a unanimous resolution promoting “legislation which would provide deportation proceeding in any case where a foreign student is found guilty of participation in this undesirable and unlawful activity on the campus of any tax supported institution.” The basis of the resolution was due to the actions of Joseph, a native of Trinidad. MSSC and law enforcement officials continued surveillance of Joseph after he graduated from MVSC.¹²⁴

Almost one year later in January 1970, students again rebelled against White’s administrative policies. Of their thirty demands, students wanted “a full-time physician, academic scholarships, removal of retirement age instructors, more public telephones, renovation of showers and shower curtains, and eased restrictions in student dress.”¹²⁵

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ MSSC Director Webb Burke to Senator James Eastland, 28 March 1969, MSSC SCR# 9-20-63-1-1-1.

¹²⁵ “Schools Make News: Mississippi Black Protests and the Feds,” *Saturday Review*, 16 May 1970.

They also demanded more maid and janitorial services, a new system of naming campus buildings, removal of harassment clauses from the student handbook, and permission for female students to drive cars on campus. While White agreed to some of the demands, he failed to abide by agreements made by faculty-student negotiation committees. On February 2, a group of “concerned students” drafted a letter to White which in part read:

Has it ever occurred to you that the best solution would be your leaving or retiring? That you are petty, vindictive and without any sense of direction other than kissing the feet of whitey. How can MVSC possibly grow in any manner when the likes of you constantly threaten and harass anyone who does not agree with your ancient philosophy and narrow-mindedness? You are a disgrace to the Black people. Of course, we know that you don’t consider yourself to be black. (Ha) Think whatever you may, whitey still thinks of you as that. To them, you are old J. H. White, a ‘good nigra’.¹²⁶

Beginning Wednesday, February 5, the student government association led over 2,000 students in protests and boycotts. In an open letter to students on Friday, February 7, White explained that the rejection of “any student demand, grievance, or request” is made “in the best interest of all students” and encouraged them to return to classes by February 9.¹²⁷ Further, he added that additional security personnel would be provided to protect students who wanted to resume classes and not participate in the boycott.

When students disregarded his letter and continued the boycott, White announced that he would close the campus and revoke all scholarships. Despite his threats, students were committed to challenging White and “the city he built.” As the protests continued, he received a letter threatening his life: “If you don’t be off this campus before 9:30 p.m.

¹²⁶ “An Open Letter from Concerned Students at MSVC to President White,” 2 February 1970, MSSC SCR# 9-20-0-74-1-1-1.

¹²⁷ “Dear Students of Mississippi Valley State College,” 7 February 1970, MSSC SCR# 9-20-78-2-1-1-1 to 9-20-78-2-1-1.

Saturday, someone will be in [your] home to murder you. ... Friday night [February 13] is your last night on this earth alive, so go on home so that you will be prepared because you have done enough wrong to us and we can't take no more."¹²⁸ In an act of defiance, five students hung an effigy of White bearing a sign that read "Uncle Tom" from a tree near the student center.

On Tuesday, February 10, fifty-eight black police officers accompanied by campus security arrested 894 marching students for obstructing a road on state property. Transported to Parchment Prison by the Highway Patrol, the students were held on a total bond of \$178,000. It was the largest mass arrest of college demonstrators in the nation's history. White closed MVC the following day, two days before he was advised in a death threat to leave the campus. When the arrested students appeared in court two days later, the judge reduced their original individual bond from \$200 to no more than \$25 and released some on their own recognizance. The campus opened two weeks later with approximately 1,000 of the 1,900 student body re-admitted on a selective basis. Following a special hearing on February 24, students signed a waiver of rights under due process and an agreement to "refrain from any acts of harassment, from boycotting classes and acts disturbing to the academic procedure of the college or any acts interfering with any regular or other activities of the college."¹²⁹ In March, an ad-hoc committee of black college students from Mississippi Valley, Tougaloo, Southern Miss, Millsaps, Ole Miss, Mary Holmes, Delta State, William Carey, Mississippi State, and

¹²⁸ Letter to J. H. White, 11 February 1970, MSSC SCR# 9-20-0-80-1-1-1- to 9-20-0-80-2-1-1.

¹²⁹ MVSC Student Agreement, President's Papers, Mississippi Valley State College, J. H. White Library Archives.

Jackson State was created to “deal with their problems on Mississippi campuses.”¹³⁰ One of the resolutions they adopted called for the removal of White as president and an end to his racist practices.

White retired on June 30, 1971. During his administration, the college grew to “thirty-five major buildings valued at over twenty-five million dollars.”¹³¹ Following retirement, he participated in a ceremony on March 15, 1974 renaming the college Mississippi Valley State University. He died fourteen days later on March 29 and was buried on the college campus. His biography, *Up From A Cotton Patch*, was published in 1979. Editor W. A. Butts described White as “a product of a social order which demanded a deep humility and personal compromise [and] even personal debasement.”¹³²

¹³⁰ “Black Students Form ‘Ad Hoc’ Committee,” *Commercial Appeal*, 24 March 1970.

¹³¹ “Obsequies of Dr. James Herbert White,” President’s Papers, Mississippi Valley State College, J. H. White Library Archives.

¹³² White, *xi*.

Chapter 3

Let the Church Say Amen!

In considering the links between the civil rights movement and religion it is important to distinguish between church people and churches as institutions. Even in the black community, many ministers and churches were reluctant to embrace the movement, and, while most national denominational bodies of white churches officially condemned segregation, local churches and their ministers and members often took a different position.¹

Historically, the church served as the institutional and spiritual center of the black community. “In church, one could find politics, arts, music, education, economic development, social services, civic associations, leadership opportunities, and business enterprises” that were unavailable or minimal in the greater society.² Within its walls, blacks who were marginalized in daily life found both respite and respect. It was a “nation within a nation” that whites did not invade as long as it posed no threat to their economic and social positions.”³ The church was the one place that blacks could exercise a degree of autonomy.

Yet, in some parts of the Mississippi Delta, this autonomy was often compromised by white elites and the planter class, particularly if the church was located on a plantation. In most instances, rural churches were built by planters who selected the minister and decided how the building could be used. In addition to financial support and other resources for the church, ministers received personal gifts and validation from

¹ Randy J. Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 221.

² Allison Calhoun-Brown. “Upon This Rock,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33 (2000): 169.

³ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 49-51.

leading whites for preaching the “right” doctrine.⁴ This practice continued well into the twentieth century. The modern planter whose workforce consisted of sharecroppers and tenant farmers insisted that black ministers preach a gospel that maintained the status quo.⁵ An A.M.E. pastor explained his expected role:

When I graduated from seminary, I went back to Mississippi, and they gave me a plantation church out near Leland. The second day I was there, the boss-man called me in. He handed me a ten-dollar bill and said, ‘Your job is to keep my niggers happy. Do that and I’ll keep you happy.’ I packed up and left Mississippi the next day.⁶

Both the church and the minister were effectively used as a means of social control to benefit the plantation system. Although this control extended across denominations, it was disproportionately evident among black Baptist ministers. However, this may be because Baptists were more prolific in establishing separate black churches than other denominations.⁷ Black leadership in the Baptist denomination emerged from the south where ninety percent of black Baptists lived.⁸

Delta Pine and Land Company served as an excellent model when examining the relationship between the black church and the modern plantation system. With 38,000 acres located around the town of Scott, it was the largest plantation in the world.⁹ Though DPLC president Oscar Johnston denied that the plantation was feudalistic, he acknowledged its paternalism, describing his management style as “*in loco parentis*” (in

⁴ Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* (Nicholson (Salem: Ayer Company Publishers, 1988), 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 184-185.

⁶ Bruce Hilton, *The Delta Ministry* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 184.

⁷ Charles Wilson, ed., *Religion in the South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 48.

⁸ Nina Mkagkij, *Organizing Black America* (New York: Garland, 2001), 406.

⁹ “Biggest Cotton Plantation,” *Fortune*, March 1937, 125.

place of parents).¹⁰ It was “a system of paternal guardianship which has existed for generations and is predicated on the existence of a race which requires management and in turn presents a responsibility.”¹¹ Tenants who lived on the twelve sections of the plantation were furnished with housing, equipment, medical services, limited educational training, and a church. Each church, which served as the center of religious and social life on the plantation, was described in the black-owned *Delta Leader* as a “government within itself, and [was] managed and operated by the membership, without any interference on the part of the management of the Company.”¹² Johnston was praised for his attentiveness to churches on the plantation:

Mr. Oscar Johnston always listens to the Negro congregation when these churches need repairing or rebuilding, and helps them to build according to their wish and specification. Very few of the ministers pastoring these churches live on the Delta and Pine Land Company. They live in cities from Memphis to Natchez, and some are from Arkansas and Louisiana. They are free to visit among their members and exercise their pastoralship in any official capacity without any intimidation on the part of the several managers.¹³

Above all, Johnston was a capitalist. His attentiveness to churches and other tenant matters rested on his desire to make a profit and retain a cost-effective labor force. His philosophy was “If the tenant makes money, we make money: if the tenant loses, we lose.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Lawrence J. Nelson, *King Cotton's Advocate* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 98.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹² “Delta & Pine Land Company,” *Delta Leader*, 14 December 1943.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Within plantation-dominated areas, there were enclaves of black landowners. These small communities which functioned autonomously from the plantation generally had stores and other small businesses to support their residents. However, they were not economically independent of the plantation infrastructure because they did not own enterprises such as furnish stores and ginneries that were essential to cotton farming. While these communities had limited economic and political power, enclaves as “autonomous spaces” offered greater freedom than plantations and provided blacks with the greatest opportunities for independent living. As on the plantation, churches were the nucleus of enclaves. Usually the church and the enclave bore the same symbolic name: Independent Tyro, Hopewell, and Fredonia. Whites, who viewed enclaves as non-places, rarely entered them and knew little about them.¹⁵

During the Great Migration, millions of blacks left the South and moved to northern urban areas such as Chicago, Detroit, New York and St. Louis. It was the largest population shift of a single ethnic group in the country. While the primary basis of the migration was economics, other factors contributed to the mass exodus from the South. A decline in cotton production, devastating floods, mechanization and eviction by planters essentially drove some blacks from the land. Yet, the continued racial climate of violence, discrimination, and disenfranchisement were overwhelming factors that prompted blacks to move to areas that offered greater economic, social and political opportunities. Although some found themselves “living in big city ghettos,” they could

¹⁵ Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 159-160.

“vote, attend better schools, look for higher wages” and “eat ice cream inside the ice cream parlor instead of outside on the sidewalk.”¹⁶

Not all blacks who left rural Mississippi migrated to northern cities. Some moved less than one hundred miles to cities such as Jackson, Greenwood, Clarksdale and Greenville. Between 1890 and 1940, the black urban population in the state increased from 34,200 to 178,000.¹⁷ No longer bound to the plantation credit system, men earned wages as day-laborers while women worked as domestics. Settling in racially segregated communities, they combined their economic resources to build or sustain churches that provided similar functions as those on plantations. In urban areas in both the north and south, the role of the black minister broadened. He was more than a religious leader. He was an educator, a politician, a professional and an organizer who was relied upon to mobilize blacks toward social change.¹⁸ By far, the minister “emerged as the most visible, most influential, and often the most powerful leader in virtually any black community in the New South.”¹⁹ Even A. H. Ramsey, Superintendent of Bolivar County Schools, acknowledged to members of the Delta Council as early as 1944 that “the greatest influence in the Mississippi Delta is the Negro preacher.”²⁰

During the Civil Rights Movement, there were three distinct types of black ministers: militant, moderate and traditionalist. The militant was an “aggressive, take-

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ McMillen, 155.

¹⁸ Lenox Yearwood, “National Afro-American Organizations in Urban Communities,” *Journal of Black Studies*, June 1978, 425.

¹⁹ Litwack, 380.

²⁰ Delta Council Educational Policy Committee, 5 October 1944, Walter Sillers Papers, Delta State University Capps Archives, Folder 29, Box 9.

charge civil rights protagonist, who was not only outspoken but committed to action on the basis of his beliefs and commitment.” While he viewed himself as a spiritual leader, the militant placed equal importance on his roles as an advocate and leader in “social, political and economic realms.” On the other hand, the moderate was “inclined to be the peacemaker, the gradualist, the treader-down-the-middle-of-the-road” who was aware of social conditions but sought improvements “carefully, quietly, slowly, without alienating the white brother.” In contrast to both the militant and the moderate, the traditionalist, who was “passive with regard to challenges to the prevailing social order,” appeared satisfied with the status quo as long as he could preach the Gospel and make a living. Their degree of involvement and commitment to the civil rights movement directly related to their age, educational level and social status. The most ardent supporters of the movement tended to be young, well-educated, and middle class.²¹

The southern black church was the institutional center of the movement due to its ability to garner and influence large masses of people. In contrast to other southern states, black religious leaders in Mississippi were noticeably absent from the forefront during the initial stages of the movement. This absence was attributed to economic dependence on the white power structure, submissive attitudes, and the lack of a strong, socially responsible ministerial alliance.²² “Although a few ministers did preach the social gospel and participate in voter registration campaigns, most black preachers – conservative, frightened, or both – kept their distance from civil rights activity.”²³

²¹ Ronald L. Johnstone, “Negro Preachers Take Sides,” *Review of Religious Research* 11:1 (1969): 82-83.

²² John Dittmer, *Local People* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 77.

²³ *Ibid.*

Medgar Evers placed some of these ministers in “that class of people who won’t be hurt by belonging to the [NAACP], but who won’t give us 50 cents for fear of losing face with the white man.”²⁴ Most black ministers, who worked for the church on a part-time salary basis, took a “cautious attitude” toward civil rights because they were economically dependent on white employers and had concerns for the safety and security of their churches.²⁵ They also faced consequences from middle-class congregations who might suffer economically and socially should the church or the minister support civil rights. Throughout the state, whites designated “reliable” black ministers as community leaders and made financial contributions to their churches.²⁶ Ministers “faced a difficult choice – embrace the movement and face harassment or violence from hostile whites, or turn away and be labeled an Uncle Tom.”²⁷ Consequently, most confined their roles and the church to providing relief for the elderly, improving education for children, establishing schools and centers to help adults gain skills to improve their family and community, and developing black leadership to uplift the race.²⁸

Therefore, the vast majority of movement activities in the Delta, particularly during the 1950s and early 1960s, were rooted in secular organizations such as the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, Council of Federated Organizations, Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party,

²⁴ Francis H. Mitchell, “Why I Live in Mississippi,” *Ebony*, 1 September 1963, 148.

²⁵ Sparks, 224.

²⁶ Dittmer, 76.

²⁷ Eric Stringfellow, “Job’s not over for black churches, backbone of civil rights movement,” *Clarion-Ledger*, 1 July 1984.

²⁸ Hilton, 31.

all of which formed alliances with the NAACP. “The greatest setback in the Negro race in Mississippi,” said Rev. Robert L. Drew, chairman of the Coahoma County NAACP branch, “was the Negro preacher whom the council [RCNL] has not been able to reach. The Negro preacher has the key to the whole situation. The lay members cannot reach the masses of the people.”²⁹ Exceptions included members of the Delta Ministry and the Ministerial Improvement Association of Mississippi. However, neither of these organizations had the sustaining power or influence of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference nor produced a leader equal to Martin Luther King, Jr. The majority of black ministers in Mississippi called for “a new Booker T. Washington – someone to lead who is not interested in racial equality.”³⁰

Among black Baptist ministers, the Sovereignty Commission primarily relied upon Harrison Henry Humes, a product of the Delta plantation system and president of the General Missionary Baptist State Convention of Mississippi. Presiding over thousands of black Baptists throughout the state, he articulated an agenda based on accommodation and frequently attributed the gains and successes of blacks to the kindness and generosity of whites. In addition to serving as president of the Baptist State Convention, he was also the minister of several churches in Bolivar and Washington Counties and owned a newspaper. From the pulpit and the newsstand, he encouraged blacks to accept their plight and live within the confines of a segregated system. With long-standing relationships within both the black and white communities, he was considered the most influential black man in Mississippi. By far, Humes was the ideal

²⁹ Report on Regional Council of Negro Leadership, 9 December 1957, MSSC SCR# 2-2-0-13-1-1.

³⁰ Bayard Rustin, *Down the Line* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 65.

informant. He was a traditional minister who had the influence and capacity to reach large numbers of blacks through his various religious, civic and social positions.

In the early 1960s, Rev. M. L. Young, founder of the Mutual Association of Colored People South, travelled throughout Mississippi investigating the NAACP and promoting segregation on behalf of the Commission. Though he did not have the same type of influential relationship with MSSC and white elites as Humes, he nonetheless appeared to have the capacity to reach large numbers of blacks throughout the south. The association had a central office in Memphis, Tennessee and a branch office in Jackson, Mississippi. It was chartered and incorporated in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi and Tennessee. Young considered the South his domain in disseminating messages perpetuating interracial cooperation, harmony and goodwill between blacks and whites. He preached a gospel of separation based on his own interpretations of the Bible and the philosophy of Booker T. Washington.

Harrison Henry Humes

The youngest son of sharecroppers, H. H. Humes was born on October 5, 1899 in Fayette on the Delta and Pine Land Company plantation. He recalled that as “a boy on a farm in the Delta they had a plantation system that was cotton and nothing else but cotton.”³¹ Growing up on the plantation, he saw “heads bloodied” and blacks who “were washed down with blood and were forced to work all day.”³² Blacks on plantations who did not pursue an education had few options to escape the cotton and the blood. With

³¹ Meeting of Delta Council Race Relations Committee, 15 March 1949, Walter Sillers Papers, Box 29, Folder 7A.

³² Ibid.

limited occupational opportunities, most educated black men became preachers, teachers or owners of small businesses.

Humes chose the divine path. He attended Jackson College in the 1920s and later received his Doctor of Divinity degree from Natchez College, a private institution established by the Baptist State Convention. Following college, he moved to Greenville, the county seat of Washington County. As a circuit preacher, Humes was the minister of churches throughout the Delta including New Hope Baptist Church in Greenville, Gospel Temple Baptist Church in Rosedale, Strangers Home Baptist Church in Greenwood, and St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church in Cleveland. Active civically and socially, he was a member of the Delta Interracial Commission, the National Negro Business League, Sir Knights and Daughters of Tabor, the Masons and the Elks.

Soon after Humes settled in Greenville, the Delta was devastated by the Great Flood in 1927. When the levee broke, some areas of Greenville were tolerable. But in the lowland black neighborhoods, the situation was desperate. On Nelson Street, the central thoroughfare in the black community and the location of New Hope Baptist Church, “water [was] up to the top of all roofs, tops of porches and second stories were covered with darkeys and cats in one terrific welter.”³³ While many whites, particularly women and children were evacuated, nearly 5,000 blacks remained in Greenville. Approximately 13,000 blacks were relocated to unsanitary, mismanaged refugee camps on the levee. Speaking of the restraints in the camps, black refugee David Coper said: “You stayed on the levee unless you had a pass to go into town. You had to have a tag on

³³ John M. Barry, *Rising Tide* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 322.

you. You don't go nowhere unless you got permission to go. ... it was really slavery."³⁴

Tags were used for job assignments, medical services and the delivery of rations.

Abuses of black refugees in Greenville and other camps were so flagrant that they were reported in black newspapers around the country. The *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that blacks having "lost their farms and worldly goods" were being "herded like cattle and forced to endure the serpent of race hatred" in conscripted labor gangs.³⁵ The *Chicago Defender* viewed the camps as prisons holding blacks captive "because after the flood they would be needed to get plantations in shape."³⁶ Planters, in an effort to maintain their labor force, worked in concert with officials to ensure that blacks remained on the levees or other designated areas. For example, Oscar Johnston of Delta and Pine Land Company "established his own refugee camp, supplied by the Red Cross, patrolled by the National Guard, and managed by his foremen."³⁷

During the flood, Lenora Briggs was a sixteen-year-old student at Almeda Garden School in Moorhead, approximately 34 miles from Greenville. When the water receded, she travelled by train to reach her family in Winterville, located a few miles north of Greenville. She recalled that Mrs. Hodges, the school principal, "took a bunch of us as far as she could on the train."³⁸ Humes, whom she said was in charge of an organization that cared for refugees, "met us where the train had to stop and took us in a boat ... over

³⁴ PBS, "Fatal Flood," http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/flood/sfeature/sf_flood_5.html [accessed 13 October 2010].

³⁵ "Conscript Labor Gangs Keep Flood Refugees In Legal Bondage, Claimed," *Pittsburg Courier*, 14 May 1927.

³⁶ "Use Troops in Flood Area To Imprison Farm Hands," *Chicago Defender*, 7 May 1927.

³⁷ Barry, 313.

³⁸ Daisy M. Greene, "An Interview with Miss Lenora Briggs," 22 April 1977, Washington County Library Stem Oral History Project, Greenville, MS.

to Rosedale where we spent the night.”³⁹ From there, Humes took them on the Greenville where she spent the night on the levee until her father came to take her home. Within a few days, a second flood threatened Greenville. Officials once again decided to conscript free black labor. However, black leaders objected to labor practices where they were supervised by armed white men. Disregarding the white-appointed organization of black ministers, the group formed the “General Colored Committee” chaired by Rev. C. B. Young with Levey Chapple as secretary. The committee recruited nearly 1,000 blacks who worked in teams around the clock for eight days sealing and topping the levee.⁴⁰ Though Greenville was safe and the levee was stable, Maurice Sisson remembered that “so many people wanted to leave here and go to Chicago [because] they just knew they were going to the promised land.”⁴¹

Following the flood, Greenville soon returned to normalcy. To prepare for future disasters, the city established measures and volunteer committees to respond to emergencies. Humes served on the Volunteer Food Emergency Committee along with Rev. E. J. Threadgill, Frank Maddox, R. L. Weston, Levey Chapple, Henry Crockett, W. H. Craig, and E. M. Torrence. The committee was organized as a “patriotic duty and to be of service in any way in which they are needed to bring about a victory over the Mississippi River.”⁴²

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Barry, 325-327.

⁴¹ PBS, “Fatal Flood,” http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/flood/sfeature/sf_flood_5.html [accessed 13 October 2010].

⁴² “Labor Section Functions But No Call As Yet,” *Weekly Democrat Times*, 11 February 1937.

In 1938, Humes purchased the *Delta Leader*, a weekly newspaper based in Greenville. From the onset, the paper took a moderate editorial stance promoting “the interest of the people of the Mid-South in economics, civics, education, religion, and a better relationship.”⁴³ Humes viewed the paper as a “brave attempt to preach with the dominant idea of elevating the minds to higher planes of thought, educating the mind to cleaner and clearer thought; the hands to love the creation of honest toil.”⁴⁴ The paper published a variety of national and international news that would be of interest to black readers yet avoided controversial issues such as civil rights. Subscription rates ranged from twenty cents per month to two dollars per year, or five cents per issue. Although weekly circulation was 500 copies, Humes contended that the paper had a volume of 4,300 copies with a readership of 20,000 in 1939.⁴⁵ Over the course of the publication, there were various staff members including his wife, Mary Humes, as office manager, and B L Bell as associate editor.

As blacks continued to migrate from the south, the Delta Council, with Walter Sillers as president, adopted resolutions in 1943 to improve housing, health and education for blacks, recognizing that these were “prime factor[s] affecting the efficiency and usefulness ... as well as their happiness and welfare.”⁴⁶ Further, the Council had concerns about the racially integrated Southern Tenant Farmers Union, which encouraged tenant

⁴³ “Our Platform,” *Delta Leader*, 14 December 1943.

⁴⁴ Julius E. Thompson, *The Black Press in Mississippi* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁶ Delta Council Committee, 4 May 1943, Walter Sillers Papers, Box 14, Folder 22. The Delta Council organized in 1935 as an association of planters and businessmen to promote agricultural development in eighteen Delta counties.

farmers and sharecroppers to organize against discriminatory wage practices. Planters quickly accepted new ideas for improving profits, but lived in constant fear of any element disturbing the black-white relationship or threatened the status quo.⁴⁷ To keep abreast of STFU activities, the Council used Humes to spy at post offices to see which sharecroppers received union literature. For example, Humes travelled ninety-seven miles from his Greenville hometown to the Tunica post office to obtain the name of the individual who received STFU literature for distribution to sharecroppers in the Delta.⁴⁸ His expanded role as an informant was nurtured by Dorothy Black, secretary-manager of the Council, in collaboration with Sillers. In a letter to Black, Humes reported that “it is true beyond every reasonable doubt the N.A.A.C.P. has been making a house-to-house canvass for members here in Greenville. The purpose of the N.A.A.C.P. is to excite Negroes through its sensational arguments and impress them to strive for political power in Mississippi.”⁴⁹ He also included the names of the NAACP leaders in Greenville: Doc Kenard, James Williams, and Grant Seales.

With Humes’ cooperation, the Council wrote and approved editorials for the *Delta Leader* that encouraged blacks to cooperate with planters and remain on the plantation. Sillers advised Black to convey to Humes that he should not give too much publicity to the Council in the *Leader* because “the designing demagogues of his race [might] play on the prejudices of the ignorant negroes with the propaganda that he is a white man’s negro

⁴⁷ James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 203.

⁴⁸ Dorothy Black to Walter Sillers, 9 February 1943, Walter Sillers Papers, Box 29, Folder 7B.

⁴⁹ Humes to Dorothy Black, 23 May 1946 in Walter Sillers Papers, Box 29, Folder 4.

and siding against his own people.”⁵⁰ In an editorial, Humes described farming as the “only way out” for “the unskilled and illeterate [illiterate] Negro in rural Mississippi.”⁵¹ He described the South as “the greatest refuge for the Negro” because it offered more economic stability than northern industrial occupations that required skilled labor.⁵² The headline of a full-page feature story boasted that DPLC tenants earned \$790,000 in 1943.⁵³ Yet, this figure was misleading since it failed to report the annual earnings of tenants by household. In actuality, the approximate 850 families representing several thousand workers averaged \$588 per household after \$290,000 credit obligations and other indebtedness to the company. The story, which could be interpreted as a carefully constructed advertisement, emphasized that DPLC with its excellent housing, health care and schools was “unbeatable in making contributions towards the tenants’ economic security.”⁵⁴ In 1943, Delta and Pine Land Company earnings were \$1,191,512.42—\$500,004.06 in expenses and \$691,508.36 profit.⁵⁵ Humes was severely criticized by the *Chicago Defender* for accepting “pay from the ‘good white folks’ whose cotton-picking advertisements he prints in his paper” and warnings against migration from the south.⁵⁶ The *Defender* also charged that Humes could not “circulate his paper nor preach his

⁵⁰ Sillers to Black, 31 March 1943, Walter Sillers Papers, Box 29, Folder 7B.

⁵¹ “Negro Farmers in Mississippi,” *Delta Leader*, 14 December 1943.

⁵² “The South A Better Refuge,” *Delta Leader*, 7 January 1945.

⁵³ “Delta & Pine Land Company,” *Delta Leader*, 14 December 1943.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Zhengkai Dong, “From Postbellum Plantation to Modern Agriculture” (PhD diss., Purdue University, 1993), 100.

⁵⁶ “Farm Bloc Uses Preacher In Campaign to Kill FSA,” *Chicago Defender*, 23 April 1943.

sermons to the plantation workers” without support from planters.⁵⁷ Humes denounced the article as lies noting that “the circulation of our paper and our preaching are two separate and distinct influences and there are no strings attached to either side—no more than are attached to the Chicago Defender in Illinois and the pulpit of the leading church in Chicago.”⁵⁸

In 1944, Humes was elected president of the General Missionary Baptist State Convention of Mississippi, a state division of the National Baptist Convention - the largest black religious organization in the country. It was a coveted position that placed him at the center of religious activity in the state. As each state president was responsible for setting the tone for their respective conventions, Humes continued to maintain that it was better to cooperate rather than agitate whites. As such, his religious platforms, which he frequently printed in the *Delta Leader*, echoed Booker T. Washington’s “cast down your bucket where you are” ideals of racial uplift through accommodation. According to his calculations, the state organization has grown to 412,000 members by 1949.⁵⁹

His position within the Baptist State Convention provided Humes with some validity and influence among members of the Delta Council, other than Sillers. In 1949, he served on the Delta Council Race Relations Committee in an advisory capacity regarding key issues affecting blacks in the Delta. The primary purpose of the committee was to formulate recommendations to guide the Council in establishing programs that

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ “Chicago Defender Tells Four Lies,” *Delta Leader*, 16 May 1943.

⁵⁹ Meeting of Delta Council Race Relations Committee, 15 March 1949, Walter Sillers Papers, Box 29, Folder 7A.

would benefit blacks in the Delta. Yet, the overarching goal of the committee was to encourage blacks not only to remain in the South, but to remain on the plantations. In setting the tone for the meeting, Rev. Richard A. Bolling of First Presbyterian Church believed that first and foremost, blacks needed to acquire the basic principles of thrift, character and education. He stated that “the Negro’s primary need is salvation” because “he’s no good to Mississippi or the South until he wants to do right.” The committee generally accepted that through education and religious training, blacks could learn “how to do right, do it efficiently and show a profit in it.” Therefore, they proposed a salary schedule based on education and experience for all public school teachers, per capita funds for schools, an increase in Delta Council appropriations to build better schools, and cooperative agreements with other southern states to develop regional institutions for post-secondary education. To meet the “Negroes’ need for salvation” and to properly prepare black ministers “for their work as Christian leaders in their race and throughout the area,” the committee recommended that the Council raise funds for theological scholarships to existing divinity schools.⁶⁰

On certain issues, the committee deferred to Humes who considered himself a spokesperson for many of the blacks in the state. On segregation, he said: “I don’t think there is any fair-minded Negro in Mississippi who wants segregation abolished [because] that simply means separation of the races.” He emphasized that blacks were more concerned about injustices and discrimination. The committee’s position on segregation was: “We believe in segregation because we believe it is best for the Negro and best for ourselves. With the wide divergence in background, culture, and ambition that exists

⁶⁰ Ibid.

between the Negro and white races, we know the Negro is happier in his own group, and we are in ours.”⁶¹

Two years before the passage of the *Brown* decision, Humes warned Governor White and Sillers that the schools must be equalized during the 1952 legislative session. He emphasized that “waiting on the decision of your South Carolina Supreme Court will invite trouble in Mississippi on the part of the most impatient members of our group who are most likely to be influenced by outside interference.”⁶² When *Brown* was announced, Humes “praised the ruling but warned of racial misunderstandings in the nation.”⁶³ He was correct in his assessment. Black segregationist leaders had led Governor White and House Speaker Sillers to believe that blacks in Mississippi favored segregation. Even Humes could not rescue White and Sillers in 1954 from black leaders in the state who decided to uphold *Brown* and voted against voluntary segregation.

When the State Baptist Convention held its annual meeting in Vicksburg in August 1955, Humes declared that the organization was not interested in racial issues such as segregation. Yet, the group “passed a unanimous resolution condemning 140 Negro parents who petitioned [with assistance from the local NAACP] the city school board to end school segregation.”⁶⁴ Continuing his campaign against the NAACP, Humes urged Convention members not to join the organization because it was

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² “Miss. Leaders Favor Continued Jim Crow,” *Jet*, 21 February 1952, 20.

⁶³ Andrew Michael Manis, *Southern Civil Religions in Conflict* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 62.

⁶⁴ “Miss. Baptists Flay Backers of Integration,” *Jet*, 4 August 1955, 26. The *Vicksburg Evening Post* published the list of petitioners in the paper, causing a number of them to withdraw their names from the petition.

detrimental to race relations in the state. Within the same period, an *Ebony* magazine article described Humes as “one of the most prominent Negro pro-segregationists in Mississippi” whose philosophy was “I’d rather be a back door Negro and be well fed than a front door Negro and go hungry.”⁶⁵

In September 1955, over 20,000 delegates convened in Memphis for a four-day conference celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the National Baptist Convention. In welcoming the delegates, Mayor Frank Tobey said, “I hope there will come a day when there will be universal respect for all denominations, greater enjoyment and hope for all men.”⁶⁶ During his opening address, Dr. Joseph H. Jackson, president of the Convention, told the capacity-crowd at the Ellis Auditorium:

We must fight our legal battles without fear and without reservations. This fight is more important to America as a nation than it is to us as a race for America shall never gain the respect she deserves and needs among the peoples of Asia until the legal battle has been won to set all citizens free, and to remove once and forever the caste of color and segregation based on race or national origin.⁶⁷

Jackson, who did not support protests and civil disobedience, advised delegates to “remain law abiding citizens and seek to reach our goals through the agencies of the courts of the land.”⁶⁸ He recommended the convention “adopt a ‘mild’ resolution on the

⁶⁵ “There Are Some Negroes Who Support Segregation,” *Ebony*, August 1955, 74.

⁶⁶ “Baptist Confab Sets New Record,” *Tri-State Defender*, 17 September 1955. Tobey addressed the delegates on September 7, 1955. Ironically, he had a heart attack later that evening and subsequently died on September 11, the last day of the convention. Four other persons associated with the convention also died during the same period.

⁶⁷ Al Westbrooks, Jr., “Dr. Jackson Tells Baptist Delegates Don’t Compromise, Don’t Become Bitter,” *Tri-State Defender*, 17 September 1955.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

matter of Emmett Louis Till” which “commends officers for their work in investigating and making arrests.”⁶⁹

On the second day of the convention, Humes was publicly criticized for “selling out the Negro in Mississippi.” Each time he rose to the platform to speak, he was “shouted down by the convention with charges of being a ‘traitor’ and an ‘Uncle Tom’.” With his head bowed and hands in his pockets, Humes listened as Dr. William Borders, pastor of Wheat Street Baptist Church in Atlanta, led “tongue-lashing denunciations” of his agreement to a voluntary segregation plan. An article in the *Delta Leader* promoting the plan was “picked up by pro-segregation newspapers” and “interpreted by that segment of the press to mean that the Negroes in Mississippi want segregation.” Though he did not identify them by name, Borders insinuated that Humes “in a way [had] contributed to the deaths of three Negroes in his state.” In addition to Emmitt Till who was murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman, Rev. George Lee and Lamar Smith had recently been killed in Mississippi for organizing voter registration campaigns. It took Dr. Thomas S. Harten of Brooklyn thirty minutes to bring the convention back to order before Humes could speak.⁷⁰

In comparison to Humes, Borders, a graduate of Morehouse College, was well-known for supporting the Civil Rights Movement. As vice-president of the Atlanta NAACP, he successfully led campaigns to desegregate municipal buses and the police department and led a voter registration drive that generated 15,000 new black voters. Borders, W. E. B. Du Bois and other national black leaders advocated the use of “rallies,

⁶⁹ Clark Porteous, “Tom’s Cabin Still Houses Trouble,” *Press-Scimitar*, 9 September 1955.

⁷⁰ “Confab Rebukes, Humiliates Rev. Humes for ‘Selling Out in Mississippi,’” *Tri-State Defender*, 17 September 1955.

protests, demonstrations and petitions to end the system of discrimination and segregation” and encouraged legislations to end poll taxes, prohibit lynching, and establish federal fair employment practices.⁷¹ Borders had previously stated “the Negro preacher was to take the lead in fighting for the civil rights of the Southern Negro.”⁷²

Considering to his ties to the Delta and Pine Land Company and the Delta Council, a relationship with the Sovereignty Commission seemed a natural progression for Humes. His pattern of encouraging blacks to accept segregation and providing white elites with information aligned with the subversive strategies of MSSC. Further, his Jim Crow performances and submissive temperament added to his nonthreatening and trustworthy persona. In time, Humes was regarded as an “effective moderator who claimed the respect of both white and Negro. He had a voice and a vocabulary that could, and did speak for his people and his state.”⁷³ Through his relationship with MSSC public relations director Hal DeCell, Humes became the first documented paid black informant. His first assignment in August 1956 was to investigate NAACP activities, for which he was paid \$29.76 for travel expenses.⁷⁴ In addition to reporting on the NAACP, Humes provided MSSC with information regarding meetings among various ministerial associations and individual civil rights activists. On occasion, he traveled outside the state to attend ministers’ conferences at the expense of the Commission.

⁷¹ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, Vol. 3 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997) 242.

⁷² Manis, 23.

⁷³ “A Voice Of His People,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 3 January 1958.

⁷⁴ Commission Payment to Humes, MSSC SCR# 97-104-0-211-1-1-1 to 97-104-0-211-3-1-1.

Humes frequently published news stories and editorials in the *Delta Leader* that used a rose-colored lens regarding racial conditions in Mississippi. In a January 1957 editorial on race relations, he wrote:

Race relations in Mississippi, at present, is better than any of our southern states. The Whites and Blacks in Mississippi have set out to build a mutual respect and understanding without fear and blood shed. Instead of Mississippi being classified as the backward state in the nation it should be classified as the forward looking state in the nation.⁷⁵

Sillers thought the editorial was “one of the best [he had] read on this complex, misunderstood, misrepresented and troublesome” subject. He read it aloud during a meeting with Governor Coleman and the state legislators. It was so-well received that Coleman suggested the Sovereignty Commission, “reproduce it and send it out over the country [so] that people elsewhere might know how the outstanding Negro leaders and newspapers in Mississippi feel on the question.” Sillers, who “was glad to place [his] friend in the right light before the Governor and Legislators,” attributed the “fine relations and understanding between the races” to Humes and other black leaders who supported segregation.⁷⁶ Apparently Humes, using a blind eye and turning of the cheek, overlooked the retaliatory and violent actions of whites against blacks who sought to desegregate schools, exercise their right to vote, and lessen the grip of Jim Crow. An *Ebony* article described Mississippi’s racial conditions as “an embarrassment to a nation which is attempting to live up to the word and the ideal of democracy.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ “Harrison Henry Humes Says: Race Relations,” *Delta Leader*, 13 January 1957.

⁷⁶ Sillers letter to H. H. Humes , 18 January 1957, Walter Sillers Papers, Box 35, Folder 12.

⁷⁷ Clotye Murdock, “Land of the Till Murder,” *Ebony*, April 1956, 91.

In March 1957, ministers in the Gulf Coast region of the state formed the Ministerial Improvement Association of Mississippi whose primary objectives were first class citizenship, integration in public transportation, and voter registration. “To obtain these objectives we shall use every peaceful means and methods.” said MIA spokesman Rev. W. H. Hall. “It is our hope and prayer that these objectives will be granted without a single litigation by anyone in the State of Mississippi.”⁷⁸ Although letters were mailed to nearly all of the black ministers in the state, only fifty-four attended the first meeting in Hattiesburg. There were no ministers present from the Delta. MSSC investigator Hicks and two members of the Highway Patrol attempted to record the six-hour meeting from a loudspeaker outside the church. However, their faulty equipment produced an incomplete report. Subsequent investigations led the Commission to believe that the group was a “front organization” for the NAACP.

An Associated Press news story in July 1957 exposed Humes, Percy Greene of the *Jackson Advocate*, and Rev. Ozelle Mason of Memphis as informants. Denouncing them before a crowd of 600 at the Mount Bethel Baptist Church in Gulfport, NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins said they were “quick to get their hands in the till.”⁷⁹ Humes responded by saying, “The people of Mississippi must be good enough, big enough, religious enough and intelligent enough to solve their own problems and if they are not willing, people out of Mississippi won’t do it by flying down here in the morning

⁷⁸ “Negro Ministers Release List of Main Objectives,” *Clarion Ledger*, 5 October 1957 in MSSC SCR# 2-3-0-9-1-1-1.

⁷⁹ “State Negroes Draw NAACP Fire,” *Meridian Star*, 30 July 1957 in MSSC SCR# 2-5-1-44-1-1-1.

stirring up strife and flying out at night.”⁸⁰ In succeeding editions of the *Delta Leader*, he charged that the NAACP has “fallen into bad hands, both nationally and locally” and wanted to “kill off leaders who don’t think like they think.”⁸¹ He said the exposure had “hurt chiefly in his standing with national Negro Baptists leaders.”⁸² The Ministerial Improvement Association issued a resolution declaring that Humes was “unworthy of the fellowship of the ministers of the Protestant denominations in Mississippi and cannot speak for Mississippi Negroes.”⁸³ He made plans to file a libel suit against Medgar Evers and John Melchor of the NAACP, MIA, and the Associated Press because the news story was used to accuse him of “conspiring with the Sovereignty Commission and the White Citizens Council to hold the Negroes back in Mississippi and cheat and defraud them of their civil rights.”⁸⁴ In a *Defender* news story, MSSC Director Ney Gore described Humes as “a Negro preacher at Greenville who has taken a public stand for segregation.”⁸⁵

When some members of the State Baptist Convention learned Humes was an informant, they tried to oust him as president during the 1957 annual meeting. The campaign was led by Rev. Robert Drew and the Ministerial Improvement Association. More than 30,000 flyers were distributed during the Convention calling for his removal

⁸⁰ “Humes Says NAACP Stirring Up Trouble,” *Democrat Natchez*, 31 July 1957 in MSSC SCR# 2-5-1-44-1-1-1.

⁸¹ “Negro Editor Blasts NAACP,” *Magnolia Gazette*, 15 August 1957 in MSSC SCR# 2-5-1-45-1-1-1.

⁸² John Herbers, “Moderation Stand Gives Negro Leaders Humes, Green Hot Time,” *Delta Democrat Times*, 28 July 1957.

⁸³ “MS Studies Cost of Equalization Program,” *Southern School News*, August 1957, 15.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ “Claim 3 On Miss. Payroll To Maintain Segregation,” *Chicago Defender*, 9 July 1957.

as president. Humes told the delegates, “I know there are those among you who say, ‘God is too slow,’ and who preach hatred. But the white man and the colored man have come a long way and we depend upon each other.”⁸⁶ Humes “was given a rousing vote of confidence in his integrity and leadership by the General Board” and retained the presidency.⁸⁷

Although he was publicly exposed, Humes continued his association with the Commission. In December, he attended the Regional Council of Negro Leadership rally at the Second Baptist Church in Clarksdale. Humes reported that the rally, with approximately 200 attendees, focused primarily on voting rights. Rev. A. Newsome of Cleveland boasted that he was a registered voter and encouraged others to register, vote and become a member of the NAACP. Levye Chapple and John Melchor, both supporters of the NAACP, agreed that paying the poll tax and voting “was the only thing that will put spurs in the white man’s side and bring him around to our thinking.”⁸⁸ The group passed a resolution to “instigate suits against every chancery court in Mississippi who refused to permit Negroes to vote.”⁸⁹ Humes was paid \$115 for conducting the investigation.⁹⁰

Humes died unexpectedly from a heart attack on January 1, 1958 at the age of fifty-five. Two days after his death, DeCell went to his office and removed all

⁸⁶ “Voice of His People,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 3 January 1958.

⁸⁷ “State Baptist Exec. Board Gives Vote Of Confidence In Integrity And Leadership Of Rev. H. H Humes,” *Jackson Advocate*, 27 July 1957.

⁸⁸ Humes Report to Commission, 9 December 1957, MSSC SCR# 2-2-0-13-1-1-1 to 2-2-0-13-3-1-1.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Payment to Humes, 17 December 1957, MSSC SCR# 99-11-0-37-1-1-1.

information pertaining to the Commission. In a memo to Governor Coleman, DeCell remarked that “the death of Rev. Humes has cost us one of the most influential Negroes we have had working in our behalf.”⁹¹ His death received widespread media coverage. The *Clarion-Ledger* reported that “his death may have been hastened by systematic abuse and ridicule heaped upon him for his assistance to the Sovereignty Commission.”⁹² Further, the *Ledger* stated that for his assistance, he was “exposed to humiliation and embarrassment” which “does not offer much incentive for future cooperation by Negro moderates in Mississippi.”⁹³ The *Delta Democrat Times* described him as a responsible leader who “formed an effective bulwark against moves which could have brought violence to our state” and “represented his people more effectively than any elected official could.”⁹⁴ The black northern press was not as generous. *Jet* reported that the “controversial cleric” was considered “one of the biggest handkerchiefheads in Mississippi.”⁹⁵ Humes said of his critics: “Some have held a spear to my heart, and have stretched my hide on the spits of public opinion, not because I have hurt anyone, but because I have tried to help.”⁹⁶ He received a total of \$1,865.76 from the Commission, an average \$150 per month.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Hal DeCell to Governor J. P. Coleman, 6 January 1958, MSCC SCR# 9-0-0-4-1-1-1.

⁹² Tom Etheridge, “Mississippi Notebook,” *Clarion-Ledger*, 8 January 1958.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ “A Voice Of His People,” *Delta Democrat*, 3 January 1958.

⁹⁵ “Controversial Miss. Cleric Dies in Greenville,” *Jet*, 16 January 1958, 52. A handkerchief head is a black person who tries to gain the favor of whites; an Uncle Tom.

⁹⁶ “Voice of His People,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, 3 January 1958.

⁹⁷ Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 43.

As the president of the Mississippi Baptist Convention, Humes had the capacity to influence over 400,000 black Baptists in the state. Rather than using his influence to unite the Convention and blacks against a Jim Crow system, he aligned himself with the white power structure. One can only imagine the strength of the early Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi had he chosen to use his influence to advance the rights of his own people.

M. L. Young

Rev. M. L. Young, pastor of the Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church in Memphis and other churches in Tennessee and Mississippi, founded the Mutual Association of Colored People South in 1943. With offices in Memphis and Jackson, Mississippi, the Association promoted segregation based on the principles of interracial cooperation, harmony, and goodwill. Its manifesto pledged “to give full support and cooperation to the Southern Government of the South, to advance the cause of the Negroes separate but equal, and to use [its] influence against racial demonstrations and sit-ins.”⁹⁸ Young began his relationship with MSCC in 1957 when the agency funded the printing and distribution of *Mississippi Negro Progress Edition*, a forty-page report that “contained the photographs of numerous Negro schools over the State [and] Negro personalities” as well as successful black-owned businesses.⁹⁹ Young, who was featured on the front page, described the MACPS “vigorous and serious movement to fight the

⁹⁸ Manifesto of the Mutual Association of Colored People So., MSSC SCR# 9-29-2-2-1-1-1.

⁹⁹ Van Landingham to Police Chief Clyde Coker, 18 March 1959, MSSC SCR# 6-6-0-7-1-1-1.

policy of Negroes and White in the same school.”¹⁰⁰ In forewarning of the consequences of integrated schools, he reported that black principals and teachers would lose their jobs, blacks would have to compete with whites who owned and controlled eighty percent of the country’s wealth, and blacks would lose their racial identity.¹⁰¹ Young also noted that because of his position on segregation, “he has been called a Negro hater and accused of trying to hold the Negro back.”¹⁰² Over 28,000 copies of the report were disseminated by MSSC across the country to promote racial segregation and illustrate black progress in Mississippi. *Memphis World*, a weekly black-owned newspaper, criticized Young’s failure to substantiate statements documenting black progress or to “mention by name or show photographs of numerous successful Negroes.”¹⁰³ The newspaper also found that the report “failed to show the typical one-level overcrowded, under staffed school structure which hundreds of Negro students are packed into” throughout the state.¹⁰⁴

In compiling the report, Young worked with Orzelle Mason, vice-president of MACPS. With a similar position on segregation as Young, Mason revealed that he had been called an “Uncle Tom” and “accused of not being fit to associate with the ministers of Mississippi.”¹⁰⁵ Exposed as an informant, Mason was paid \$496.15 in March 1957 for printing and distributing 10,000 pamphlets promoting black progress.¹⁰⁶ Though there

¹⁰⁰ Mississippi Negro Progress Edition, MSSC SCR# 6-6-0-3-1-1-1 to 6-6-0-3-40-1-1.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ “Where Are The Negroes Who Went From Rags to Riches?,” *Memphis World*, 27 March 1958.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Mississippi Negro Progress Edition, MSSC SCR# 6-6-0-3-1-1-1 to 6-6-0-3-40-1-1.

¹⁰⁶ Payment to Reverend Orzelle Mason, 20 February 1957, MSSC SCR# 97-104-0-100-1-1-1.

was no information in the Commission files that provided the scope of his work for the agency, public relations director DeCell acknowledged that Mason worked as an investigator. From March 1957 to June 1958 he was paid \$690.00 for investigations by Governor Coleman.¹⁰⁷ Since his payments were from Coleman, it can be assumed that he worked directly for the governor rather than MSSC staff which may explain the lack of documentation in the files.

When Young, informant 9-9, re-established his relationship with MSSC in July 1959, Mason was no longer affiliated with MACPS.¹⁰⁸ His renewed relationship had several functions: completing a second edition of *Negro Progress*, reporting on the NAACP, and conducting investigations in Memphis and Mississippi. In letters to MSSC investigator Van Landingham and director Maurice Malone, Young requested \$500 to cover expenses for the second edition. He added, "I think we'll be able to get rid of a portion of the agitators in Mississippi."¹⁰⁹ After a major election in Memphis in August 1959, Young excitedly informed the Commission, "We have knocked them all out."¹¹⁰ He was referring to the black candidates who were not elected because efforts by MACPS "split the vote and [kept] any of the negroes from being elected."¹¹¹ Young did not provide any details regarding exactly how they split the vote. Actually, the black candidates known as the Volunteer Ticket were running for separate political offices

¹⁰⁷ Payments to Mason, MSSC SCR# 97-104-54-1-1-1, 97-104-0-85-1-1-1, 99-11-0-13-1-1-1, 99-11-0-16-1-1-1, 99-11-0-20-1-1-1, 99-11-0-22-1-1-1, 99-11-0-25-1-1-1, 99-11-0-27-1-1-1, 99-11-0-38-1-1-1, 99-11-0-42-1-1-1, 99-11-0-55-1-1-1, and 99-11-0-60-1-1-1.

¹⁰⁸ M. Young Informant Number, MSSC SCR # 99-201-0-330-1-1-1.

¹⁰⁹ Young to MSSC director Maurice Malone, 22 July 1959, MSSC SCR# 6-6-0-16-1-1-1; Young to Van Landingham, 8 August 1959, MSSC SCR# 6-6-0-14-1-1-1.

¹¹⁰ Van Landingham to file, 21 August 1959, MSSC SCR# 6-6-0-2-1-1-1.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

against white candidates. Therefore, the vote was not split due to numerous black candidates running for the same office. Simply put, the candidates lost the election because they did not receive the majority vote.

For the next year, there was no documented contact between Young and the Commission. Then in January 1961, Young wrote MSSC public relations director Erle Johnston informing him that MACPS had participated in twenty-six happenings in the past year in Mississippi and solved all the incidents without trouble.¹¹² Once again, he did not provide specific details. The practice of providing MSSC with tenuous information continued for the next two years. For instance, he reported that the majority of blacks in Mississippi believed that James Meredith's desire to attend Ole Miss was designed to "create racial violence and hate backed by communist agitators."¹¹³ In another report, he stated that he worked for two weeks in Columbus to prevent two black students from attempting to enroll in the all-white college in that city.¹¹⁴ Yet, the Commission seemed content and unsuspecting of his reports on the NAACP and the attitudes of blacks toward segregation and civil rights.

In 1963, MSSC initiated a vigorous campaign to defeat the proposed 1964 Civil Rights Bill. To support the campaign and demonstrate that not all blacks supported the bill, Young collected 5,774 names of individuals from fourteen states on a petition he presented to elected officials in Washington.¹¹⁵ Considering his meager resources, it

¹¹² Young to Johnston, MSSC SCR# 9-29-1-3-1-1-1.

¹¹³ Young to MSSC director Albert Jones, 15 September 1962, MSSC SCR# 9-29-1-26-1-1-1.

¹¹⁴ Young to MSSC director Jones, 5 March 1963, MSSC SCR# 9-29-1-31-1-1-1.

¹¹⁵ Young to Johnson, 9 December 1963, MSSC SCR# 9-29-1-67-1-1-1. Young stated he collected names of individuals in Tennessee, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Kentucky, Alabama, Illinois, Missouri, South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, Washington, Virginia, and Washington, D.C.

seems unrealistic that Young could physically or financially travel to fourteen states to collect names for a petition. Upon examination of the approximately 2,500 names on the petition in the Commission files, the majority of the individuals lived in Memphis and Hickman, Kentucky.¹¹⁶ Since some of the names representing five states were repeated, less than twenty-five percent of the individuals were Mississippi residents. Further, the petition was a list of names and addresses without signatures which raises questions regarding credibility and validity. For instance, there were 38 names with the same address.¹¹⁷ Further, a former Booneville resident whose grandparents, J. B. (Johnny Bob) and Georgia Spain, were listed in the petition stated that her grandmother had moved to Nashville, Tennessee years before Young drafted the petition.¹¹⁸ Johnston considered the petition “one of the biggest arguments against the bill.”¹¹⁹ Yet, there was no evidence to suggest that he verified the information in the document. Even if the petition was valid, the 5,774 petitioners would have been an inconsequential representation of the approximately 19 million blacks living in the United States during this period.¹²⁰ On December 9, Young wrote to Johnston:

The people who are in favor our work want us to do everything we can before the 15th of January, but they advised us to work hard and not give any publicity, so that Phillip Randolph, Martin Luther King, Louis Young,

¹¹⁶ Manifesto of the Mutual Association of Colored People South, MSSC SCR# 9-29-2-2-1-1-1 to 9-29-2-2-58-1-1.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, MSSC SCR# 9-29-2-2-51-1-1.

¹¹⁸ Mary Allen Davis, author interview, 1 November 2010.

¹¹⁹ Director’s Report to Sovereignty Commission Members, December 1963, MSSC SCR# 99-68-0-1-2-1-1.

¹²⁰ 1960 U. S. Census, <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/statcomp/documents/1961-02.pdf> [accessed 1 November 2010].

James Farmer, Adam Power [Powell] cannot use this as a method of futherling [furthering] their program. We are told not to be in the newspaper and off the television until everything is set.¹²¹

Young received a two hundred fifty dollar donation from the Commission to cover his expenses to Washington and Johnston contacted key individuals on his behalf.¹²² In particular, he scheduled a meeting between Young and John J. Synon, director of the Coordinating Committee for Fundamental American Freedoms which received approximately \$120,000 funding from MSSC to coordinate national efforts to defeat the Civil Rights Bill. To provide substance to the petition, Young travelled to various cities surveying the conditions of blacks. He reported to the Commission that he travelled “over 4,000 miles in about two weeks time” and found “in the north and the east thousands [of blacks] are living from welfare support and social security” because they are unemployed.¹²³

In addition to his travels and the petition, Young wrote to key legislators expressing his strong opposition to the “so-call Civil Rights legislation” and urged them “to use every means at the disposal of your high office to defeat this Bill.”¹²⁴ In his response to Young, Senator Herman Talmadge of Georgia wrote that he would resist the legislation “with every resource at his command” because “it would deprive our citizens of more rights and liberties than it purports to give to anyone.”¹²⁵ Ten days after the bill

¹²¹ Young to Johnson, 9 December 1963, MSSC SCR# 9-29-1-67-1-1-1.

¹²² Director’s Report to Sovereignty Commission Members, December 1963, MSSC SCR# 99-68-0-1-2-1-1.

¹²³ Mutual Association of Colored People South, Survey From the South to the East, MSSC SCR# 9-29-2-15-1-1-1.

¹²⁴ Young to Senator Albert Gore, MSSC SCR# 9-29-2-13-1-1-1.

¹²⁵ Talmadge to Young, 22 April 1964, MSSC SCR# 9-29-2-44-1-1-1.

passed in the Senate, Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota wrote to Young that “the time for talking is past; the time for action is now. To continue to ignore the legitimate grievances of a large segment of our population would have been a provocation to civil disorder and strife and cause of heavy loss to our nation in both human and economic terms.”¹²⁶ As with other efforts to defeat the Civil Rights Bill, Young’s petition, letter-writing, and travels were ineffective. The bill was signed into law on July 2, 1964.

Following the passage of the bill, Young confined his activities to disseminating anti-protest information and fighting Communism. In a report to Johnston, now the MSSC director, he wrote: “If you have a little change to spare, will you please send us a little more. We haven’t got time to collect any money we are going to every trouble spot in Mississippi, preaching to the Negroes not to join these outside agitators.”¹²⁷ By mid-1965, MSSC established a policy limiting donations to private groups and individuals. In Young’s defense, Johnston stated that “he furnishes us no information of any value, but he is energetic and appears to have a wide following among the Negroes.”¹²⁸ In August, Johnston learned that Young had “a very unsavory reputation with federal authorities for being ‘a professional con man’ supported by whites in return for information (often useless) about civil rights workers.”¹²⁹ Although Johnston stalled payments, Young persistently sent MSSC periodic reports and requested funds. Finally, Johnston wrote Young in April 1965 informing him that the Commission could no longer provide funds for his endeavors. Though MSSC files did not indicate exact payments to Young,

¹²⁶ Humphrey to Young, 29 June 1964, MSSC SCR# 9-29-2-48-1-1-1.

¹²⁷ Young to Johnston, 31 August 1964, MSSC SCR# 9-29-2-57-1-1-1.

¹²⁸ Johnston to Herman Glazier, 25 March 1965, MSSC SCR# 9-29-2-73-1-1-1.

¹²⁹ Johnston to Herman Glazier, 17 August 1965, MSSC SCR# 9-29-2-89-1-1-1.

Johnston acknowledged that the Commission made donations to him varying “from \$50.00 to \$200.00 a month” for seven years.¹³⁰ Based on minimum calculations, Young received more than \$4,000. The files indicated that Young’s next and final contact with Johnston was through a letter in May 1967 in which he wrote: “I believe if ever there has been a white friend, you have been the one. You have shown your friendship to me beyond bounds and means and I appreciate it to the fully [fullest] esteem.”¹³¹ When Johnston was interviewed in 1993 for the Mississippi Oral History Program, he was asked about Young. Johnston replied, “The name doesn’t ring a bell.”¹³²

While some members of the NAACP and the Regional Council of Negro Leadership found that a number of ministers were unresponsive to the civil rights movement, efforts were made by progressive black ministers to improve racial conditions in Mississippi. In fact, many of the most outspoken progressive ministers were either members or supporters of civil rights organizations. For example, Rev. George W. Lee, co-founder of the Belzoni NAACP and vice-president of the RCNL, successfully led voter registration drives in Humphreys County. During the RCNL annual meeting on April 19, 1955, Lee told the more than 7,000 attendees: “Pray not for your Mom and Pop. They’ve gone to heaven. Pray you can make it through this hell.”¹³³ The following

¹³⁰ Johnston to Glazier, 25 March 1965, MSSC SCR# 9-29-2-73-1-1-1.

¹³¹ Young to Johnston, 13 May 1967, MSSC SCR# 9-29-2-98-1-1-1.

¹³² Yasuhiro Katagiri, Oral History with Mr. Erle Johnson, 13 April 1993, University of Southern Mississippi Southern Civil Rights Documentation Project, <http://anna.lib.usm.edu/%7Eespol/crda/oh/ohjohnstone2p.html> [accessed 30 October 2010].

¹³³ Dittmer, 54.

month he was killed by white gunmen as he drove through the black section of Belzoni. An *Ebony* article stated that “many who attended the Lee funeral [felt] that men like Humes [were] responsible for [the] murder of Rev. Lee.”¹³⁴ Humes was one of the eulogy speakers.

In 1957, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church issued a statement denouncing segregation. During its West Tennessee and Mississippi Annual Conference, Presiding Bishop C. Ewbank Tucker of Kentucky told the attending ministers:

I am sending you out for another year to preach the gospel and to maintain the honor and integrity of the church. I warn you here and now, in the presence of God and this audience, that if anyone of you permit any person, white or black, to advocate segregation in any form, your appointment will be revoked. Further you will be brought to trial for the violation of the honor and traditions of this great denomination.¹³⁵

Tucker’s warning was not atypical of national denominations that professed disdain for the segregated South. Yet, like many denominational leaders who condemned segregation, he lived outside the restraints and scrutiny placed on black ministers in Mississippi. As evidenced by the death of Lee, ministers who advocated civil rights not only risked their lives but the safety of their churches and congregants. At the time, their fears seemed practical considering the violence that spread throughout the state during the early 1960s. Hundreds of individuals—both black and white—were intimidated, beaten, and jailed for their support or participation in civil rights activities. Among them was SNCC field secretary Sam Block, B L Bell’s nephew, who was beaten and jailed repeatedly for organizing voter registration drives in LeFlore County. In June 1964,

¹³⁴ “There Are Some Negroes Who Support Segregation,” *Ebony*, August 1955, 74.

¹³⁵ DeCell to Governor Coleman, 16 December 1957, MSSC SCR# 2-5-2-16-1-1-1.

SNCC and COFO launched Mississippi Freedom Summer, a campaign using thousands of volunteers to register black voters. During the ten-week project, four civil rights workers were killed, eighty workers were assaulted, over one thousand individuals were arrested, thirty-seven churches were bombed or burned, and thirty black homes or businesses were burned.¹³⁶

In response to the violence during Freedom Summer, the New York-based National Council of Churches established the Delta Ministry in September as a “ministry of reconciliation directed toward economic and spiritual improvement of the underprivileged in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta.”¹³⁷ From the onset, the Ministry was viewed as an outsider in Mississippi’s closed society. While it initiated a number of successful projects to empower poor blacks in the Delta, the Ministry was heavily criticized for its role as a civil rights organization - a role that many thought extended beyond the spiritual scope of its objectives. In a published letter to the editor of the *Clarion Ledger*, Rev. M. L. Young wrote of his dissatisfaction with the organization: “I know we cannot make progress if we must listen to the so-called civil rights workers, who spend more time on bottles [liquor] and pleasure than in working for the best interest of our race.”¹³⁸ He urged the National Council of Churches to remove the outsiders and let Mississippians tend to their own problems. B. F. Smith, Lay Leader of the Leland Methodist Church, echoed Young’s sentiments. In a letter to the Delta Ministry Evaluation Committee, he wrote that “no permanent gains in economic improvement can

¹³⁶ Susie Erenrich, ed., *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle* (Montgomery: Black Belt Press, 1999), 82.

¹³⁷ Memorandum on the Delta Ministry, MSSC SCR# 2-157-180-1-1-1 to 2-157-180-8-1-1.

¹³⁸ “Voice of the People,” *Clarion Ledger*, 3 November 1965, MSSC SCR# 2-157-1-43-1-1-1.

possibly be realized, either in the Delta or elsewhere, unless those being aided assume some measure of individual responsibility.”¹³⁹ He viewed the Delta Ministry as not only a failure but an “indictment of the Christian institutions that sponsor its activities.”¹⁴⁰ Smith may have had other motives for condemning the Ministry since he was also executive vice-president of the Delta Council, an association that had historically suppressed the economic rights of sharecroppers and tenant farmers. The idea of economic empowerment among poor blacks contrasted with the interests of planters who relied upon economical black labor. Despite its lack of broad local support, internal conflicts and controversial strategies, the Ministry remained in the Delta until the 1980s.

¹³⁹ Memorandum on the Delta Ministry, MSSC SCR# 2-157-1-80-1-1-1 to 2-157-1-80-8-1-1.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Chapter 4

Editorializing the Black Press

What weapons or what tools did black people have in order to further their own cause or to present their argument? ... For over 150 years, African American newspapers were among the strongest institutions in Black America. They helped to create and stabilize communities. They spoke forcefully to the political and economic interests of their readers while employing thousands. Black newspapers provided a forum for debate among African Americans and gave voice to a people who were voiceless. With a pen as their weapon, they were Soldiers Without Swords.¹

The initial soldiers of the black press were John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish, editors of *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American newspaper. Established in New York City in March 1827, the newspaper began publication the same year New York State legally abolished slavery. Russwurm and Cornish envisioned a newspaper that served as a voice and advocate for blacks who were either misrepresented or neglected by the white press. In the first edition, they established the mission of *Freedom's Journal*:

We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations in things that concern us dearly... Whatever concerns us a people will ever find a ready admission into the Freedom's Journal, interwoven with all the principle news of the day... As the diffusion of knowledge and raising our community into respectability are the principal motives which influence us in our present understanding, we hope our hands will be upheld by all our brethren and friends.²

With the tagline, "Righteousness Exalteth a Nation," the four-page, four-column weekly newspaper provided its readers with news on worldwide events and editorials denouncing lynching, slavery and other iniquities against blacks. To counter the racist rhetoric

¹ "The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords," Public Broadcasting Service, <http://www.pbs.org/blackpress/film/index.html> [accessed 10 January 2011].

² "Freedom's Journal," Wisconsin Historical Society, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/libraryarchives/aanp/freedom/docs/v1n01.pdf> [accessed 10 January 2011].

commonly found in the mainstream white press, *Freedom's Journal* depicted positive images of black life through feature articles that promoted achievement, solidarity and racial pride. When it ceased operations in March 1829, the newspaper had published 103 issues which were circulated in eleven states, the District of Columbia, Canada, Haiti and Europe.³ Though it was published for a short time, *Freedom's Journal* nonetheless laid the foundation for the black press in America.

In the years to follow, black newspapers were deliberate organs of advocacy and protest depending upon the socio-cultural and political climate. During the antebellum period, they focused on the anti-slavery movement. Throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction, they stressed education and racial identity. Following Reconstruction, the black press fought against widespread lynching and violence. In the years spanning the Great Migration and World War I, they guided millions of southern blacks to northern cities and advocated for equal treatment of black soldiers. During the Great Depression, they fought for equal employment practices while continuing the fight against violence. Newspapers renewed their campaign for equal treatment of black soldiers during World War II. From the Cold War era to the beginnings of the civil rights movement, they focused on segregation and violence. During the civil rights era, the black press avidly reported issues and advancements within the movement. Since the founding of *Freedom's Journal* in 1827 to the mid-1980s, there had been over 4,000 black newspapers in the United States.⁴

³ "African-American Newspapers and Periodicals," Wisconsin Historical Society, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/libraryarchives/aanp/freedom/> [accessed 10 January 2011].

⁴ Charles A. Simmons, *The African American Press* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1998), 1-2.

Throughout its history, the black press remained true to the original principle of Russwurm and Cornish: the dissemination of information relevant to the collective political, economic and socio-cultural experiences of African Americans. Consequently, it became a crusading and protest press, an instrument for social change and artistic expression that reached large masses of the African American population uniting them in a common cause. *Pittsburgh Courier* editor Percival L. Prattis, argued that “the chief function of the Negro newspaper, along with other forces in Negro life, is to fight for first class citizenship and full opportunity for growth for Negroes.”⁵ Frank L. Stanley, president of the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association and editor of the *Louisville Defender*, voiced a similar opinion: all black newspapers functioned “to fight oppression [and] to give expression to the desires of those citizens of minority groups in these United States, who seek full citizenship rights.”⁶ When Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal completed his landmark study of black life in America in 1944, he described the black press as an educational and power agency that influenced and shaped public opinion, institutions, leadership and actions. He concluded that the black press more so than the church and the school was “the greatest single power in the Negro race,” a determination that had been reached in 1926 by Edwin Mims in *The Advancing South*.⁷

Leading northern black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*, the *Afro-American*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier* demonstrated the power of the press by not only reporting the news but also encouraging blacks to participate in their own liberation. Of

⁵ P. L. Prattis, “The Role of the Negro Press in Race Relations,” *Phylon* 7 (1946): 273.

⁶ Internet Archive, “Negro Year Book: A Review of Events Affecting Negro Life, 1941 – 1946,” http://www.archive.org/stream/negroyearbookrev00guzmrich/negroyearbookrev00guzmrich_djvu.txt [accessed 17 January 2011].

⁷ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), 923-924.

these publications, the *Chicago Defender* had the greatest impact on the lives of blacks in the South. The influence and tenacity of the newspaper rested with its founding editor, Robert Sengstacke Abbott, who established “The World’s Greatest Weekly” in 1905 as “an advocate for black progress and an adversary of racism.”⁸ Using the tagline, “American race prejudice must be destroyed,” its glaring red headlines, editorials and even cartoons dramatized the effects of segregation, disenfranchisement, and violence. To increase circulation and readership outside of Chicago, Abbott shrewdly used Pullman porters and workers on the Illinois Central Railroad to distribute the newspaper along its route from Chicago through the Mid-West and into the Mississippi Delta and Gulf Coast. During the Great Migration, ICR was a conduit of information and a gateway out of the South. The *Defender* encouraged southern blacks to move to “portions of the country where [they could] get better wages, better opportunity and better treatment.”⁹ In contrasting the opportunities in the North with the brutalities of the South, Abbott declared in a 1917 editorial: “To die from the bite of the frost is far more glorious than at the hands of a mob.”¹⁰ The *Defender* fueled the exodus from the south by publishing employment notices and information regarding agencies and religious organizations that were willing to help new immigrants. It received countless letters from blacks who were eager to leave the South. A Grantville, Mississippi laborer earning three dollars a day working in a lumber mill wrote:

I want to come north where I can educate my 3 little children also my wife. Please write me at once where I can get my people where they can

⁸ Carl Senna, *The Black Press and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1993), 108.

⁹ “Southerner Is Feeling Loss of Work Animal,” *Chicago Defender*, 3 November 1923.

¹⁰ “Surge to the City,” *Life*, 6 December 1968, 97.

get something for their work. I would like to live in Chicago or Ohio or Philadelphia. Tell Mr. Abbott that our peple [people] are being snatched off the trains here in Greenville and a rested [arrested] but in spite of all this, they are leaving every day and every night 100 or more is expecting to leave this week. Let me hear from you at once.¹¹

A reader from Greenville, Mississippi wrote: “I want to get my famely [family] out of this cursed south land down here a negro man is not good as a white man's dog.”¹²

Though some southern whites attempted to hinder distribution of the *Defender*, blacks went to great lengths to secure the paper, including hiding it in bundles of merchandise or secretly passing it around.¹³ Because a single copy of the paper passed from person to person and was often read aloud in churches, barbershops and other gathering places, it was estimated that every paper sold reached four to five blacks, bringing its weekly readership to over one-half million by 1920.¹⁴ Following Abbott’s death in 1940, John Henry Sengstacke, his nephew and heir, assumed leadership of the *Defender*. He continued the legacy of the newspaper, especially during the Civil Rights Era when it challenged racism, segregation and discrimination in the South. Langston Hughes, who was a *Defender* columnist for over twenty years, described the newspaper as “the journalist voice of a largely voiceless people.”¹⁵

¹¹ Emmett J. Scott, “More Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916-1918,” *Journal of Negro History* 4 (1919): 435.

¹² *Ibid.*, 452.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 80-90.

¹⁴ Public Broadcasting Service, “The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords,” <http://www.pbs.org/blackpress/film/> [accessed 10 January 2011].

¹⁵ Christopher C. De Santis, *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995): 13.

Depending upon its editor and locality, the voice of the black press in the South was far less vocal than the editorial freedom found in the North. Though they shared similar socio-cultural and political concerns as the *Chicago Defender* and other black newspapers, the voice of the southern black press was often stilled or compromised. In addition to hostility and intimidation from whites, black editors who challenged the status quo lost support and revenue from white patrons and advertisers. Further, black newspapers in the south with limited news coverage, readership and circulation were often viewed as secondary presses by African Americans in comparison to their northern counterparts. Though the majority of black newspapers circulated in the South were published in the north, blacks still turned to their local presses for community news. Southern black newspapers focused on education, voting rights, self-improvement, solidarity, migration and protest—central themes in promoting black survival and awareness.¹⁶ Yet, in even discussing these issues, some black newspapers were cautionary and accommodating.

Historian Julius E. Thompson equated the role of the black press in Mississippi from 1900 to 1950 to “an unfulfilled dream” hindered by a Jim Crow system that made it difficult “to record, analyze, critique, or offer remedies” for the conditions faced by African Americans.¹⁷ Members of the black press who championed social equality were threatened, beaten or forced to leave town - indicating that caution and accommodation were essential for survival of both the newspaper and its editor. It was safer and more profitable “to merely chronicle church doings, social affairs and fraternal confabulations

¹⁶ Henry L. Suggs, ed., *The Black Press in the South, 1865-1979* (Greenwood Press: Westport, 1983), x.

¹⁷ Julius Thompson, *The Black Press in Mississippi* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 38-39.

and to speak editorially only in praise.”¹⁸ In a culture inundated with repression against African Americans, freedom of the press was an elusive dream. George Schuyler, a columnist with *Crisis Magazine*, wrote that it was easier to walk on eggs without breaking them and tread through snow without leaving tracks than to be a black editor in Mississippi.¹⁹ At its peak between 1900 and 1920, there were eighty-seven black newspapers in Mississippi.²⁰ By 1954, there were only five black-owned commercial newspapers in the state: the *Delta Leader*, the *Jackson Advocate*, the *Mississippi Enterprise*, the *Community Citizen*, and the *Eagle Eye*.²¹ With the exception of the *Eagle Eye*, these newspapers were conservative, pro-segregation organs that adopted passive approaches to the coverage of significant issues impacting black life in Mississippi.

As an instrument for social change, the black press was the informational center of the protest movement. However, the movement would not succeed until racial discrimination, segregation, disenfranchisement and white supremacy were candidly and repeatedly reported in the mainstream white press.²² Nationally, it was a protracted media struggle between the north to expose the truth and the south to protect the old order. In Mississippi, the white press stood as a vigilant guard to maintain the racial, economic, political and religious orthodoxy of the closed society.²³ Standing in the ranks were members of the black conservative press: H. H. Humes of the *Delta Leader* who

¹⁸ George S. Schuyler, “Freedom of the Press in Mississippi,” *Crisis* 43 (October 1936), 302.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 306.

²⁰ Suggs, 181.

²¹ Thompson, 41.

²² Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, “*The Race Beat*,” (Vintage Books: New York, 2006), 10.

²³ Silver, 30.

was discussed in the previous chapter; Percy Greene and Joseph Albright of the *Jackson Advocate*; and John W. Jones of the *Community Citizen*. Leading the charge was the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission.

MSSC was the primary mechanism used by the state to project an image and protect the old order. To accomplish this goal in the African American community, MSSC decided in June 1956 to secure “the services of [black] newspapers as disseminators of favorable publicity for the Commission.”²⁴ In addition to receiving revenue from MSSC for subscriptions and advertisements, Humes, Greene, Albright and Jones were paid informants. Their pro-segregation editorials and news articles were also widely distributed by the Commission to media outlets across the country. By 1958, MSSC had a media mailing list of approximately 4,950 newspapers.²⁵

Percy Greene

Percy Greene began his journalistic career in 1927 as editor of the *Colored Veteran*, a monthly newsletter published in cooperation with the National Association of Negro War Veterans. Greene, who was a World War I veteran, founded the organization after “seeing that Negroes were coming out of the army unable to get any assistance from the American Legion, the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars), and everything else in processing their claims.”²⁶ By 1932, the organization had “upwards of twelve thousand

²⁴ Minutes of the Meeting of the State Sovereignty Commission, 20 June 1956, MSSC SCR# 99-14-0-4-1-1-1.

²⁵ Newspaper Mailing List, 19 December 1956, MSSC Records, SCR ID # 10-8-0-1-1-1-1.

²⁶ Neil McMillen, Oral History with Mr. Percy Greene, University of Southern Mississippi Southern Civil Rights Documentation Project, 14 December 1972, <http://anna.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/ohgreenep.html> [accessed 1 November 2010].

members in chapters in eight states.”²⁷ NANWV members paid two dollars a year for the newsletter subscription and twenty-five cents monthly dues.²⁸ However, the Great Depression brought an end to both the organization and the newsletter.

Greene founded the *Jackson Advocate* as a weekly newspaper in September 1939. The editorial on the front page of the first issue explained its policy and purpose: “to gain for the Negro citizens of Mississippi the uninhibited right to vote; and the right to political participation; and to help in the creation of an atmosphere, within the state, in which responsible white and Negro citizens can work together for the betterment and benefit of all people of the state.”²⁹ A well-known quote from Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Exposition speech in 1895 was printed on the editorial page of each issue: “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the hands on the fingers, but in all things that affect our mutual progress and development we can be together as the hand.” With the motto, “with the people, by the people, and for the people,” the paper had a circulation of 3,000.³⁰ At the time, the *Advocate* was considered a radical newspaper due to its support of voting and political rights for blacks. In 1940, the black population in Mississippi was 1,074,578 or forty-nine percent.³¹ Yet, of the voting-age population, only 2,000 or 0.4 percent of blacks were registered to vote.³² Further, blacks were not

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “The Jackson Advocate Story,” *Jackson Advocate*, 22 March 1969.

³⁰ Vishnu V. Oak, *The Negro Newspaper* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1948), 159.

³¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Census Statistics, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/tab39.pdf> [accessed 5 February 2011].

³² McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 36.

permitted to hold any elected offices. It is notable that Greene took such a position considering the punitive climate for progressive blacks.

In 1944, the NAACP won a major victory when the Supreme Court ruled in *Smith v. Allwright* that white primary elections in Texas were unconstitutional. The ruling which applied to all the southern states allowed blacks to vote in Democratic primaries. Frederick Sullens, the fiery editor of the *Jackson Daily News*, denounced the decision declaring that the Supreme Court was wrong in thinking blacks in Mississippi would be allowed to vote. In June 1945, Greene published an editorial assaulting southern traditions such as disenfranchisement, unequal education, and fair treatment in state and federal courts as illegalities that retarded the progress of blacks in the south. He also condemned the appointment of Tom Clark of Texas as U. S. Attorney General because as a “typical southerner [he was] by training and tradition opposed to the Negro in his struggle for equality of citizenship.”³³ Greene soon experienced the wrath of Sullens who issued a warning through an editorial: “If that Negro newspaper, the *Jackson Advocate*, keeps on talking about Negroes voting and participating in politics, there is going to be a lynching in Jackson and that Negro editor, Percy Greene, is going to be in the middle of it.”³⁴ For weeks, Greene and Sullens engaged in editorial bantering that pitted the old order against the hope of a new south. In one response to Sullens, Greene emphasized that “the old type of accommodating Negro leader has lost his standing and influence in the Negro community.”³⁵ Referencing Gunnar Myrdal (*The American Dilemma*), he

³³ “The New Attorney General and the Southern Tradition of Illegality,” *Jackson Advocate*, 9 June 1945.

³⁴ “41 Years of Community Service,” *Jackson Advocate*, 2 February 1979.

³⁵ “Thank You, Major Sullens!,” *Jackson Advocate*, 23 June 1945.

proclaimed that a new south was being born in which “the old ideas and practices of benevolent paternalism will have to come to an end and Negroes will be called upon to shoulder their proper share of the burden of citizenship responsibilities.”³⁶

To prepare blacks for the new south, Greene intensified his editorials while working with the NAACP, the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, the Progressive Voters’ League and other civic organizations to encourage black vote registration. He also formed the Mississippi Negro Democrats Association to give blacks a viable political voice that challenged ineffective black Republicans. As he spoke across the state, he had a resonating message: “Mississippi would never rise to its full potential as long as perhaps fifty percent of its people were denied the right to vote and political participation.”³⁷ By 1946 MNDA had 8,000 card-carrying members who were registered and qualified to vote in the upcoming senatorial election.³⁸ This election was crucial for blacks because it was the first time they would be able to vote in a Democratic primary in Mississippi since Reconstruction. While Greene was on his own personal campaign trail, Sullens issued a warning to blacks: “Don’t attempt to participate in the Democratic primaries anywhere in Mississippi on July 2nd. Staying away from the polls on that date will be the best way to prevent unhealthy and unhappy results.”³⁹ Adding fuel to Sullens’ fire was Theodore Bilbo who was running for a third term in the U.S. Senate. Well-known for his anti-black rhetoric and racist viewpoints, Bilbo called “upon every red-blooded American who believes in the superiority and integrity of the white race to get

³⁶ “New South Being Born,” *Jackson Advocate*, 30 June 1945.

³⁷ Neil McMillen, Oral History with Mr. Percy Greene.

³⁸ Neil McMillen, Oral History with Mr. Percy Greene.

³⁹ “DON’T TRY IT!,” *Jackson Daily News*, 3 June 1946.

out and see that no nigger votes.”⁴⁰ Despite these warnings and reported threats and intimidations across the state, approximately 1,500 blacks cast their ballots on Election Day. Greene voted within one hour after the polls opened. By the end of the decade, he was a well-regarded crusading journalist and a pillar of the black community. The Mississippi Association of Colored Teachers praised him for his editorials on education. He received an Honor Scroll from the Institute of Race Relations in 1946 for exposing the unethical racist tactics Bilbo used during his campaign. For three consecutive years, the *Pittsburgh Courier* included him in their annual list of ten great freedom fighters.

Greene’s change in ideology and break with the black community began with a philosophical disagreement with the NAACP and other civil rights organizations shortly after the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education*. According to Greene, he was personally told by Supreme Court Chief Justice Hugo Black that the NAACP should focus on registration and voting rather than school desegregation. Yet, most who knew Justice Black did not believe “for a moment that he ever suggested to anybody that the NAACP bring no suits attacking racial segregation in public schools.”⁴¹ Greene emphatically believed pursuing school desegregation “would lead to bitterness between the races and do more harm than good.”⁴² Similar to many other African Americans, he feared desegregation would lead to the loss of black schools and massive job losses among black educators. At the time, there were 1,758 black schools and 7,028 black

⁴⁰ Earl M. Lewis, “The Negro Voter in Mississippi,” *Journal of Negro Education* 26 (1957): 332.

⁴¹ Louis Lautier, “Capital Spotlight,” *The Afro-American*, 6 June 1959.

⁴² Trezzvant Anderson, “Percy Green Tells Why He Switched,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 21 January 1961.

teachers in Mississippi.⁴³ Greene contended that “if even half of the Negro teachers in the south, who represent one of the best employed groups, should lose their jobs in the drive for full and complete integration, it will stymie Negro economic progress for generations.”⁴⁴ N. R. Burger, president of the Mississippi Teachers Association, noted that black teachers had been advised by some leaders and newspaper editors to support segregated schools in order to retain their jobs. During the MTA state convention in 1954, he overwhelmingly found that black teachers did not support segregation for the sake of their jobs. In addition to implying that the principles of democracy and the rights of individuals were a commodity, it conveyed improper messages to students and the community and violated their professional integrity.⁴⁵ Burger concluded, “The Negro teacher feels that he could be easily made the ‘goat’ in the matter and his best position is the position of silence—a period to be used for constant preparation and professional growth ...”⁴⁶

During the meeting with Governor Hugh White and other black leaders in July 1954, Greene proposed a plan that he viewed as a compromise between the extreme views of both races: black demands for total school integration and white threats of abolishing the public school system. His plan maintained separate and equally funded schools, raised the standards of black state colleges, admitted blacks to the University of Mississippi and Mississippi A & M College for graduate work and professional studies, permitted athletic competition between black and white schools, and appointed or elected

⁴³ Mississippi Department of Education, Statistical Data on School Session 1954-55, 21, 27.

⁴⁴ Anderson, “Percy Green Tells Why He Switched.”

⁴⁵ Bond, 250-251.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

blacks to policy making boards.⁴⁷ Though elements of the plan had merit, it contained one fatal flaw, namely continuation of segregated schools. To Greene, equalized schools in black neighborhoods meant “there [was] not going to be any mad rush of Negro parents to send their children to so-called White Schools just to have their children going to school with White Folks.”⁴⁸ Since he felt blacks were not fully assimilated in society, his plan “would give the Negro the time to know the difference between the promise of assimilation and his demand for integration.”⁴⁹ Moreover, it appeased whites who were prepared to use any means necessary to maintain segregated schools. In a series of editorials, he promoted his plan as a viable resolution because a school “with nothing but Negro children, taught by Negro teachers, is no longer a segregated school but an American school.”⁵⁰ Though he lauded the *Brown* decision for ending segregation, he contended that the Supreme Court did not have the judicial power to mandate the actions of local governments. He argued that the segregation issue could only be settled by blacks and whites coming together to resolve the matter on a local level. His position on *Brown* aligned him with the white power structure and placed him in opposition with the NAACP and black leaders in the state.

By the time Greene began his association with the Sovereignty Commission in 1956, he was entrenched in the conservative politics of the state. His criticisms of the

⁴⁷ “The Jackson Advocate Story,” *Jackson Advocate*, 22 March 1969. Greene’s seven-point plan was first published in 1944 and reprinted in several issues. Other points of the plan included elimination of Jim Crow and segregation in public transportation and removal of voting restrictions against blacks.

⁴⁸ “Mississippi and School Segregation Decision,” *Jackson Advocate*, 22 May 1954.

⁴⁹ Transcript of Meeting of Legal Educational Advisory Committee and Negro Leaders,” Sillers Papers, Box 21, Folder 15.

⁵⁰ “The Editor Of The Jackson Advocate Restates His Views on Segregation,” *Jackson Advocate*, 5 June 1954.

NAACP, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other black leaders, and the Civil Rights Movement made him an invaluable asset to the Commission. As the owner of the largest black newspaper in the state, he had the capacity to reach a broad audience. Further, the Commission distributed his editorials and opinions to media outlets across the county thereby substantiating its position that blacks in Mississippi were content with segregation. In addition to paying Greene for editorial license and subscriptions, the Commission paid him periodically for conducting investigations and attending conferences. Consequently, as informant 9-1-1, he became the single most powerful black journalistic voice of the Commission.⁵¹ He attributed his now-conservative accommodating perspective to economics and the survival of the *Advocate*: “You can’t fight the people you’re doing business with ... [whites] got the money and products to advertise.”⁵² He advised blacks who maintained a “friendly and respectful attitude to the responsible white people of the community” not to be fear being labeled an “Uncle Tom” by the new black leadership.⁵³ “In light of the present conditions as they affect the masses of Negroes,” he asserted “the greatest need of the Negro in Jackson, in Mississippi, and in the rest of the south, is more and more Uncle Toms”⁵⁴ In less than ten years, Greene had fallen from a civil rights hero to a pro-segregation moderate labeled by most blacks as a traitor to his race.

An Associated Press news story exposing Greene in July 1957 for receiving monies from the Commission provided tangible evidence that he was wedded to the old

⁵¹ Percy Greene Informant Number, MSSC SCR# 99-201-0-332-1-1-1.

⁵² Anderson, “Percy Green Tells Why He Switched.”

⁵³ More Uncle Toms Greatest Need of the Southern Negro,” *Jackson Advocate*, 19 January 1957.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

order and conservative white politics. Known payments included \$35 in September 1956 to participate in a panel discussion on WDIA radio in Memphis, a \$200 donation in his behalf to the Mutual Association of Colored People South in October 1956, and \$300 to print and distribute editorials on the parallel progress of blacks in February 1957.⁵⁵ Similar to Rev. H. H. Humes, Greene was denounced by NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins, NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers, and the Ministerial Improvement Association. Though there was no evidence to suggest that he publicly protested the allegations, Greene used the July 27 issue of the *Jackson Advocate* to vindicate himself. He regarded comments by Evers as “nothing except the outflowing of juvenile logic and energy” from a young man attempting “to use the Ministers’ Improvement Association as a ‘Front’ to carry on the policy and program of the rapidly declining NAACP.”⁵⁶ He described the “libelous” resolution adopted by MIA as a “sad and tragic example of Negro preachers” deserting their religious calling for political leadership thereby “widening the gap between responsible Negro and white people, increasing their hatred and ill will, and adding to the frustration and bewilderment of the Negro masses.”⁵⁷ To those who questioned his leadership, he responded: “The statement concerning me as a leader in the state is just another example of the worst in the thinking of most of the new Negro leaders, so-called, based on the idea that you can make yourself look big by trying to belittle other people.”⁵⁸ While MSSC did not publicly support him, it considered

⁵⁵ State Warrants (Invoices) to Greene, MSSC SCR# 97-108-0-22-1-1-1, 97-104-0-163-1-1-1, and 97-104-0-98-1-1-1.

⁵⁶ “Editor Greene Answers Attacks of Ministers,” *Jackson Advocate*, 27 July 1957.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

punitive measures against the wives of the two ministers who signed the MIA resolution censuring Greene. Because both women were teachers, failure to list their membership in the NAACP would result in the cancelation of their teaching contracts. Hal DeCell, MSSC public relations director, wanted “to let the negroes in the state know that we back our negro friends and that we are capable of showing our displeasure.”⁵⁹ By making an example of these women, “word will get around quickly enough” to others “who might be tempted to agitate in behalf of the NAACP.”⁶⁰ In defense of his actions, Greene said “the Commission paid his expenses when he participated in several programs designed to promote harmonious race relations.”⁶¹ In the spirit of “misery loves company,” Greene announced on the front page of the August 3 issue of the *Jackson Advocate* that the *Mississippi Enterprise* also received money from MSSC for an “advertisement in a special edition on the recent annual Negro Teachers convention.”⁶² The *Mississippi Enterprise* relationship with the Commission was not mentioned in the Associated Press news story or any other newspaper. Greene obtained the information from the same state auditor’s report used by the Associated Press correspondent. Though he did not reveal how he acquired the report, he probably had assistance from his “friends” at the Commission.

While Greene received a modest sum for his services, he also paid a price - the loss of distributors, a decline in black advertisers, and a decrease in subscriptions from

⁵⁹ Hal DeCell to Ney Gore, 7 August 1957, MSSC SCR# 1-15-0-1-1-1-1.

⁶⁰ Ibid. MSSC files did not indicate than any action was taken against these women.

⁶¹ “Editor Greene Answers Attacks of Ministers.”

⁶² “Mississippi Enterprise Got Money From State Sovereignty Commission,” *Jackson Advocate*, 3 August 1957.

4,500 to approximately 3,000.⁶³ Much of the black press that commended his early crusades for voting rights now expressed disapproval. At one point, the *Chicago Defender* considered him the “undisputed leader of the state’s civil rights fight.”⁶⁴ Now it described him as an “undercover agent ... employed to spy and report on individual Negroes and colored organizations” pursuing desegregation.⁶⁵ The *Baltimore Afro American* which once praised Greene because he showed “great promise as a crusader for human dignity” now regarded him as an individual who was “so concerned about keeping faith with Mississippi segregationists he has lost touch with the colored people.”⁶⁶ It described the *Jackson Advocate* as a “tragic example of a publication with an editorial policy of intellectual bankruptcy.”⁶⁷ Though he lost revenue from the black community, he substantially increased his contributions from the Commission.

In 1958, Greene received \$3,230 from MSSC for conducting investigations.⁶⁸ The payments were directly from Governor James Coleman who exercised his authority with the Commission “to use informants and operate in much the same manner as the FBI.”⁶⁹ Most of the payments averaged \$150 monthly except for September during which he received \$1000.⁷⁰ Though the payment was for an “investigation,” it is

⁶³ “State Aid Costly For Negro Paper,” *Clarion Ledger*, 16 August 1958.

⁶⁴ Enoch P. Walters, Jr., “Mississippi In State Of Uneasy Truce on Civil Rights,” *Chicago Defender*, 18 April 1959.

⁶⁵ “Claim 3 On Miss. Payroll To Maintain Segregation,” *Chicago Defender*, 9 July 1957.

⁶⁶ “Poor Old Percy,” *The Afro American*, 31 August 1957.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*

⁶⁸ Schedule of Payments to Greene, 16 March 1959, MSSC SCR# 9-1-1-24-1-1-1.

⁶⁹ “Segregation Unit To Hire Secret Agents,” 16 May 1958, MSSC SCR# 99-120-0-8-1-1-1.

probable that it was used toward the November publication of a special edition of the newspaper containing Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise speech. The edition at an estimated cost of \$5,000 was distributed free to every black household in Jackson with 50,000 more copies sent to various cities across the state.⁷¹ Greene was paid an additional \$460 for 184 six-month subscriptions of the newspaper for black schools throughout the state.⁷²

Similar to other informants, Greene primarily investigated civil rights activities and organizations. Ironically, he found himself investigating the same organizations he once supported, namely the NAACP, the Progressive Voters League, and the Regional Council of Negro Leadership. His investigative reports were typewritten in journalistic style—who, what, when, where, and why—with subjective commentary. When King spoke at the Southern Christian Ministers Conference, Greene reported that “his old clichés of the NAACP” and references to the “Till case, the Belzonia Incidents [and] the Poplarville case” did not arouse the audience.⁷³ While investigating a meeting of the Progressive Voters League, Greene conferred with B L Bell which suggested that informants were knowledgeable of each other and their respective relationships with the Commission. His report to Van Landingham minimized it as a “meeting [that] amounted to nothing whatsoever” with “only a few Negroes present.”⁷⁴ When he was unavailable to investigate certain activities, Greene used his own informants. For example, he based

⁷⁰ Schedule of Payments to Greene, 16 March 1959, MSSC SCR# 9-1-1-24-1-1-1.

⁷¹ Greene to David J. Van Landingham, 29 October 1958, MSSC SCR# 9-1-1-18-1-1-1.

⁷² Minutes of the Meeting of the State Sovereignty Commission, 16 October 1958, MSC SCR# 99-14-0-12-1-1-1.

⁷³ A Report, 28 September 1959, MSSC SCR# 9-1-1-73-1-1-2.

⁷⁴ Van Landingham to File, 11 August 1959, MSSC SCR# 9-1-1-50-1-1-1.

his opinion that an NAACP meeting “had no effect among Negroes in the community and was a dismal failure” on a report from his informants.⁷⁵ Most of his investigations on individuals were to determine if they were racial agitators, had alliances with the NAACP, or were members of other civil rights organizations.

In 1959, Greene voluntarily testified before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights. He informed the committee that a civil rights law was not necessary provided blacks had the right to vote and the friendship of leading whites on the local level. When questioned regarding payments from the Sovereignty Commission, he explained that the funds were for circulating a speech on parallel progress and not as an employee. He further emphasized that if anyone including the Sovereignty Commission “wants to buy my paper and pay me for my services, I am going to sell it to them.”⁷⁶ After reading Greene’s fourteen-page typewritten testimony, Van Landingham found he proved to be “an excellent witness” who was “very favorable toward segregation in the South and against the need of any Civil Rights legislation.”⁷⁷

For years, Greene waged a campaign against the NAACP while conducting investigations on its activities. In editorial after editorial, he described the organization as a contributing factor to the bitterness between blacks and whites in the south. His harshest criticisms were directed toward Roy Wilkins (NAACP executive director), Aaron Henry (state president of the Mississippi NAACP), and Medgar Evers. During every NAACP meeting, Greene said remarks were made about “Uncle Toms,” a term he

⁷⁵ Van Landingham to Director, 17 February 1959, NSSC SCR# 9-1-1-21-1-1-1.

⁷⁶United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights, Greene Testimony, 5 January 1960, MSSC SCR# 9-1-1—41-1-1-1 to 9-1-1-41-14-1-1.

⁷⁷ Van Landingham to D. H. Coleman, 11 August 1959, MSSC SCR# 9-1-1-51-1-1-1 to 9-1-1-51-2-1-1.

believed the organization used “to humiliate and belittle ... any Negro who maintains a friendly and respectful relationship with white people, especially those in position of power and authority.”⁷⁸ In his opinion, it would not “be long now before the masses of Negroes find that the NAACP has become a ‘stinking albatros’ hanging around their necks.”⁷⁹ Though it was unsubstantiated, he reported that “every movement to put Negro children in white schools has been urged by the NAACP usually with some financial guarantee to the family of the child or the children involved.”⁸⁰ Greene regarded his confrontations with the NAACP as “a war on me and my paper. I had about 10,000 subscribers then and they kept attacking me and it was whittled away to just about nothing.”⁸¹ At one point, Greene confided to Van Landingham that he was “getting mighty tired of white people telling him what a fine job he is doing and going around without a dime in his pocket and losing his negro subscriptions.”⁸² Throughout the “war,” he maintained that the NAACP campaign for public school integration was “the greatest mistake in the entire history of the struggles of the American Negro.”⁸³ Because his editorials and opinions were widely disseminated by MSSC, newspapers quickly printed his commentary as evidence that the NAACP was losing momentum, particularly

⁷⁸ “The NAACP Meeting – A Challenge To Negro Leadership,” *Jackson Advocate*, 16 November 1957.

⁷⁹ “Clarence Mitchell’s Statement on Senator Eastman,” *Jackson Advocate* in MSSC SCR# 99-206-0-9-10-1-1.

⁸⁰ “Negro’s Answer On Integration,” undated, circa September 1959, MSSC SCR# 99-206-0-8-2-1-1.

⁸¹ Anderson, “Percy Green Tells Why He Switched.”

⁸² Van Landingham to File, 3 May 1960, MSSC SCR# 7-0-1-127-1-1-1.

⁸³ “The Greatest Mistake In The History Of The Southern Negro Struggle For Civil Rights and First Class Citizenship,” *Jackson Advocate*, 27 July 1957.

in Mississippi. It was common to read headlines such as “Negro Editor Blasts NAACP,” “Negro Editor Writes Against Integration,” or “Editor Urges Cooperation of Negroes” on the pages of the white press.⁸⁴

Two months after the passage of the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act, Greene organized the Mississippi Negro Citizenship Association in September as an adjunct to the *Jackson Advocate*. Its “paramount” purpose was to “counter-act those individuals and organizations” outside the state who jeopardized blacks working “together with White leadership for the creation and establishment of a better national image of the state.”⁸⁵ As president, Greene was determined that MNCA promote better race relations by “reopening of the lines of communication between responsible Negro and White citizens, and community leaders, at the local community level throughout the state.”⁸⁶ These leaders would work collaboratively to train blacks in the duties and responsibilities of citizenship primarily focusing on voting and political participation. Though Greene envisioned an organization with local advisory committees uniting responsible black and white leaders for the betterment of Mississippi, Johnston quickly informed him that MNCA should not form any bi-racial committees or participate in mass voter registration drives. These directives, which struck at the core of the organization’s purposes, signaled that it would be another tool of the Commission. Since Greene asked MSCC for \$5,000 to finance the organization, it is likely that it would function within the parameters and

⁸⁴ *Jackson Daily News*, 26 April 1958, in MSSC SCR# 9-1-1-14-1-1-1; *State Times*, 5 September 1959, in MSSC SCR# 9-1-1-63-1-1-1; and *State Times*, 20 November 1959, in MSSC SCR# 9-1-2-6-1-1-1.

⁸⁵ Greene to Erle Johnston, 8 September 1964, MSSC SCR# 99-62-0-222-1-1-1 to 99-62-0-222-2-1-1.

⁸⁶ “Form Organization for Better Race Relations in the State,” *Jackson Advocate*, 5 September 1964, in MSSC SCR# 9-1A-0-3-2-1-1.

guidelines of the Commission.⁸⁷ When Greene published a front-page story announcing MNCA, Johnston took the liberty of arranging additional publicity that resulted in coverage from wire services, the press and television. The formation of MNCA and sanction from the Commission seemed arbitrary considering the Civil Rights Act had legally ended racial segregation and guaranteed voting rights. Yet, the murder of civil rights workers James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman in June of that year demonstrated the myopic mind-set of some whites in Mississippi. As a seasoned veteran in working with responsible white people in Mississippi, Greene may have foreseen the troubled road ahead for blacks in realizing the promises of civil rights.

As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gained prominence as the leader of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, Greene became his most severe black southern critic. However, the foundation of his criticisms may not have been based entirely on King's ideologies and tactics but more on his role as a designated leader in the African American community. For years Greene held that position in Mississippi. It was a role he was not ready to relinquish: "I wasn't going to abdicate my position as a leader to Martin Luther King, James Farmer, or nobody else."⁸⁸ However, his collusion with the Sovereignty Commission placed him in an obscure role and on the wrong side of the Civil Rights Movement. When freedom riders were arrested and jailed in Mississippi in 1961, Greene questioned King's absence: "Instead of going to jail like everybody else and setting the supreme example, Dr. King ... is busy Cadillacking about the country making speeches

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Neil McMillen, Oral History with Mr. Percy Greene.

and taking bows in the relative and or welcome safety on northern environments.”⁸⁹ In an editorial reprinted in the *Chicago Defender* and other leading black newspapers, Greene named King “as the chief author and instigator of Negro student demonstrations that has turned many of the nation’s most renowned Negro institutions of learning into centers of agitation and unrest.”⁹⁰ He advised King to abandon SNCC and use his influence to encourage black students to disband demonstrations and return to academics. Former baseball player Jackie Robinson, an active supporter of King and the NAACP, scathingly criticized Greene as an “Uncle Tom” in his syndicated column, “Jackie Robinson Says”:

Mr. Greene evidently decided that the best way for him to carve out a name and career for himself was to say in his newspaper all the things the white people of Mississippi want to hear. Mr. Greene has often in the past succeeded in making a fool out of himself. He has consistently betrayed his race by fighting integration and insisting that the Negro in the South is contented and will be happy if only outsiders like the NAACP will leave him alone. . . . It makes happy to realize that Dr. Martin Luther King will not be affected by the treachery of people like Percy Greene.⁹¹

Greene sent Governor Ross Barnett copies of Robinson’s column and his editorial. In the accompanying letter, he wrote:

I think this effort by Jackie Robinson is enough proof that I and my paper are now being regarded as their most challenging opposition, and therefore must be destroyed and silenced in order to allow them to take complete command of the minds of the Negroes of the state. . . . Just as King needs money to keep up his agitation, I need money to oppose and expose him and continue publishing the Advocate.⁹²

⁸⁹ “Negro Editor Challenges King To Make Himself a Martyr,” *Jackson Daily News*, 6 July 1961, in MSSC SCR# 2-140-3-29-1-1-1.

⁹⁰ “A Real Challenge to Martin Luther King,” undated, MSSC SCR# 9-1-2-64-3-1-1.

⁹¹ Jackie Robinson, “Jackie Robinson Says,” undated, MSSC SCR# 9-1-2-64-2-1-1.

Though it is not known if he received the requested funds, Greene continued his own agitation against King.

In April 1964, he conspired with Johnston to plant a news story linking King, the NAACP and SNCC to the Southern Conference Educational Fund, an organization deemed a front for communism by the Louisiana Joint Legislative Committee on Un-American Activities. Johnston who provided Greene with the dubious information believed the story would be more credible if it was first published by a black newspaper. He then alerted the Jackson white press which published similar articles giving the *Jackson Advocate* credit for breaking the story. Because the story was also carried by the Associated Press wire service, it received national publicity.

As King and other leaders intensified their efforts in Mississippi, Greene was relentless in his criticisms of student protests on college campuses, economic boycotts against white businesses, and marches and demonstrations. In his investigation of the boycott planned against white businesses in Jackson during Easter Week 1960, he assured Van Landingham that “he had made considerable effort to learn just how far the plans for the boycott had gone” and “was convinced that the great majority of negroes in Jackson were not in favor of the boycott and would not agree to any such demonstration.”⁹³ He was paid fifty dollars to investigate “negro hotels, negro boarding houses, negro night clubs and beer joints to determine if outside negroes” had been brought into Jackson to participate in the boycott.⁹⁴ Greene even wrote to President

⁹² Percy Greene to Ross Barnett, 14 July 1962, MSSC SCR# 7-0-6-57-1-1-1.

⁹³ Boycott by Negroes, 6 April 1960, MSSC SCR# 2-135-0-1-11-1-1 to 2-135-0-1-12-1-1.

⁹⁴ Zack Van Landingham to Governor Ross Barnett, 6 April 1960, MSSC SCR# 9-1-2-28-1-1-1.

Lyndon Johnson predicting that future demonstrations and boycotts encouraged by King could “only serve to aggravate already existing poor relations between Whites and Negroes in Mississippi” and “prove to be a further throwback to the Negroes in the state.”⁹⁵ He urged Johnson to “use the great power and influence of [his] office to prevent further boycotts and demonstrations” and to encourage “the civil rights workers from the outside to return to their homes.”⁹⁶ Just days before King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, Greene published an editorial declaring him an “enemy of the nation [and an] enemy of the Negro.”⁹⁷ During a rally in Jackson held by the NAACP and the Committee of Concerned Citizens on April 23, Charles Evers remarked, “We as Negroes cannot tolerate such writing as this coming from a Negro.”⁹⁸ In calling for a boycott against businesses who advertised in the *Jackson Advocate*, he declared that “if they don’t withdraw their advertising, they will have picket lines in front of their stores.”⁹⁹ Evers told the assembled group “if Percy Greene is a friend of the white man, let the white man support him, because he will be run out of town.”¹⁰⁰

As in previous years, Greene endured this attack. But the cumulative impact of his long-term association with the Commission and his stand against civil rights forever damaged his credibility and that of the newspaper. A statement he made early in his career summarized public opinion and his conviction: “I have never been concerned

⁹⁵ Greene to Johnson, undated, MSSC SCR# 9-1-2-79-1-1-1 to 9-1-2-79-2-1-1.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Lynn J. Lasker, “Protests in Jackson,” *Southern Courier*, 4 May 1968.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Restricted, 23 April 1968, MSSC SCR# 99-48-0-72-1-1-1.

about what folks thought about me. They have called me ‘Uncle Tom,’ ‘Buzzard,’ ‘White Folks’ Nigger’ and everything you could imagine. However, I remain undaunted in my interest and concern with the plight of my people.”¹⁰¹ While some viewed his actions as a betrayal to the black community, others contended that he made the best use of the resources at his disposal. James Rundles, who was a columnist at the *Advocate* for many years, noted that it was white leaders and businesses that provided Greene with financial assistance to save the newspaper when blacks turned against him. Erle Johnston, who served as both MSSC public relations director and agency director, described Greene as “a moderate black compared to Negro activists and somewhat of an “Uncle Tom” to his own people.”¹⁰² In his estimation, Greene walked a “chalk line” trying to balance “being a black editor, but at the same time he had to please some whites in order to get revenue to keep going.”¹⁰³ Charles Tisdale, who purchased the *Jackson Advocate*, said Greene was “an opportunist [whose] economic interest overrode his basic integrity.”¹⁰⁴ Myrlie Evers, the widow of Medgar Evers, had little empathy for Greene. She found that her “vision” of him was “clouded by his very negative, negative approach” to her husband.¹⁰⁵ For her, “it made no difference what the circumstances in his personal life were. It was

¹⁰¹ George Sewall and Margaret Dwight, *Mississippi Black History Makers* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 272.

¹⁰² Erle Johnston, *Mississippi's Defiant Years 1953-1973* (Forest, Mississippi: Lake Harbor Publishers, 1990) 231.

¹⁰³ Yasuhiro Katagiri, Oral History with Mr. Erle Johnston, 13 April 1993, University of Southern Mississippi Southern Civil Rights Documentation Project, <http://anna.lib.usm.edu/%7Eespcol/crda/oh/ohjohnstone2p.html> [accessed 11 November 2010].

¹⁰⁴ Jerry Mitchell, “Commission planted stories in black newspaper that King was communist,” *Clarion Ledger*, 28 January 1990.

¹⁰⁵ Leesha Cooper and Susis Spear, “Tisdale: Greene needed cash to cover medical bills,” *Clarion Ledger*, 30 June 1989.

[her] impression that he was doing what he did because he believed it.”¹⁰⁶ Greene and MSSC endured a symbiotic relationship. “The Sovereignty Commission took advantage of his rhetorical skills and access to a mass communications outlet in an attempt to preserve the status quo. Greene used the commission to get national exposure and to get financial support for his publication.”¹⁰⁷ From 1956 to 1967, Greene received \$6,397 from MSSC.¹⁰⁸

In 1972 at the age of 75, Greene still considered himself the architect of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi. He credited himself for beginning the movement in 1927 when he organized the National Association of Negro Veterans. In retrospect he stated: “As far as history of the civil-rights movement is concerned, when it becomes bereft of its emotional qualities and the real truth of its beginning is told, it's going to begin right here in Mississippi.”¹⁰⁹ Yet, the new histories written about Mississippi during the Civil Rights Era have not given Greene the credit he thought he deserved. Instead, his early contributions have been overshadowed by his allegiance to the old order and his failure to support the Movement.

Joseph F. Albright

In 1946, World War II veteran Joseph Albright was appointed by President Harry Truman as a special assistant in the Department of Veteran Affairs. For the next several

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Julian Williams, “Percy Greene and the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission,” *Journalism History* (2002): 71

¹⁰⁸ Thompson, 110.

¹⁰⁹ Neil McMillen, Oral History with Mr. Percy Greene.

years, he was instrumental in desegregating Veteran's Hospitals across the country. He began his association with Percy Greene when they worked together to integrate the nursing staff at the Veterans Memorial Hospital in Jackson. Because of their efforts, Mattie Rundles and seven other black nurses were appointed at the hospital in 1949.¹¹⁰ Albright resigned his military appointment in 1951 and started a public relations business in Chicago. When he retired in 1961, he moved to Mississippi to work with Greene at the *Jackson Advocate*. The social climate for blacks in Mississippi was a sharp contrast to the northern cities where Albright had resided for most of his life. Yet, he spoke confidently of his ability to adapt to life in the south. "I was aware of the local customs and mores and I intended to live by them," he said. "If I felt the situation was so intolerable here, I would pack my bags and take the first train out of Mississippi."¹¹¹

In June 1961, Albright "volunteered his services more or less as an informant to Governor Barnett and [Commission director Albert Jones] for the benefit the Sovereignty Commission." In his first lengthy report, Albright wrote that he conducted "278 interviews and espionage conversations" with blacks who attended various events in Jackson. He attributed the "sparse attendance" at NAACP meetings to the growing dissatisfaction among the "rank and file" blacks who believed the "organization should confine itself more to its legal functions, and give less of its time and effort to civil rights activities." According to Albright, more blacks were in favor of the "middle-of-the-road approach to racial problems" rather than the "let's-get-everything-today program."

¹¹⁰ Neil McMillen, Oral History with Mr. Percy Greene; Terry Flucker and Phoenix Savage, *African Americans of Jackson* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 38.

¹¹¹ "Negro Consultant Denounces Rides," *Commercial Appeal*, 2 December 1961.

Though he found that most blacks opposed the strategies of MSSC, they would support a program advancing interracial progress, fellowship and goodwill. He reported that he repeatedly heard from blacks that caution and espionage must be maintained to keep abreast of activities of “out-of-state intruders” intent upon disrupting the peaceful efforts of Mississippians to settle their own racial differences. Similar to Rev. M. L. Young, Albright provided no documentation to substantiate his report. However, his close association with Greene probably contributed to his credibility with the Commission. Further, MSSC director Jones considered Albright “a very intelligent Negro.”¹¹²

Over the next several months, Albright conducted various investigations. After obtaining information from a NAACP meeting in Memphis, he reported that the organization was intensifying its efforts to integrate Mississippi schools and register black voters. He suggested that “a full time trusted Negro investigator with intelligence and espionage training [was] very definitely now in order to frequently cover the state.”¹¹³ His meticulous invoices indicated that under the guise of public relations, he investigated other black organizations including CORE and the National Baptist Convention. In contrast to other informants who received fixed monthly payments, Albright established his own fee system for investigative work. For instance, in August, he invoiced MSSC \$95.00 for “gathering information and attending [the] Baptist Convention.”¹¹⁴ In September, he invoiced the agency \$41.30 for “work among Negro

¹¹² Albert Jones to Honorable John Bell Williams and Albright Report, 20 June 1961, MSSC SCR# 7-0-4-61-1-1-1 to 7-0-64-6-1-1.

¹¹³ Albert Jones to Ross Barnett regarding Albright report, 5 June 1961, MSSC SCR# 3-23A-2-111-1-1-1 to 3-23A-2-111-3-1-1.

¹¹⁴ Joseph Albright Invoice, 1 August 1961, MSSC SCR# 97-98-2-182-2-1-1.

organizations.”¹¹⁵ Albright was also reimbursed for expenses such as transportation, telephone, postage, meals and entertainment.

When he spoke at Columbia University on October 18, 1961, Albright was the first black speaker for the Commission. Though Johnston normally accompanied speakers, Albright made the trip to New York alone. Following the showing of “*The Message from Mississippi*,” he told the integrated audience of 250 students:

Negroes in Mississippi are not poverty-ridden pariahs, as has been charged. My statement is attested to by the \$8 million Negroes have on deposit in one bank alone in Jackson, by ownership of innumerable homes and farms, by ownership of every conceivable type of business, by thousands of skilled laborers, and by their large commercial real estate holdings.¹¹⁶

Defending the state’s segregation laws, he explained: “These statutes will remain operative until they are either repealed by the proper legislative body or nullified in the progressive courts. This is the established procedure of democratic government and I pray that it will always be.”¹¹⁷ In emphasizing that “Mississippi Negroes do not want desegregation,” he noted that “not one Negro family in this state has attempted to send its children to a white school.”¹¹⁸ When asked why blacks in Yazoo City lost their jobs because they petitioned to integrate the schools, Albright was unable to answer. William Gardner, a black graduate student, told Albright that “his speech was obviously written

¹¹⁵ Joseph Albright Invoice, 7 September 1961, MSSC SCR# 97-98-2-166-2-1-1.

¹¹⁶ “Race Progress Told By Negro at New York,” *Jackson Daily News*, 19 October 1961, in MSSC SCR# 10-99-0-14-1-1-1.

¹¹⁷ “Negroes Should Earn Progress, Columbia Audience is Told,” *Southern School News*, November 1961, 13.

¹¹⁸ “N.Y. Students Howl at Miss. Uncle Tom,” *California Eagle*, 26 October 1961, in MSSC SCR# 10-99-0-13-1-1-1.

by whites [and] sounded like the Jew telling how clean the concentration camps were.”¹¹⁹ On point after point, he was criticized by the hostile crowd who frequently booed and jeered his presentation. He lost credibility as a spokesman for black life in the state and created more antagonism when he revealed to the students that he had only lived in Mississippi for a year. Therefore, he had little limited personal knowledge or experience of the decades of repressive living conditions for blacks. Considering his short residence in Mississippi, Albright could have easily been considered an outsider. However, his ability to speak the language whites wanted to hear permitted a degree of latitude unavailable to most blacks.

Albright’s treatment by students at Columbia was incomparable to the backlash heaped upon Erle Johnston and Albert Jones by MSSC Commissioners. In addition to their shock and outrage, Commissioners Aubrey Bell and Wilburn Hooker stated the decision to use Albright was not unanimously approved by Commission members. They both agreed that MSCC staff overstepped its authority and disregarded the desires of the Commission board. Bell, who communicated his dissatisfaction to other commissioners, recalled that during the August Commission meeting, Governor Ross Barnett presented a report “that showed this negro’s thorough unfitness to represent the Commission.”¹²⁰ Hooker, who considered Albright psychopathic, concluded that he was a “publicity seeker” who used the Commission “to further his own ends.”¹²¹ After a series of letters in which Bell and Hooker engaged in a who’s-to-blame game, Johnston conceded that he

¹¹⁹ Everett Jacobs, “Negro Defends Racial Bars: Says Laws Must Be Obeyed,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, 19 October 1961.

¹²⁰ Aubrey H. Bell to Albert Jones, 19 October 1961, MSSC SCR# 7-0-4—130-1-1-1.

¹²¹ Wilburn Hooker to Albert Jones, 21 October 1961, MSSC SCR# 7-0-4-134-1-1-1; Hooker to Erle Johnston, 27 October 1961, 7-0-4-139-1-1-1.

made the final decision to send Albright to Columbia. Furthermore, he insisted that he had Governor Ross Barnett's permission to use Albright because the audience was integrated. Johnston viewed the speaking engagement as "a tremendous opportunity to have a member of the colored race speak to northerners on the progress of both races under segregation."¹²² In a letter to Jones supporting Johnston's decision, James A. Files, who had spoken in several northern cities for the Commission, wrote: "I returned fully convinced that this type of program should include participation of more of our colored people" because it added "extra emphasis and impact to our efforts."¹²³ In his final analysis, Johnston believed the Commission had "shaken up the NAACP, who can no longer claim that they have the sympathetic support of Mississippi Negroes."¹²⁴ There was no evidence to suggest that Albright's presentation had an adverse effect on the NAACP. In fact, Medgar Evers spoke before a northern audience one month later regarding the "constant injustices which are 'imposed most frequently in a ruthless and Hitler-like atmosphere'."¹²⁵ When the dust finally settled, the Commission decided that Albright would not be used for future speaking engagements.

Though Albright was no longer a speaker for MSSC, the agency made full use of the editorials and articles he wrote that favored segregation or denigrated civil rights activities. In "Don't Try to 'Save Me' Please," he admonished outside "saviors" who felt obligated to rescue him from Mississippi. He pointed out that he did not want to be saved from his own women, churches, schools, fraternal organizations and "the friendship and

¹²² Erle Johnston to Aubrey Bell, 20 October 1961, MSSC SCR# 7-0-4-132-1-1-1.

¹²³ James A. Files to Albert Jones, 24 October 1961, MSSC SCR# 7-0-4-127-1-1-1.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ "Evers Declares Facts on Race Misrepresented," *Jackson Daily News*, 1 November 1961.

encouragement” that he received from “white Mississippians whose generosity [and] sympathetic aid” allowed him to “walk successfully down the high road of progress.”¹²⁶ In a pamphlet entitled “I Am Proud to Be a Negro,” he wrote of his racial pride and heritage emphasizing that he considered himself an “arch segregationist” because he valued choosing his own friends, religion, fraternities, associations and way of life. Another editorial described the freedom ride as a gimmick to lure blacks to the north where they “can live in an abundance of milk and honey.”¹²⁷ He warned blacks that “pastures may look greener over yonder, but when you get there you will find the grass is just about the same. The problems ... racial and otherwise ... cannot be escaped simply by running to a change in geography or climate.”¹²⁸ Albright’s writings and persona rang with the familiar accommodationist rhetoric. Johnston considered him as “one of those well-educated, smart blacks who knew what the white folks wanted to hear.”¹²⁹ In addition to praise and wide dissemination by MSSC, his writings were frequently reprinted or quoted in local white newspapers such as the *Clarion Ledger* and the *Jackson Daily News*.

Like B L Bell, Albright envisioned himself as an MSSC employee conducting special investigations among black populations. In June 1963, he approached Johnston regarding a position as a part-time employee for special services. Albright stated that he had a genuine interest to provide “assistance against those who have been inciting local

¹²⁶ “Don’t Try to Save Me Please,” MSSC SCR# 10-99-0-6-1-1-1 to 10-99-0-6-5-1-1.

¹²⁷ “What Freedom Ride?,” *Jackson Advocate*, 12 May 1962.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Yasuhiro Katagiri, Oral History with Mr. Erle Johnston, [accessed 11 November 2010].

Negroes to participant in demonstrations.”¹³⁰ While Johnston agreed to submit his request to the Commission, he advised Albright “that there was considerable antagonism toward him ... because of some of his actions during his previous association.”¹³¹

Albright’s application was rejected during the July Commission meeting.

Over the next several years, MSSC used Albright’s editorials and public relations skills as needed. When MSSC campaigned against the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, it distributed to the House and Senate a special Emancipation Proclamation edition of the *Jackson Advocate* that included an editorial written by Albright. In his opening remarks to the Senate on July 24, 1964, South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond introduced the editorial - “Go Home ‘Saviors’: A Negro Speaks Out of Pride of His Race” - as one written by “a Negro who appeals to the so-called civil rights workers invading Mississippi to go home and leave the people of Mississippi alone.”¹³² On March 3, 1965, Mississippi Congressman Prentiss Walker used “We Will Blast This Boycott” by Albright in response to the nationwide boycott initiated by Martin Luther King, Jr. and SCLC against Mississippi products. The editorial, which condemned the boycott as an economic assault on blacks, also described the efforts of out-of-state civil rights workers as “questionable benevolence” that “proved to be just about as ineffective as it was stupid.”¹³³ Both editorials were printed in the Congressional Record.

When Mississippi was criticized for the lack of job opportunities for blacks in 1965, Johnston suggested to Albright that the *Jackson Advocate* publish a special edition

¹³⁰ Agenda for Sovereignty Commission Meeting, 18 July 1963, 99-55-0-1-1-1-1.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² 1964 Congressional Record Appendix, A3887, MSSC SCR# 10-99-0-30-1-1-1.

¹³³ 1965 Congressional Record Appendix, A946, MSSC SCR# 10-99-0-31-1-1-1.

promoting blacks employed in various industries throughout the state. In addition to revenue generated through ads from businesses in the special edition, MSSC agreed to purchase a \$250 ad and spend an additional \$250 for 500 copies to use in its public relations efforts.¹³⁴ In a letter to the governor, Johnston wrote: “The supplement which was a suggestion from this office will portray the development of industry and commerce in Mississippi with special emphasis on Negro participation. It will be an excellent mailing piece to show that Negroes do have good employment opportunities in this state.”¹³⁵ Considering the special edition a tremendous success, Johnston used it to silence critics who said that blacks couldn’t find suitable employment in Mississippi. Further, he viewed it as a tool against potential boycotts because employers had tangible evidence of blacks on their payrolls.

At Albright’s suggestion, MSSC gave him \$500 in March 1966 for expenses and entertainment to attend the Mississippi Teachers Association annual meeting.¹³⁶ His invoice indicated that the funds were used for distributing copies of Governor Johnson’s education report to the legislature, maintenance of conference headquarters, public relations, and courtesies for outstanding leaders who attended the conference. Rather than paying Albright directly, the funds were diverted through the Robert E. Lee Scholarship Fund, which provided college scholarships to black students. This method of payment raises questions about the scholarship fund’s relationship to the Commission and Albright. In a December 1964 memo, Johnston wrote that after investigating the

¹³⁴ Johnston, 251-252.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Erle Johnston Memo, 22 March 1966, MSSC SCR# 6-41-0-5-1-1-1.

organization, he found it to be a “very worthy corporation” to which MSSC donated \$200.¹³⁷ MSSC files did not reveal an association between Albright and the scholarship fund. However, one must have existed in order for him to accept and use the organization’s funds.

In September 1966, Percy Greene notified the Commission that Albright appeared to be suffering from a nervous breakdown. He stated that Albright had “tried to live on a far more lavish scale than his income permitted,” accumulating nearly \$5,000 in debt.¹³⁸ The following month Albright left Mississippi as mysteriously as he had appeared. Surprisingly, the MSSC early investigation of Albright in 1961 by commissioner John Bell Williams failed to reveal a significant point. Prior to coming to Mississippi, Albright had worked for over twenty-four years in various capacities promoting inter-racial goodwill.¹³⁹ In fact, he held prominent positions within NAACP branches in Minnesota, Illinois, and Washington, D.C.

John Wesley Jones

In regard to black informants, John W. Jones of New Albany could be considered a three-base-hit. He was a newspaper editor, an educator, and a minister. As discussed previously, Jones was the only black person who supported Governor White’s voluntary segregation plan in 1955. When White released the meeting transcript, it was altered

¹³⁷ Erle Johnston Memo, 1 December 1964, MSSC SCR# 6-41-0-3-1-1-1.

¹³⁸ Erle Johnston Memo, 20 September 1966, MSSC SCR# 10-99-0-36-1-1-1.

¹³⁹ NAACP Branch News, *Crisis*, June 1944, 200.

when compared to the memories of blacks who actually attended the meeting. Aaron Henry, leader of the Cleveland NAACP, recalled that Jones also said:

I don't want my children to go to school with white children and here's why. Suppose my little boy and Governor White's little boy get in a fight and I whipped 'em both. Mrs. White's boy goes home and tells her that I whipped him, and she's gonna come looking for me with a shotgun.¹⁴⁰

Comments by Jones regarding the governor's wife were excluded. Though Jones could have served MSSC in either of his varied roles, the Commission primarily used his newspaper, the *Community Citizen*, as its editorial voice in New Albany and Union County.

Established in 1949, the *Community Citizen* was a semi-monthly "Negro paper dedicated to the maintenance of peace, good will, order, and domestic tranquility."¹⁴¹ With similar editorial policies as the *Delta Leader* and *Jackson Advocate*, Jones used the paper to encourage blacks to accept and live within the confines of segregation. Jones wrote in an editorial that "Southern whites have been too good to the Negro. Most Negroes who have accumulated anything worthwhile were encouraged to do by some white friend."¹⁴² In another editorial, he wrote: "We do well know that we can depend on a white man for a favor more so than we can for members of our own race. When a burning or some misfortune overtakes a member of our race, the white people's contribution exceeds ours in every instance."¹⁴³ When Robert Patterson, founder of the

¹⁴⁰ Henry and Curry, 90.

¹⁴¹ Tagline, 17 September 1955, *Community Citizen*.

¹⁴² "What Segregation Has Done for the Negro," *Community Citizen*, 6 October 1960, in MSSC SCR# 9-16-0-87-1-1-1.

¹⁴³ "Can a Negro Get Justice in Southern Courts?," *Community Citizen*, 9 June 1960, in MSSC SCR# 9-16-0-78-1-1-1.

Citizens' Council, bought 1200 copies of the paper, Jones acknowledged the purchase in an article stating that the *Community Citizen* had "won fame for itself" because Patterson distributed the paper throughout the state.¹⁴⁴ In subsequent editions, the banner – "This paper is endorsed by the Citizens' Council of Mississippi" – was printed on the front page above the masthead.

While the four-to-six page newspaper reported local black news in northeast Mississippi, considerable space was dedicated to reprinting articles and news from other sources. Jones published "The Church and Segregation" by Methodist minister J. Paul Barrett, a member of the States' Rights Council of Georgia. Like other religious zealots who were also segregationists, Barrett considered separation of the races as God's divine and original plan. The lengthy article, which was a six-column spread covering an entire page, was actually the reprint of a pamphlet written by Barrett for distribution by the Georgia Council. The edition also included an article from the Council supporting Barrett's position and its wholehearted support of racial segregation for the best interest of both races. From the *South Deering Bulletin*, Jones reprinted "A Real Negro Problem" which argued that blacks needed more than "just the school type of education but the education in how to behave like a human being and not a savage [and] how to be able to live like human beings instead of like animals."¹⁴⁵ "Rights for Whites" from the *Centerville Press* described blacks as "the best treated human beings in the United States" because they "can live without working," "have 40 illegitimate children," "10 common law wives" and "get on welfare programs when good, honest, hard working

¹⁴⁴ "The Community Citizen Has Won Fame For Itself," *Community Citizen*, 23 June 1955.

¹⁴⁵ "A Real Negro Problem," *Community Citizen*, 23 June 1959, in MSSC SCR# 9-16-08-1-1-1.

white people are unable to qualify.”¹⁴⁶ Jones was frequently praised for the newspaper content by House Speaker and Commission member Walter Sillers and other whites for his public support of segregation. Their letters of endorsement were often printed in the newspaper. From the content of the *Community Citizen*, it appeared that Jones had little regard for his black readership and was more concerned with pleasing whites.

In October 1957, Sillers demonstrated his support of Jones when he persuaded the Commission to approve payments of \$75 per month for subscriptions to the *Community Citizen*.¹⁴⁷ In a letter of appreciation to Governor Coleman and the legislature, Jones explained that the financial assistance from the Commission “has been solely used for distribution of copies of the paper among members of my race aside from a few copies which we send to white supporters to keep them informed of what we are doing.”¹⁴⁸ He assured them that “every article we write is for the instruction of my people, trying to inform them of the danger of listening to outside agitation and the propaganda of the NAACP.”¹⁴⁹ Jones remained true to his word “to support the social-traditional way of life.”¹⁵⁰ In nearly every instance when blacks challenged southern traditions, Jones reinforced his support of segregation and intensified his attacks against the Civil Rights Movement. “Don’t let anybody fool you,” he warned his readers, “the NAACP is the worst enemy we have [because] its objective is to create a disturbance among us and the

¹⁴⁶ “Rights for Whites,” *Community Citizen*, 23 July 1959, in MSSC SCR# 9-16-0-90-1-1-1.

¹⁴⁷ Minutes of Commission Meeting, 9 October 1957, MSSC SCR# 99-14-0-8-1-1-1.

¹⁴⁸ Jones to Coleman, 3 December 1959, MSSC SCR# 9-16-0-45-2-1-1-1,

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

white people of the south.”¹⁵¹ When James Meredith applied for admission at the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), Jones issued a statement that was published in the

Clarion Ledger:

James Meredith is not a Patrick Henry but a pied piper. He will not be doing his race a service by entering the University, he will be doing us harm. We colored people in Mississippi in the great majority are still dependent upon the consideration of the white people for their employment and subsistence. . . . Does he believe we can continue to expect and receive the financial assistance and other courtesies and co-operation we have been receiving from the white people if he crosses that line?¹⁵²

He also volunteered to present himself as a witness for any state official charged with contempt of court for disregarding the order to admit Meredith since they were acting “in the better interest of Negroes in Mississippi, and also the South.”¹⁵³ In his view, civil rights was “more of a liability than an asset [and] does not mean anything to a people who have not acquired an ability of self-government, ability to compete with experts of other races, and the ability to shoulder other responsibilities.”¹⁵⁴ A *Clarion Ledger* reader thought it would be an “excellent idea” to send Jones “to the benighted North and let him give them the facts of life. But he would not be safe from members of his own race who would term him ‘Uncle Tom’.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Untitled, *Magnolia Gazette*, 13 November 1958, in MSSC SCR# 9-0-0-13-1-1-1.

¹⁵² “Negro Minister says Meredith Should Not Enroll at Ole Miss,” *Clarion Ledger*, 19 September 1962 in MSSC SCR# 9-16-0-106-1-1-1.

¹⁵³ Jones to Erle Johnston, 19 September 1962, MSSC SCR# 9-16-0-109-2-1-1.

¹⁵⁴ “What Does Civil Rights Mean To Us,” *Community Citizen*, 10 March 1960, in MSSC SCR# 9-16-0-54-1-1-1.

¹⁵⁵ “Voice of the People,” *Clarion Ledger*, 31 March 1960, in MSSC SCR# 9-16-0-64-1-1-1.

When the Sovereignty Commission placed an advertisement in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* for volunteer speakers, Jones eagerly responded:

We Negroes who are enjoying the system of segregation in the State of Mississippi should give every ounce of our support to the program. There is nothing which has contributed as much to the Negro's success and welfare, here in Mississippi, as segregation has. If the program includes Negroes, please consider this letter as my application that my name be placed on the speaking staff.¹⁵⁶

The following week, he wrote a detailed five-page letter to MSSC public relations director Erle Johnston explaining why segregation in Mississippi must be maintained. In his estimation, blacks were not ready for the responsibilities of integration. "We are loud in our expression, have but little regard for time, are not prompt to appointments, very little respect for our women, and are embarrassing [embarrassing] to the upper bracket."¹⁵⁷ Though Jones was not selected as a speaker, MSSC used his letter of application as an opportunity to illustrate that blacks in Mississippi were content with segregation. Apparently, Johnston distributed the letter to various news agencies because it was reprinted in several newspapers prompting responses from readers. Mrs. C. T. Yates of Vicksburg believed Jones seemed "qualified as a speaker and with a little encouragement he would be a real asset" particularly "among his race in the South."¹⁵⁸ R. T. Daniel of Long Beach suggested the Commission use Jones and "several good negroes to offer their voluntary services ... because one good negro can do as much good as a dozen white men, in other parts of the country."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Jones to MSSC, 3 August 1960, MSSC SCR# 9-16-0-84-1-1-2.

¹⁵⁷ Jones to Johnston, 12 August 1960, MSSC SCR# 9-16-0-86-1-1-1 to 9-16-0-86-5-1-1.

¹⁵⁸ C. T. Yates to Albert Jones, 15 August 1960, MSSC SCR# 10-86-0-23-1-1-1.

Throughout his association with the Commission, Jones, identified as informant 9-16, continually advanced a platform of compliance and deference that brought praise and acknowledgement from whites.¹⁶⁰ When he wanted to solicit financial contributions for the newspaper from white merchants and businesses, Commission staff members wrote letters of recommendation that were published in the newspaper. Investigator Zack Van Landingham regarded his “advice and counsel” to blacks as “instrumental ... in combating the influence of the NAACP and maintaining a healthy relationship between the races.”¹⁶¹ Another investigator, Tom Scarbrough, concluded that Jones had done so “much good among his race in teaching and preaching our segregated system of government [that] his is due the support of the white people.”¹⁶² Even director Albert Jones commented on his relentless efforts: “Even though our state has been invaded, Reverend Jones has not relaxed his interest in our traditional way of life. He has proved himself beyond a doubt to be a true Southerner.”¹⁶³ Though he never engaged in investigative tasks to the extent of Humes, Greene or Albright, Jones was routinely contacted by MSSC investigators regarding racial agitation and NAACP activities in Union County. By 1965, MSSC considered him “a part time employee outside the office.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ R. K. Daniel to State Sovereignty Commission, 15 August 1960, MSSC SCR# 10-34-0-22-1-1-1.

¹⁶⁰ J. W. Jones Informant Number, MSSC SCR# 99-201-0-320-1-1-1.

¹⁶¹ Van Landingham letter regarding Jones, 12 August 1959, MSSC SCR# 9-16-0-22-1-1-1.

¹⁶² Scarbrough letter regarding Jones, 15 September 1960, MSSC SCR# 9-16-0-80-1-1-1.

¹⁶³ Director Jones Letter regarding Jones, 6 November 1962, MSSC SCR# 9-16-0-112-1-1-1.

¹⁶⁴ Erle Johnston to Herman Glazier, 16 March 1965, MSSC SCR# 10-0-2-32-1-1-1.

In November 1968, MSSC discontinued contributions to Jones due to changes in its donation policies. During his eleven years of service, Jones was paid \$9,975.¹⁶⁵ More so than he realized, John Wesley Jones succinctly described the conditions for blacks in Mississippi in one of his early editorials: “We as Negroes cannot do any more than the white people let us do. And we are most likely to go just as far as they will let us.”¹⁶⁶

Similar to the *Jackson Advocate*, *Delta Leader* and *Community Citizen*, the *Mississippi Enterprise* subscribed to the philosophy of Booker T. Washington. Established by Willie J. Miller in 1938, the *Enterprise* was the first black owned newspaper in Jackson. Miller viewed the newspaper as an instrument to fulfill the informational needs of blacks:

What we have tried to do is give Jacksonians and Mississippians a paper in which there is plenty of space to give accurate accounts of news, in the religious, educational, business, professional, civic, fraternal and social fields – a privilege denied them in the daily papers and most of the foreign papers sent into the state.¹⁶⁷

It should be noted that Miller did not include political or civil rights as a “field” for news coverage. In fact the newspaper basically remained apolitical except in instances when he supported the status quo. In a 1946 editorial, he warned readers not “to be led astray by evil forces” who advocate “racial, social and political changes.”¹⁶⁸ He maintained that there was “no real race problem in the South [but] a misunderstanding which exists

¹⁶⁵ This calculation is based on payments from November 1957 to November 1968, a total of 133 payments @ \$75 per month.

¹⁶⁶ “What is an Opportunity?,” *Community Citizen*, 23 April 1959, in MSSC SCR# 9-16-0-5-1-1-1.

¹⁶⁷ Thompson, 30.

¹⁶⁸ “Our Heritage,” *Mississippi Enterprise*, February 1946.

because of a few white and colored who are seeking selfish advancement and have no better weapon than the cowardly appeal to racial prejudice.”¹⁶⁹

Though Greene exposed the *Enterprise* for accepting advertising funds from MSSC in 1957, there was no evidence in the files to suggest that the newspaper accepted monies for anything other than advertising and subscriptions. Yet in March 1959, Van Landingham considered making payments to the newspaper “if they are willing to publish the right kind of news relative to maintaining the status quo in race relations over the State”.¹⁷⁰ Later that year, the Mississippi NAACP issued a statement condemning the *Enterprise* for accepting advertising from the Commission because the newspaper gave “aid and comfort” to “continued segregation and discrimination.”¹⁷¹ The Commission files indicated the *Enterprise* was paid at least \$700 in advertising.¹⁷² Erle Johnston acknowledged that Miller was a “subsidized informant” he inherited from the previous MSSC administration.¹⁷³ Though he was unsure of Miller’s exact function, he recalled that the Commission purchased subscriptions of the newspaper.

The first major dissident voice to challenge the pervading black press in Jackson was the *Mississippi Free Press* initiated by Medgar Evers, white attorney William Higgs, and black entrepreneur Robert L. T. Smith Jr. Before the first issue was on the newsstand, the Commission began an investigation of the editor, staff and board of

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ “Mississippi NAACP Condemns Newspaper,” *Memphis World*, 31 October 1959.

¹⁷² *Mississippi Enterprise* payments for advertising, MSSC SCR# 97-10-2-2-126-1-1-1, 97-96-0-2-244-2-1-1, 97-97-1-167-3-1-1, 97-102-1-39-2-1-1, 97-102-1-97-2-1-1, and 97-102-1-169-2-1-1.

¹⁷³ Yasuhiro Katagiri, Oral History with Mr. Erle Johnston, [accessed 11 November 2010].

directors using the Jackson Police Department and Mississippi Highway Patrol. Percy Greene of the *Jackson Advocate* and Willie Miller of the *Mississippi Enterprise* investigated editor Paul E. Brooks. On December 15, 1961 MSSC director Albert Jones and investigator Andy Hopkins observed a meeting at the newspaper offices between Hazel Brannon Smith (white editor and publisher of the *Lexington Advertiser*), Higgs, Evers and several black men.¹⁷⁴ Their investigation revealed that Brooks did not have a criminal record but staff members James Bevel and Lester McKinnie had been arrested numerous times for participating in the Freedom Ride movement. It also indicated that the *Free Press* was printed on presses owned by Smith who had been under investigation for some time due to her liberal viewpoint and stand against the Citizens Council.

With the motto, “The Truth Shall Make You Free,” the first issue published on December 16, 1961 clearly defined the purpose of the newspaper: to help secure the rights of Mississippians who had been denied certain freedoms and to fight against injustice. Further, it promised to discuss issues commonly avoided by other black presses including the state’s fiscal policies, the educational system, teacher salaries, voting and registration, and desegregation. While the *Advocate* was discouraging blacks from participating in the boycott of white merchants in downtown Jackson, the *Free Press* published a statement from Evers on the front page:

The fact that Negroes make up a large volume of the business transactions on Capitol Street, and the fact that the merchants have consistently refused to employ Negroes as sales clerks and extend courtesy titles are reasons which all of us, I am sure, will agree are sound. To those of you who believe in human decency, dignity and respect: We urge you to cooperate

¹⁷⁴ Investigation of Tari Brooks or Paul E. Brooks, 21 December 1961, MSSC SCR# 3-76-0-15-1-1-1- to 3-76-0-15-2-1-1.

with us and DO NOT BUY ON CAPITOL STREET until such time as we are treated as other Americans, citizens, and customers.¹⁷⁵

The issue also announced the candidacy of Robert L.T. Smith, Sr. for Congress, the arrest of seven blacks for encouraging a boycott against white businesses in Clarksdale, and a lengthy resolution from the Mississippi NAACP urging Governor Ross Barnett to end segregation. In the spirit of the *Chicago Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier*, it used a local lens to provide black readers with straightforward news relative to their daily lives.

In June 1962, Charles “Charlie” Butts, a twenty-year-old white student from Oberlin College, became editor of the *Free Press*. One month later, State Representative Wilburn Hooker, a Commission member and official of the Citizens Council, directed MSSC director Jones to “find out more about the background” of the editor from “Yankee Land.”¹⁷⁶ Butts was no stranger to the Civil Rights Movement. He had left college a year earlier to work as a community organizer in Haywood and Fayette Counties in Tennessee assisting blacks who were evicted from their land when they registered to vote. Like Bevel and McKinnie, he came to Mississippi as a Freedom Rider. He regarded the Mississippi press as an arm of the state that took liberties in dispersing the truth “by carefully selecting what it will print, and then molding this scanty material to suit its ends.”¹⁷⁷ In his view, the greatest fault with the mainstream press was not its distortions but rather what it chose to omit from publication.

¹⁷⁵ “Jackson Negroes Asked: Stay Off Capitol Street,” *Mississippi Free Press*, 16 December 1961, in MSSC SCR# 3-76-0-2-1-1-1 to 3-76-0-2-5-1-1-1.

¹⁷⁶ Wilburn Hooker to Albert Jones, 12 July 1962, MSSC SCR# 3-76-0-21-1-1-1.

¹⁷⁷ Charlie Butts, “Mississippi: The Vacuum and the System,” in *Black, White and Gray*, ed. Bradford Daniel (Sheed and Ward: New York, 1964) 104.

Since it was the first newspaper in Mississippi with an integrated staff, the *Free Press* was scrutinized by the Commission, the Citizens' Council, and public officials. Such scrutiny was often hazardous to the newspaper staff. On his way from investigating a shooting of two young girls in Ruleville, Butts was attacked by a gas station attendant who recognized him from a photo on the front page of the *Jackson Daily News*. Reporter Lawrence Hudson was stopped by the highway patrol and arrested on his way to Brandon. While in jail, he was placed over a chair with his pants down and beaten by five men with leather straps until he was almost unconscious. He was warned that if he screamed he would be killed. At the trial he was fined \$151 for "having an improper license, resisting arrest, reckless driving and assaulting an officer."¹⁷⁸ Reporter and photographer Dewey Greene, who was told to "get the hell out of town," had his camera seized by police while he was photographing blacks registering to vote at the Amite County courthouse.¹⁷⁹ The camera was returned the following week minus the film. In addition to opposition from the white establishment, the *Free Press* experienced the wrath of Percy Greene and the *Jackson Advocate*, its primary competitor for black readers and advertisers. In an editorial, Greene referred to Butts as a "twentieth century carpetbagger" who published a newspaper "dedicated to the more militant approach [to] the cause of Negro civil rights."¹⁸⁰ The friction between the two presses grew as Greene frequently criticized the newspaper for its support of CORE, SNCC and COFO. In

¹⁷⁸ "Claims Officer Beat Jackson Negro Editor," *Clarion Ledger*, 20 June 1962 in MSSC SCR# 3-76-0-27-1-1-1;

¹⁷⁹ "Negro Says Camera Taken From Him," *Clarion Ledger*, 22 August 1962 in MSSC SCR# 3-76-0-27-1-1-1.

¹⁸⁰ "The Mississippi Negro Their Civil Rights and the Twentieth Century Carpetbaggers," *Jackson Advocate*, 2 February 1963.

return, the *Free Press* challenged his support of segregation and opposition to the Civil Rights Movement.

The *Free Press* was published until the early 1970s. Like many other black weekly newspapers, it was hindered by a lack of stable revenue. Further, as the social and political climate in the state changed, there was less need and interest in the radical newspaper. Yet, at a time when blacks in Mississippi desperately needed a progressive press, it vigorously led the crusade against injustice and inequality. Tougaloo professor and activist John Salter characterized the *Free Press* as “the first liberal Negro social action newspaper, in the history of this unhappy state.”¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ John Salter, “Thoughts on the Mississippi Free Press,” *Mississippi Free Press*, 5 May 1962, in MDAH, Roll Number 19834.

Chapter 5

Coming to Terms with the Past

We must be the guardians of the accuracy and integrity of the process by which we record and preserve the records of our past. We must never let the political intrigues and passions of the moment divert that purpose. And we must never be afraid to protect the records of those events in our past of which we may not necessarily be proud. History must reflect our bad times as well as our good ones.¹

After seventeen years, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission closed its offices in 1973. From 1956 to 1973, the agency received a total appropriation of \$2,230,191 of which \$1,542,172.75 was expended to maintain the state's southern traditions.² It was not officially abolished until 1977 when its funding was vetoed by Governor William Waller. Following lengthy debates regarding destroying the files, Mississippi state lawmakers ordered the files sealed in a vault at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History until 2027. In 1977, the American Civil Liberties Union in conjunction with civil rights activists filed a class-action lawsuit in the United States District Court in Jackson to make the records available to the public. After a series of appeals that spanned twenty-one years, the files were finally opened at MDAH on March 17, 1998. At 8:00 A.M. on that morning, Richard Barrett, a white attorney who moved to Mississippi in 1966, stood outside the archives building distributing fliers that read "Mississippi's streets were safer, its schools better run, its patriots taller, in the days

¹ Andrew P. Mullins, Jr., ed., *The Measure of Our Days* (Jackson: William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation, 2006), 157.

² State Sovereignty Commission Statement of Appropriated Funds & Unexpended Balances, MSSC SCR# 97-58-0-22-1-1-1.

when the commission reigned and the state was a deeply segregated place.”³ With an extensive file in the commission records, he previously described himself as a “racist” who “believes that segregation should be the law of the land.”⁴

Similar to earlier discussions regarding disposition of the files, the opening of them “generated a debate between those who believe the ugliness of the past should remain buried and those who believe that only a full airing can bring healing.”⁵ Former commission director Erle Johnston, who had no objections to the public viewing the files, wanted them destroyed because he knew “reports were filed under the hysteria of the day [and a] tense time in Mississippi.”⁶ On the other hand, Betty Long, a former commission board member and state representative, wanted the “facts to be known instead of innuendo and rumors.”⁷ She explained that “at the time, everyone in the state was gung-ho to keep things segregated and that was tied in with the idea that the communists were taking over.”⁸ Former Governor William Winter hoped the files would “be the basis for understanding that we can’t ever lapse back into the kind of intolerance we once had in this state.”⁹ While the commission symbolized Mississippi’s primary state-funded mechanism to maintain the “closed society,” it was not an isolated entity but an archetype

³ Paul Hendrickson, “Unsealing Mississippi’s Past,” *Washington Post*, 9 May 1999.

⁴ Richard Anthony Barrett, MSSC SCR# 6-72-18-1-1-1 to 6-72-18-3-1-1.

⁵ Kevin Sack, “Mississippi Reveals Dark Secrets of a Racist Time,” *New York Times*, 18 March 1998.

⁶ Don Hoffman, “Archives and History continues sealing files,” *Clarion-Ledger*, 11 February 1982.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

for southern resistance. Other southern states used Mississippi as a model to establish sovereignty commissions.

In February 1957, the Arkansas state legislature approved House Bill 322 creating a state sovereignty commission. Using essentially the same language as Mississippi, the Arkansas commission had a similar mission: “power in the name of the state, to protect any and all things deemed necessary and proper to protect the Sovereignty of the State of Arkansas, and her sister states, from encroachment thereon by the federal government, or any branch department or agency.”¹⁰ The commission could also “provide advice and legal assistance to school districts” regarding matters that related to the “comingling of the races in the public schools of the state.”¹¹ The twelve-member commission consisted of the governor, the lieutenant governor, the attorney general, the speaker of the House, three private citizens, two senators, and three members of the House of Representatives. Although the agency was appropriated more than \$90,000 for a two-year period, it used only \$10,308 and had only two commission meetings.¹² Unlike Mississippi, individual school boards in the state gradually implemented school desegregation following the *Brown* decision. The widely publicized and successful desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock marked the beginning of the end of segregated public schools in Arkansas. By the fall of 1959, most schools were desegregated. The commission was

¹⁰ “Judge Declares Two Ark. Racial Acts Are Valid,” *The News and Courier*, 21 August 1958, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=749JAAAIBAJ&sjid=CAwNAAAIBAJ&pg=3781,3137454&dq=arkansas+sovereignty+commission&hl=en> [accessed 22 May 2011].

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Sovereignty Unit Inactive,” *Washington Afro-American*, 27 September 1960, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=0781AAAIBAJ&sjid=yvQFAAAAIBAJ&pg=2569,3407190&dq=louisiana+sovereignty+commission+history&hl=en> [accessed 22 May 2011].

basically inactive by 1960. Following its demise, the state used the Central Investigative Division of the Arkansas State Police “as an instrument of harassment, intimidation, and spying.”¹³ The division “infiltrated organizations, tapped telephones, secretly tape-recorded meetings, compiled lists of group members and suspected sympathizers, traced car ownership through license numbers, fingered state employees suspected of integrationist or anti-Faubus sympathies, and collected damaging personal information on political opponents and seemingly ordinary citizens.”¹⁴ Some of the information collected by the division was passed on to Governor Orval Faibus. The Faibus papers housed in the University of Arkansas archives “include documents related to surveillance of people involved in the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.”¹⁵ When civil rights activist Ozell Sutton viewed the papers, he found his name among a group of individuals who attended an anti-segregation meeting in 1961. Though he believed the state’s surveillance may have “deterred some participation for the meek and mild of soul ... it had no effect on people who were committed to desegregation.”¹⁶ Due to the limited existence of the Arkansas Commission, it is doubtful that the agency used African American informants. Yet, the Faibus papers may provide a connection to investigations by Arkansas officials and the possible use of informants.

Louisiana established a thirteen-member state sovereignty commission in May 1960. The legislation creating the commission was drafted by arch-segregationist and

¹³ Roy Reed, *The Life and Times of an American prodigal* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), 275.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 275-276.

¹⁵ Edith Paal, “Surmounting Southern Spying Commission Works To Make Records of Surveillance Public,” *The Sun Herald*, 9 February 1997.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Citizens' Council organizer Judge Leander Perez who was described by *Time* magazine as "the symbol of Louisiana racism ... who helped mastermind the legislative struggle against school integration."¹⁷ LSC had the authority "to make and conduct special inquiry, investigation and examination for the governor and members of the Legislature ... into appropriate means to safeguard the rights of the state from encroachment by any agencies of the Federal Government and for means to preserve said rights."¹⁸ The agency also had "subpoena powers and the right to question witnesses, subject to their being held in contempt by a judge if they did not respond."¹⁹ John Deere, the commission's first director, did not view the agency as a "segregation commission" but an organization whose broader goal was "an amendment to the United States Constitution that would prohibit the federal government from 'encroaching on the internal affairs' of the several states."²⁰ Ultimately, the amendment "would permit Louisiana and other Southern states to continue segregation as in the good old days before May 17, 1954."²¹ Maintaining segregation in Louisiana would not be an easy task for the commission. By mid-1964, Jack Gould of Baton Rouge expressed to Mississippi commission director Erle Johnston that the Louisiana commission was in "a state of confusion" and nearly all the staff had been terminated.²² LSC ceased operations in 1969 but was not officially abolished until

¹⁷ "National Affairs: Racist Leader," *Time*, 12 December 1960, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,871886-1,00.html> [accessed 22 May 2011].

¹⁸ Bill McMahon, "Records shed light on Sovereignty Commission: Documents tell of duties, members," *The Advocate*, 7 April 1998.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Cook, 251.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 251-252.

²² Jack Gould to Erle Johnston, MSSC SCR# 99-104-0-5-1-1-1.

1972. During its nine years of existence, it expended more than \$1.2 million.²³ Shortly after the opening of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission records in 1998, Louisiana State Representative Arthur Morrell solicited assistance from Governor Mike Foster to locate the Louisiana Commission records. Yet, the “records are nowhere to be found, and no one seems to know what became of them.”²⁴ The records were last held by the State Police and presumed destroyed. The Louisiana Department of Archives and History has one box of LSC records regarding the agency’s relationship with the Mississippi commission. Documents pertaining to investigations by the Louisiana commission and possible African American informants remain undisclosed.

On September 16, 1963, the Alabama legislature established a sovereignty commission with a two-year appropriation of \$100,000.²⁵ Similar to Mississippi and Louisiana, the Alabama Commission was charged with safeguarding the state “from encroachment by [federal agencies], and to preserve those rights necessary for the well-being and safety of citizens and for the orderly conduct of governmental affairs.”²⁶ In addition to protecting state sovereignty, the commission also had the authority to “employ persons to make and conduct special inquiry, investigation, and examination for the Governor and Legislature into means to protect [those] rights.”²⁷ A level of secrecy regarding commission proceedings, receipts and disbursements was maintained because

²³ Bill McMahon, “Records shed light on Sovereignty Commission: Documents tell of duties, members,” *The Advocate*, 7 April 1998.

²⁴ “Politics: Lost Records Sought,” *The Advocate*, 12 April 1998.

²⁵ Erle Johnston Memorandum, 16 March 1964, MSSC SCR# 99-25-0-6-1-1-1.

²⁶ Alabama Department of Archives and History, Agency History Record. <http://216.226.187.53:81/vwebv/holdingsInfo?searchId=4735&recCount=10&recPointer=4&bibId=2781> [accessed 23 May 2011].

²⁷ *Ibid.*

the agency's documents were exempted from other laws that regulated public records. For guidance in establishing policies and procedures, commission director Eli Howell visited the Mississippi commission in March 1964 to review its filing and reporting systems and learn the functions of the investigative, research and public relations divisions. Howell and Mississippi commission director Erle Johnson "agreed there would be many areas in which the commissions of both states [could] work together."²⁸

As governor, George Wallace served as chairman of the commission and appointed seven commissioners. To supplement the agency, he established other "intelligence units" including the Subversive Unit of the Department of Public Safety and the Alabama Legislative Committee to Preserve the Peace which collectively served as "listening posts in every county."²⁹ The information collected on civil rights advocates created a "blacklist ...designed to intimate decent citizens, by threats of state pressure, interfere with the work of both Federal officials and newsmen, and turn ordinary policemen and bureaucrats into political police."³⁰ Although the legislature ceased funding the agency in 1973, it was not officially terminated until 1978 under the provisions of the Alabama Sunset Law. In August 1976, Attorney General William J. Baxley filed a suit in the Montgomery Circuit Court ordering commission officials to release the sovereignty records to the Alabama state archives. Baxley, who believed that the records were of "immense historical value," contended that the commission did "nothing but waste taxpayers' money for 10 years" and stood "against everything we in

²⁸ Erle Johnston Memorandum, 16 March 1964, MSSC SCR# 99-25-0-6-1-1-1.

²⁹ "Civil Wrongs in Alabama," *New York Times*, 18 February 1964.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

America believe in and especially in the dignity of the individual.”³¹ The commission records were deposited in the state archives and opened to the public in 2002. Upon viewing the records, Birmingham native and activist W. Edward Harris considered them “essentially useless.” Though he found payments to individuals he believed were agents and spies for the commission, the records did not indicate why they were paid. When he asked for additional records, he was told by an attendant: “They came to us purged. It is because of what happened in Mississippi when their records were opened. Five capital murder cases have been reopened on the basis of those Mississippi files. But it can’t happen here.”³² The remaining documents included sixteen microfilm reels containing administrative and financial records.

While the Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama commissions functioned independently, they frequently shared resources and information. On May 4, 1968, they solidified their relationship by forming the Interstate Sovereignty Commission. Henry A. Sibley, director of the Louisiana commission, chaired the two-hour meeting held at the Monteleone Hotel in New Orleans. It was designed to “explore possible areas of cooperation and coordination” and “explore possibilities for establishment of Commissions on Constitutional Governments in other states.”³³ The seventeen representatives who attended the meeting included nine from Alabama, four from Louisiana, three from Mississippi, and one from Georgia. While Georgia did not have an established sovereignty commission, the state had created the Georgia Education

³¹ “Baxley Seeking Files From Defunct Agency,” *The Times Daily*, 2 August 1976.

³² W. Edward Harris, *Miracle in Birmingham* (Indianapolis: Stonework Press, 2004), 150.

³³ Minutes of the First Interstate Sovereignty Commission Meeting, 4 May 1968, MSSC SCR# 99-83-0-3-1-1-1 to 99-83-0-3-3-1-1.

Commission whose investigative division “conducted its own undercover activities” and “carried on subversive activity not only in Georgia but in two neighboring states.”³⁴

MSSC records did not indicate why a representative from Georgia attended the meeting.

Eli Howell, director of the Alabama commission, later communicated to Mississippi commission director Webb Burke “that it would be better to confine the meetings to the members of the separate Sovereignty Commissions” until the group formally organized.³⁵

During a second meeting held in Jackson, Mississippi in June, the group formalized its purpose and officially named the organization the Interstate Sovereignty Association. Membership in the association was open to “members of state sovereignty commissions [and] commissions for constitutional government or similar organizations in any state.” Its primary purpose was “to promote the exercise the constitutionally guaranteed sovereignty of the individual states through constructive activities designed to encourage and improve the exercise and responsibilities which such sovereignty imposes.” Further, it sought “to gather and exchange information concerning high school and college campus activities in regard to Communist influences, narcotics traffic, subversive activities, and pornographic literature.” Howell was selected as temporary chairman. Sibley was appointed acting secretary.³⁶

A third association meeting was held on February 16, 1969 at the Sun and Sands Motor Hotel in Jackson. Howell, who did not attend the meeting, had resigned from the Alabama commission to accept a position in the offices of U.S. Senator James B. Allen.

³⁴ Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 223.

³⁵ Eli Howell to Webb Burke, 9 December 1968, MSSC SCR# 99-83-0-8-1-1-1.

³⁶ Interstate Sovereignty Association, MSSC SCR# 99-83-0-2-1-1-1 to 99-83-0-2-3-1-1

Burke was selected as the association's new chairman. The group outlined plans for a permanent organization and a future meeting that would include the governors of each state and elected officials. A majority of the discussion focused on "the conflict in federal court in interpretations of laws, Congressional acts in conflict with interpretations, evidence of subversive activities on college campuses, dictation of the federal government and courts in administrative details of schools affecting such minor matters as repairs to buildings, [and] use of federal authority to force busing of students to obtain racial balance in spite of federal legislation strictly forbidding it." Eight representatives from Mississippi, three from Alabama and two from Louisiana attended the meeting.³⁷

The Interstate Sovereignty Association proved to be an ill-fated and poorly-timed endeavor. Shortly before leaving the Alabama commission, Howell wrote Burke regarding the problems they faced finding "individuals in the adjoining states willing to undertake reactivation of similar commissions."³⁸ The defunding of the Louisiana commission in 1969 signaled the decline of state-funded organizations in the south whose original intent was to maintain segregation. The association might have been more effective and generated greater interest had it been established prior to the passage of landmark civil rights legislation and watershed advancements in the Civil Rights Movement.

Though the Mississippi commission files represented rich documentation of the use of African American informants, it is clear that "the records have been purged of most

³⁷ Minutes of the second Interstate Sovereignty Association Meeting, 99-83-0-5-1-1-1 to 99-83-0-5-2-1-1.

³⁸ Eli Howell to Webb Burke, 27 November 1968, MSSC SCR# 99-83-0-9-1-1-1.

evidence potentially incriminating to [the] commission and the state.”³⁹ This was confirmed by a memo dated February 8, 1965 when director Erle Johnston instructed investigators ‘to remove from the files any reports of [investigations] which might in any way be construed to mean that the Sovereignty Commission has interfered with voter registration drives or demonstrations.”⁴⁰ Horace Harned, a former state representative and commission board member, believed the agency did what it had to do: “Whether it was legal or not never . . . bothered me. We needed to have those spies who told us what [civil rights activists] were doing. We kept the radicals and communist-led marchers from taking over Mississippi.”⁴¹ When examined within the entirety of the Civil Rights Movement, the efficacy of African American “spies” is debatable. Yet, as in the case of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, informants and allies proved to be a practical and accommodating mechanism to gather and disseminate information.

This research suggests that as a whole, sovereignty commissions and similar organizations were a southern phenomenon that emerged out of the desire to maintain a segregated society. Following *Brown*, the South became a “core of resistance” that used every measure at its disposal to preserve racial segregation.⁴² Mississippi, at the center of the “core,” led the Deep South in a doomed second civil war. As historians and other scholars examine the post-war remnants of the Civil Rights Movement, they may find important revelations regarding the motives and means used by the South to uphold its

³⁹ “Sovereignty Papers Released,” *Michigan Daily News*, 19 March 1998.

⁴⁰ Johnston Memo to All Investigators, 8 February 1965, MSSC SCR# 99-62-0-33-1-1-1.

⁴¹ Associated Press, “Segregationist spy agency collected data such as plate numbers,” *The Daily News*, 18 March 1998.

⁴² Shoemaker, 109.

traditions. While white segregationists led the charge, accommodating blacks were willing foot soldiers. Nearly fifty years after the peak of the Movement, African Americans who remained hidden under the protection of secret files, sealed documents and privacy acts are being exposed as informants. “The old cast of black heroes still [have] center stage, but supporting actors who used to be walk-ons now have speaking parts.”⁴³ Their non-supportive roles in the black struggle for freedom speak volumes that will influence future histories of the movement and the South. It is not a history of which we can be proud but nonetheless one that must be revealed and preserved. For it illustrated the power of an elite minority-white population to circumvent the principles of a democratic society to serve its own needs while effectively subjugating and co-opting the majority-black population.

⁴³ Lauren Winter, “Doubtless Insincere” in *The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights South*, ed. Ted Ownby (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 157.

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Coleman, James P. Collection. 2 cubic feet. J. P. Coleman was governor of Mississippi from 1956 to 1960. Though he considered himself moderate on racial issues, he signed the Sovereignty Bill into law within his first three months in office. The collection includes speeches, public statements, news clippings, government documents and scrapbooks. Mississippi State University. Mitchell Memorial Library Special Collections. Starkville, MS.

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Cox, Allen Eugene Papers. 60 cubic feet. A. E. Cox was the manager of the Delta Pine and Land Company Plantation and a member of the Delta Council. The collection includes information on the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, White Citizens Council, National Council of Churches, COFO, NAACP, SNCC and related organizations. Mississippi State University. Mitchell Memorial Library Special Collections. Starkville, MS.

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———. .12 cubic feet. The collection includes photographs, newspaper clippings, and writings documenting Johnston's life as a journalist, author, campaign publicity writer, and politician. Mississippi State University. Mitchell Memorial Library Special Collections. Starkville, MS.

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Silvers, James Collection. 55 boxes. James Silver was a historian and professor at the University of Mississippi. He is most noted for his book, *Mississippi: The Closed Society*, an examination of the state's commitment to maintain a racially separate society. The collection includes correspondence, newspaper clippings, research materials, photographs, speeches and personal papers. University of Mississippi. J. D. Williams Library. Department of Archives & Special Collections, Oxford, MS.

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