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Courage and Political Resistance

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COURAGE AND POLITICAL RESISTANCE

DAVID LYONS*

INTRODUCTION	1755
I. POLITICAL RESISTANCE.....	1756
II. SAVING LIVES IN MY LAI.....	1759
III. RESISTING IN WARSAW	1761
IV. ORGANIZING IN MISSISSIPPI.....	1764
POSTSCRIPT.....	1768

INTRODUCTION

We celebrate courageous acts, but the conventional selection of acts to honor may sanction the slaughter of innocent persons. Most of those who are cited by governments for bravery are military personnel (I shall refer to them, generically, as “soldiers”). We can understand why governments routinely honor soldiers for bravery. Courage is required in warfare. To act as they are told that duty requires, soldiers must overcome reasonable fear of the gruesome dangers that they face. And we can expect governments to claim that their soldiers did not die in vain, but served nobly in a just cause.¹

Those claims are often false. Few wars can be justified, and legions of soldiers are sacrificed senselessly even in wars that might plausibly be considered justifiable. In modern war, military strategists deliberately target civilians, who suffer on a massive scale. They order carpet-bombing, fire-bombing, and worse on cities. News accounts may lead us mistakenly to think that systematic rape and ethnic cleansing are recent innovations. But they have long been elements of military strategy aimed at terrorizing and demoralizing civilian populations. Some soldiers who conduct these actions themselves become casualties, and – except in rare cases – they are honored for their service, as are their commanders and the military strategists. At least if they wind up on the winning side.

I begin with these unpleasant observations because some of my examples involve courage in wartime, including brave acts by combatants. I believe that

* Professor of Law and Professor of Philosophy, Boston University. This Essay is a slightly revised version of a talk I gave on November 20, 2000, under the auspices of the Boston University Institute for Philosophy and Religion. I am grateful to Bart Gruzalski, Matthew Lyons, and Sandra Lyons for helpful suggestions.

¹ A sensitive regard for those who have lost loved ones in war makes skeptics hesitate, on the official honoring occasions, to express their doubts about the real need for those sacrifices or the justice of the causes.

the individuals I discuss should be honored for their courageous actions. But I also believe we should discriminate. We should grieve for *all* those whose lives are wasted by war – soldiers as well as civilians – but we should not celebrate courageous acts that are performed in the service of crimes against humanity. Brutal acts are sometimes characterized as “cowardly,” but they need not be. I do not doubt that courage has been displayed in every war. That is a problem; it is not something to celebrate.

I. POLITICAL RESISTANCE

You might well wonder how all of this relates to my announced topic, which refers specifically to “political resistance.” I must explain this term of art for the word “political” may bring to mind contests for public office. Courage is sometimes displayed in that context, as it can be in any realm of human activity, but my focus is different.

I began using the term “political resistance” several years ago when study and personal experience convinced me that most theories about the nature and justification of civil disobedience bore little relation to the real, historical acts, campaigns, and movements that are usually referred to when we speak of that category of political activity. Theories of civil disobedience typically assume that those who engage in civil disobedience (1) act unlawfully, (2) for limited reforms, (3) within a system that they respect because they regard it as generally decent and fundamentally just. That view of civil disobedience seems to me mistaken, on all three counts.²

In the first place, some of the most famous and important actions deemed to be civil disobedience were not unlawful. Examples include the non-cooperation campaigns led by Mohandas Gandhi, in which South Asians refused to cooperate further with British colonial rule. Declining to participate in local government was not unlawful.

A similar case is the decision by African Americans to boycott segregated buses in Montgomery, Alabama – a yearlong campaign that brought Martin Luther King, Jr., to public prominence. Walking to work instead of riding a bus is not unlawful.

From the political activist’s point of view, the line between lawful and unlawful subsets of resistance is somewhat arbitrary and accidental. Declining to ride the buses in Montgomery, Alabama, was not unlawful, but law enforcement charged King with violating a local ordinance for helping to organize the boycott. An African American might not violate the law by merely requesting service at a “whites-only” lunch counter in Greensboro,

² A typical definition holds civil disobedience to be “an illegal, public, nonviolent, conscientiously motivated act of protest, done by someone who accepts the legitimacy of the legal and political systems and who submits to arrest and punishment.” Paul Harris, *Introduction: The Nature and Moral Justification of Civil Disobedience*, in *CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE* 1, 2 (Paul Harris ed., 1989). Such a definition involves a number of arbitrary limitations, but their examination would take us too far afield.

North Carolina, but if she stayed there after being denied service and asked to leave, she would be trespassing. Distributing handbills, picketing, and the like may be lawful or unlawful, depending on local conditions.

Furthermore, most political activists are neither lawyers nor recipients of legal counsel before they act, so they do not always know whether (for example) a contemplated, peaceful, nonviolent action is lawful. On the other hand, they may have excellent reason to expect that police will treat lawful protest as if it were a crime. That reaction to lawful protest is as American as apple pie and racial segregation.

These facts suggest the need for a category of political activity that includes both lawful and unlawful acts, which I meet by using the term “resistance.” This particular term seems especially appropriate because reformers must resist enormous pressures that are exerted by and on behalf of the status quo.³

Let us now consider the second and third points embraced by civil disobedience theories, which hold that those who engage in civil disobedience not only (1) act unlawfully, but also (2) act for limited reforms, (3) within a system that they respect because they regard it as generally decent and fundamentally just.

Both the historical records and writings of Gandhi and King show that neither of them acted for merely limited reforms. Both regarded the systems against which they respectively struggled as fundamentally flawed – undemocratic, brutal, and exploitative – and they expressed themselves clearly on the point.⁴ The same is true of Henry David Thoreau and, I believe, of most political resisters.⁵

King may seem a doubtful case, as the Montgomery bus boycott called for very modest reforms and King publicly endorsed the democratic principles embedded in our Constitution.⁶ Nevertheless, King repeatedly made a point of distinguishing America’s official endorsement of democratic values from its deeply entrenched, profoundly undemocratic practice.⁷ The practice that he initially condemned (his condemnation became wider with experience) was Jim Crow, the system of white supremacy that had been in place for generations. Jim Crow excluded African Americans from voting and public office, from decent schools, well-paying jobs, and public services. The Jim

³ I do not mean to suggest that all those who resist prevailing political pressures have justice on their side. That would not be true, for example, of groups that are dedicated to maintaining – or, in their eyes, restoring – white supremacy. They are soldiers in an unjust war, and I shall say no more about them here.

⁴ See David Lyons, *Moral Judgment, Historical Reality, and Civil Disobedience*, 27 PHIL. & PUB. AFF. 31, 42-46 (1998).

⁵ See David Lyons, *Political Responsibility and Resistance to Civil Government*, 26 PHIL. EXCHANGE 5, 5-25 (1995).

⁶ Lyons, *supra* note 4, at 43, 45.

⁷ *Id.* at 45.

Crow system created an economic and social hierarchy in which African Americans were treated with callousness and contempt.

Jim Crow was not a peripheral aspect of American society. Racial stratification in political, economic, and social spheres existed in the United States and in the colonial societies out of which it developed for 300 years. Racial stratification pervaded the nation, although more formally in the states of the Old South than elsewhere. After the Civil War, attempts to “reconstruct” the system and secure basic rights for African Americans were violently resisted and soon abandoned.

Most importantly, Jim Crow was *forcibly imposed*. It was sustained by coercion, harassment, intimidation, and terror, and made possible by the most egregiously unlawful conduct of public officials. I am not referring here to officials’ routine enforcement of judicially sustained segregation laws. I am referring to officials’ involvement in kidnapping, rape, and murder. Lynching was commonplace under Jim Crow; it was publicly performed and endorsed as a means of keeping Blacks in their place. Lynching is – among other things – *murder*. Public officials participated openly in lynchings. When they did not, they generally refused to enforce the law against those who did. On the rare occasions when prosecution was attempted, juries generally refused to convict. Federal officials in all three branches of government declined to intervene, even when they had the authority to do so.

Theorists of civil disobedience generally ignore the historical fact that frequently, as in the American civil rights context, those who violate the law are not the resisters but the public officials who are committed more to the status quo than to the rule of law. When one takes official conduct into account, it becomes much easier to see how King could embrace American ideals but regard the system as fundamentally flawed. For African Americans, the rule of law was a false promise.

Inasmuch as Jim Crow and colonialism were not isolated practices but broad *systems* maintained by those who wielded political power, it is natural to regard resistance to them as *political*. And the term “political” has in recent years been used to emphasize the *systemic* dimensions of many serious problems faced by individuals.

How broadly should we understand “political resistance”? I do not assume that every human act and interest is usefully thought of as political, but neither am I interested in drawing sharp boundaries around the realm. There seems to me a significant *political* dimension, for example, to the plight of the patient whose cancer is caused by toxic pollution that would not exist but for deeply entrenched social practices, which may include systematic violation of environmental laws, the systematic failure to enforce them, and other governmental practices. In addition, there is a *political* dimension to the cancer patient’s inability to secure adequate medical care because of large-scale efforts to prevent the development of a single-payer system with universal coverage as well as public policies that have encouraged employers to exclude medical insurance from their employees’ fringe benefits. Attempts

to change the system can reasonably be classified as political. I note finally, in this connection, that people often show great courage in coping with such commonplace catastrophes.

I turn now to a small set of examples in which individuals engaged in political resistance display extraordinary courage. These examples involve events with which we should all be familiar, but my focus is on individuals whose names may not be known to my readers.

II. SAVING LIVES IN MY LAI

On the morning of March 16, 1968, Chief Warrant Officer Hugh C. Thompson piloted a helicopter over the village of My Lai in South Vietnam.⁸ His job was to observe an action being conducted on the ground by American soldiers. What he saw led him to take a courageous act.

Thompson noticed wounded civilians lying in several places. He sent down smoke devices to mark the locations of persons needing evacuation for medical treatment. But then he saw American officers deliberately killing the wounded civilians. He also saw American soldiers firing upon other groups of civilians. He landed his helicopter where soldiers were firing at a group of children, women, and old men. He ordered the soldiers to stop firing and deliberately placed himself in the line of fire, between the soldiers and the Vietnamese civilians.

Given what he had observed, he could not assume that the soldiers would stop firing. Some of the other officers resented his interference. If the soldiers made him a casualty so that they could continue with the killings, they could report his death as the unfortunate result of “friendly fire.” Many deaths were misreported in Vietnam, although they were usually the deaths of innocent civilians deliberately killed by American bullets. American troops increasingly regarded the Vietnamese as the enemy, and acted accordingly. The killings at My Lai expressed that attitude without inhibition.

Thompson took the extraordinary step of calling on another American soldier to shoot at the threatening American troops if they should resume firing at the civilians. But it was not clear that the American soldier would shoot other Americans in order to save Vietnamese civilians, even under such orders.

We learned of this particular event because the soldiers did not fire on Thompson. As a result, he was able to rescue nine civilians – two old men, two women, and five children (one of whom died en route to the hospital). After he flew out, however, the soldiers resumed firing on a group of civilians that they had forced into a drainage ditch. Not all were killed at once, and when Thompson returned later he found and rescued another wounded child.

Most of the Vietnamese civilians who survived had managed to flee the village early on. Others survived because the dead bodies of victims fell on

⁸ This Section describes events depicted in SEYMOUR M. HERSH, *MY LAI 4: A REPORT ON THE MASSACRE AND ITS AFTERMATH* (1970).

top of them, shielding them from view. Wounded civilians who were found by the soldiers were killed by their bullets or, in many cases, by their bayonets.

Before the events of that morning, 700 people lived in My Lai. On the morning of March 16, 1968, American soldiers killed between 450 and 500 civilians.

Although we are told that the original purpose of the military operation in My Lai was to drive an enemy unit out of the village, the Americans saw no soldiers and suffered no casualties. Their actions were not a response to enemy fire, for they received none.

My Lai is in Quang Ngai province, which had been a center of independence activity under the French colonial regime. American forces regarded its inhabitants as sympathetic to the National Liberation Front and its military arm. The Americans who attacked My Lai that morning had been ordered to destroy the village, and they evidently decided to take the next logical step and kill every person in it as well.

What Thompson witnessed and flew into that morning in My Lai has been called a *massacre*. To massacre civilians was contrary to official policy. Calling what happened in My Lai a massacre distinguishes the mass murders there from the mass killings of civilians by officially approved military actions, such as bombing unseen targets while knowing it would cause extensive civilian casualties and the American "scorched earth policy" that destroyed entire villages.

I begin with this example for several reasons. First, as I have mentioned, courage is associated with military actions in war because they require overcoming reasonable fear and inhibitions. In a wartime setting, however, we do not usually think of a soldier facing down his own troops in order to save people deemed enemies. I want to celebrate, and I want you to remember, Hugh Thompson's courageous action.

Second, the example illustrates, in an unusual way, the category of *political* resistance. Thompson's act clashed with established American *practice*, if not official policy, in Vietnam, and his concern clashed against the attitudes of his brutalized fellow soldiers. Thompson's brave action was lawful and what he resisted was patently unlawful. As I have noted, however, that combination is not unusual in cases of political resistance.

There is a third aspect to this example that is worth noting, and it is common to my other examples (though not, of course, to all cases of honorable resistance). Our soldiers and officials in Vietnam exhibited racist contempt for the Vietnamese. Resistance against racism is worth celebrating.

III. RESISTING IN WARSAW

My next example also has a wartime setting – the city of Warsaw, Poland, occupied by the German army during World War II.⁹

By October 1940, the Germans and their collaborators had driven almost half a million Polish Jews into a small district in the city that became the Warsaw Ghetto.¹⁰ German forces required non-Jewish Poles who lived in the designated area to move outside the Ghetto to homes Jews had been forced to abandon.

The brick wall German forces constructed to create the Ghetto was eleven miles long, ten feet high, topped by broken glass, and heavily guarded by troops. Conditions within the confines of the Ghetto were disastrous. There was too little space for so many people – on average there were thirteen people to a room – and too little food. As a consequence, a hundred thousand people died in the Ghetto of disease or starvation.

Warsaw was not under siege and living conditions were much better on the “Aryan” side of the wall. German forces imposed shortages of food, fuel, and medicine on the Ghetto. The point of the Ghetto was, after all, not simply to segregate Jews but to round them up for extermination. This aim was provisionally served by Ghetto conditions, as well as by random killings and systematic massacres.

Ghetto residents managed to establish some illicit trade with the outside and their resourcefulness minimized the Ghetto death rate. In any case, starvation, disease, and gunfire were inefficient methods of extermination. The principal means became, of course, camps that were created for the purpose of extermination. Jews were to be transported by rail from the Ghetto to Treblinka – under conditions on trains that served the same murderous purpose.

In 1942, the Germans began systematically rounding up Jews from the Ghetto for transportation to extermination camps. By mid-September, 300,000 had been transported, leaving 50,000 or 60,000 Ghetto residents behind. Of those who remained, half evaded the Germans and half were slave laborers for German businessmen, producing uniforms for the German military.

The Germans in charge referred to the transportation process as “resettlement,” but Ghetto residents had reliable reports of its true objective. Word had come of the systematic extermination of Jews in Vilna and Chelmno. None of the 60,000 who remained could reasonably expect to survive, unless they escaped.

Some Ghetto residents found the reality of “resettlement” too horrible to believe. Despite long Jewish experience with pogroms and German policy

⁹ This Part draws upon Dan Kurzman’s depiction of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in DAN KURZMAN, *THE BRAVEST BATTLE: THE TWENTY-EIGHT DAYS OF THE WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING* (1976).

¹⁰ The German army also forced a number of Roma or “gypsies” into the Ghetto, for they too were targets of the systematic extermination campaign.

under the Third Reich, it remained difficult to think of humans as capable of organizing murder on so massive a scale. At any rate, many Ghetto residents were unwilling or unable to resist. So the first roundup, in the summer of 1942, seems to have met with no resistance.

This did not last. About 1500 young Jews decided to resist. Many joined underground fighting units centered around the remnants of left-wing and Zionist youth groups. Their first public act was taken at the beginning of the second "resettlement" operation, in January 1943. Ten young Jews with hidden weapons joined a group that German soldiers were leading to the trains and suddenly attacked the soldiers. In the skirmish, German soldiers killed nine resisters. Still, the resisters' bold act sparked other spontaneous acts of resistance that continued until the Germans ceased the operation after four days.¹¹ These events shocked the Germans, who may have been persuaded by their own propaganda and the compliance up to then of Ghetto residents, that Jews were incapable of militant resistance.

The next time, in April 1943, the Germans came in much greater force, for they were determined to complete "resettlement" promptly. But they encountered a more organized, expanded, and sustained resistance, which became known as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The Uprising lasted (by official German count) for twenty-eight days.

I do not wish to romanticize the Uprising. The resisters had pistols, grenades, a few rifles and automatic weapons, and some homemade incendiary and explosive bombs. Resisters smuggled some arms into the Ghetto. But they faced an army with tanks, artillery, flamethrowers, and many well-equipped soldiers. As they hoped they would, the resisters drew German blood; but they also suffered heavy casualties. Although they had food, they lacked medicine, and they could not provide much medical assistance to their wounded. They found shelter in bunkers hidden in Ghetto buildings, but the buildings were subjected to bombardment and incendiary attack, which led to more casualties and made shelter increasingly difficult to find.

The resisters knew they had no hope of military success, and few expected to survive. Survival was possible only by escaping the Ghetto, perhaps to fight with partisans. Escape was difficult but possible, although only on a limited scale. Some resisters eventually left, through sewers and tunnels, with the aid of non-Jewish Poles. After the first day of successful resistance, many chose to stay until they could fight no longer. The Ghetto resisters were not suicidal but wanted to make the point, to the world at large and specifically to Jews, that militant resistance was possible and honorable. It was a point they regarded as extraordinarily important.

¹¹ Theorists have generally assumed that civil disobedience is by definition nonviolent. I make no such assumption about political resistance, even when it is justifiable, though I assume that violence always requires substantial justification.

I believe the resisters were courageous. They manifested courage in many ways, and I want to note one way that might not normally be mentioned. One series of events on the first day of the Uprising has been described as follows:

On the balcony of [a] corner building, a fighter named Yehiel, almost completely exposing himself to enemy fire, hung over the balustrade to fire more accurately After each hit, he had told his comrades inside the flat, he would make a motion with his foot to let them rejoice in his success. Yehiel moved his foot many times, then made no motion at all. An enemy bullet had severely wounded him.¹²

Later, as the others rejoiced in having driven back the invaders, Yehiel was in great pain from his wounds. “Yehiel moaned and writhed in agony, and there was no way to help him – until Mordechai Growas, his group leader, aimed his pistol at him and ended his suffering.”¹³

Growas’s act was merciful. I think it was also courageous. Growas did not need to cope with fear or danger when he made this decision, but he had to overcome deep commitments and powerful, humane inhibitions. Resisters performed merciful and courageous acts of a similar nature during the Uprising on at least two other occasions.

I want to note another series of courageous acts that might be neglected in a brief discussion of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. To underscore their significance, I must provide some background information.

During the German occupation, a Polish government in exile was located in London. The Home Army was its underground military wing in Poland. The Home Army included anti-Semitic groups who welcomed the ethnic cleansing of Jews from Poland. They would not support the Ghetto fighters, even if it would aid their own resistance efforts. Also, many leaders of the Home Army would not aid any group they regarded as communist or that might cooperate with communists. As some of the Ghetto’s fighting groups had ties to Polish communists, the leaders of the Home Army would not support Ghetto fighters.

Not all members of the Home Army agreed with their leaders. Some regarded Jewish resisters as comrades in arms, fighting a common enemy. Captain Henryk Iwanski led a Home Army contingent that, acting on its own, aided the Ghetto resisters.

These activities were very difficult and dangerous. The partisans smuggled arms into the Ghetto through the sewer system and led Jews out of the Ghetto by the same route. In entering the sewers through manholes outside the Ghetto, the partisans had to avoid being noticed by Germans and their informers. To find their way within the underground labyrinth, they had to identify Polish workers who were able and willing to serve as guides and who could be relied upon not to provide intelligence to the Gestapo.

¹² KURZMAN, *supra* note 9, at 99.

¹³ *Id.* at 100.

Iwanski's efforts were not limited to the transfer of arms and ammunition. For example, on the eighth day of the Ghetto Uprising, he led sixty partisans into the Ghetto to deliver supplies and then to lead, or in some cases carry, civilians out. Before the partisans left, they became embroiled in heavy fighting. Iwanski was severely wounded. German soldiers killed several partisans, including Iwanski's son, Roman, and brother, Edward.

By the eighteenth day, Iwanski had recovered sufficiently to lead twenty-eight partisans into the Ghetto with supplies, and while inside they once again engaged in heavy fighting. His second son, Zbigniew, and a second brother, Waclaw, had insisted on being included, and they too were killed. Iwanski's father was also killed in a Gestapo raid on a shop outside the Ghetto where Jews were hidden.¹⁴

Years later, Iwanski was asked why he risked so much to save Jews. Given the prevailing attitudes, the question was not presumptuous. He is said to have responded, "When a Jew cries, I cry. When a Jew suffers, I am a Jew. All are of my nation, for I am a man."¹⁵

IV. ORGANIZING IN MISSISSIPPI

I turn now to Mississippi voting rights campaigns of the 1960s and specifically to two "local people," Samuel Block and Annie Belle Robinson Devine.¹⁶ They died shortly before this Paper was originally written – Block on April 13, 2000, at age 60, Devine on August 22, 2000, at 88. I have chosen to honor them because they are not nearly as well known as their associates Robert Moses and Fannie Lou Hamer.¹⁷

In the early 1960s, one needed considerable courage to promote participation by African Americans in Mississippi's political process. Like other southern states, Mississippi used various devices with the express aim of keeping Blacks from voting and out of public office. These included the "white primary," the poll tax, and the "understanding clause" of the voter

¹⁴ Iwanski and his partisans continued their resistance throughout the German occupation. He was severely wounded again, in August, 1943, and twice more during the general Warsaw Uprising of 1944.

¹⁵ KURZMAN, *supra* note 9, at 331.

¹⁶ See generally JOHN DITTMER, LOCAL PEOPLE: THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN MISSISSIPPI (1994) (detailing the history and personal experiences of civil rights workers in Mississippi). For additional discussion of Block, see TAYLOR BRANCH, PARTING THE WATERS: AMERICA IN THE KING YEARS, 1954-63, at 633-36, 680, 712-13, 715-16, 718-19 (1988). For additional discussion of Devine, see KAY MILLS, THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE: THE LIFE OF FANNIE LOU HAMER 110-11, 116, 130, 145-46, 151, 155, 160-62, 166-70, 197, 312-13 (1993); WOMEN IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: TRAILBLAZERS AND TORCHBEARERS, 1941-1965, at 16, 18-20 (Vicki L. Crawford et al. eds., 1993).

¹⁷ For discussion of Robert Moses, see generally ERIC BURNER, AND GENTLY HE SHALL LEAD THEM: ROBERT PARRIS MOSES AND CIVIL RIGHTS IN MISSISSIPPI (1994). For discussion of Fannie Lou Hamer, see generally MILLS, *supra* note 16.

registration laws. However, the principal method of exclusion, there and elsewhere, was brute force. As a result, ninety-four percent of black adults in Mississippi were not registered to vote, and very few of those who had managed to register were foolhardy enough to try and exercise the franchise.

African Americans who returned home after military service in the Second World War were determined to end the oppressive system of white supremacy that by then was, in one form or another, three centuries old. They sought first of all to vote. But when, for example, in July 1946, Medgar Evers and other black veterans tried to register in Decatur, Mississippi, a mob of armed white men turned them away.¹⁸ Mississippi's Senator Bilbo publicly urged the use of night-riding terror to dissuade Blacks from voting. Blacks who were registered and attempted to vote were threatened, assaulted, and whipped. Law enforcement officers performed such acts and witnessed them without interfering. Many of those who suffered the threats, beatings, and reprisals filed complaints with federal authorities, but the FBI and Department of Justice declined to intervene.

In the spring of 1955, a voter registration rally in Mound Bayou (near Samuel Block's hometown of Cleveland) was followed by death threats to the Reverend George Lee, one of the speakers at the rally, and his friend Gus Courts. Two weeks later Lee was murdered in his car and Courts was shot in his store. After calling on Blacks to vote in the Democratic primary, Lamar Smith of Brookhaven was shot and killed before many witnesses, none of whom admitted seeing the killer. No arrests in these cases were ever made. Shortly thereafter, Emmett Till was lynched in Leflore County, and the jury refused to convict those identified as his killers. Till, a young teenager from Chicago, was thought to have been too forward with a white woman.

Samuel Block. A native of Cleveland, Mississippi, born into a working-class family, Block was a brilliant student who would not accept second-class citizenship. After attending Marlboro College in Vermont for two years, Block transferred to Mississippi Valley State College, from which he was expelled for civil rights activity. In 1962, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee ("SNCC") asked Block, then twenty-three years old, to initiate a voter registration campaign in Leflore County. Block moved to Greenwood, the county seat, and engaged in that work in a steady and persistent manner, under battlefield conditions, for two exhausting years.

Greenwood was the center of Mississippi's cotton industry. In 1962, its public facilities remained segregated and it was home to the state offices of the White Citizens Council and to a chapter of the John Birch Society. Of the 50,000 African Americans in Leflore County, only 250 were registered to vote.

Block began by getting to know the black community. He spent time at stores and juke joints. He had no car or money, and little food. He usually managed to find places to stay and he eventually found space for an office,

¹⁸ Evers, who became NAACP field secretary for Mississippi, was later assassinated in 1963.

though pressures on his hosts sometimes led to his eviction. He organized meetings at which he taught freedom songs and provided an opportunity for people to talk about their common troubles. After he accompanied several Blacks to register at the courthouse, he was beaten severely. SNCC sent two more young field workers to Greenwood. When Block accompanied other Blacks to register, the police chief cursed and threatened him, and that evening several men carrying guns and chains entered the SNCC office. The three SNCC workers had seen the attackers arriving and managed to escape out an upstairs window and across adjacent rooftops. The attackers trashed the office. When Block contacted the Justice Department, they offered him no help except the advice to leave town.

The Black community became more fearful, but Block and a new co-worker continued the voter registration activities. After Block publicly defied the sheriff's warning that he should leave town, local Blacks rejoined the campaign.

In response, Leflore County supervisors voted to stop taking part in a federal surplus commodities program which, at minimal cost to the county, provided food for farm workers' families in winter, when work and money were scarce. There was terrible hunger in the county that winter; people lacked food, wood for heat, and adequate clothing. SNCC organized a new campaign: they collected food and clothing out of state and distributed it in Greenwood, while offering recipients voter registration forms. After one such shipment, the SNCC office received a telephone threat followed by an arson attack that destroyed buildings adjacent to the SNCC office. When Block publicly reported the sequence of events, police arrested him for inciting a breach of the peace. That was the seventh time police arrested Block during his first eight months in Greenwood. More than a hundred Blacks attended his trial. They witnessed the judge offer Block a suspended sentence if he would leave town and Block's reply, "Judge, I ain't gonna do none of that."¹⁹ That evening a record number attended the voter registration meeting.

Block and other SNCC workers were repeatedly shot at, and one was wounded seriously. The SNCC office suffered a more accurate arson attack. Then shots were fired into the house of a local family that was active in the movement, and the Black community reacted strongly. During a protest march in response to the shooting, police assaulted protestors using dogs and other methods. Ten leaders of the Greenwood movement were arrested, promptly convicted, and given jail terms and fines. The voter registration campaign then accelerated, though police regularly blocked applicants and had their dogs attack them.

The open warfare on lawful registration activities, combined with a growing militancy in the Black community, led SNCC to bolster its Greenwood staff and other civil rights groups to send in personnel. Nationally prominent

¹⁹ Douglas Martin, *Samuel Block, 60, Civil Rights Battler, Dies*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 22, 2000, at C7.

figures, such as Dick Gregory, aided the interstate food drive. When they came to Greenwood, the media followed. The Justice Department followed the media. The Department started to intervene on behalf of voting rights, but it made a deal with local officials that freed some Blacks from jail, abandoning others, and effected no change in local conditions.

Block and other SNCC field workers continued the voter registration campaign in Leflore County. The Black community had become their strong supporters. Block however, was wearing down. On their way to a SNCC meeting in Atlanta in June, 1964, for example, a highway patrolman stopped Block and four other SNCC workers and savagely beat them in the Lowndes County Jail. Block spent the fall of 1964 back in Marlboro College.²⁰

Annie Devine. A single mother of four, Annie Devine had been employed as a domestic worker and taught in an elementary school. When the Congress of Racial Equality (“CORE”) sent young field workers to begin a voting rights campaign in Canton and Madison County in 1963, Devine was employed by a Black-owned insurance company. She had a keen understanding of how to work with people in her community. Long before CORE went to Canton, Devine and other Black community leaders had discussed ways to organize local Blacks.

Devine did not join CORE upon their arrival. After she attended a CORE meeting, her landlord threatened her with eviction. That changed her mind. She gave up her secure job to work full-time for CORE. Devine helped to organize the voting rights campaign. She offered her extensive knowledge of Canton and Madison County, invaluable advice for working with the local Black community, and mature, stabilizing leadership to the young field organizers sent by CORE to Canton.

The campaign was met with economic reprisals, police roadblocks to prevent people from attending mass meetings, and shots fired at young canvassers. When the Black community responded with a boycott of Canton stores, police raided the CORE office and arrested nine voting rights workers for violating a new ordinance requiring permits for literature distribution.

Canton held a “Freedom Day” in February 1964. Three-hundred and fifty Blacks went to register at the courthouse. Only five were admitted. Television crews were present, as were federal officials. The Justice Department secured a court order to speed up the process. But when the media left, so did the Justice Department, and the police resumed harassing and assaulting those who sought to register.

In 1964, a number of Blacks throughout Mississippi tried to participate in the process of selecting delegates to the Democratic National Convention, but were turned away. This led to the founding of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (“MFDP”), which established a parallel party structure, with precinct meetings, city-wide meetings, and a state convention attended by 2500

²⁰ Block later moved to California. I have not been able to determine whether he returned at all to Mississippi.

people. Devine, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Victoria Gray were among the founders of MFDP, and the three worked closely together thereafter.²¹

Devine was one of the MFDP delegates who went to the Democratic Party convention in Atlantic City and challenged the credentials of the official state delegation, which had been chosen in a process that excluded African Americans. There was strong initial support for the challenge, but President Johnson and his associates, who were unwilling to alienate Democrats in the Jim Crow South, undermined the challenge.

Back home, Devine, Gray, and Hamer sought to run as Democrats for Congress, but officials refused to accept their nominating petitions. In response, they conducted a symbolic, parallel campaign. After the election, the three initiated the Mississippi Challenge: they asked the House of Representatives to unseat the Mississippi delegation. King and other civil rights leaders supported this proposal. The President, again, opposed the measure and it failed.

In June of that year, voting rights demonstrations in the state capital of Jackson led to more than a thousand arrests, including, for the first time, the arrest of Annie Devine.

There was indeed progress, of the sort that was fought for so hard at so great a cost, after passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But the South was not readily reconciled to the changes that were beginning. There is good evidence of this from participants' reports of encounters in Jackson, organized by Devine and others, between Black women from both the North and the South and white women from the North and the South. Further evidence was the incendiary and shotgun attack in January 1966 that destroyed Vernon Dahmer's house. Dahmer, who had been urging Blacks in his Forrest County community to register and vote, managed to save his family, but died from his injuries.

Annie Devine continued to live and work in Canton. She was a founder of the Child Development Group of Mississippi and worked as a volunteer in its Head Start program to involve parents and develop community support.

POSTSCRIPT

I have recalled for you, or told you about, several courageous people who took considerable risks for extraordinarily important causes. I will close with one qualifying comment.

Some of the individuals I have focused on, and some I merely mentioned in passing, died as heroes. I do not want to suggest that courage in worthwhile

²¹ During this organizing period, Freedom Summer brought hundreds of young people, including many northern white college students, to work on voter registration in Mississippi. The response of local officials included their participation in the murder of three young voting rights workers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. As Goodman and Schwerner were white, their murders received considerable attention outside Mississippi. Chaney was buried the day following the MFDP state convention.

resistance generally requires heroism. It does not. Nor do I want to suggest that the only suitable setting for courageous action is warfare, the domestic equivalent thereof, or that it must be political.

I know a young man who was afraid of water and heights. While a pre-teen, he faced down his own fear and learned to swim. As a teenager, he mustered up the courage to learn rappelling. As a college student, he decided to spend a year abroad, in a country he had never visited, amidst people whose language he had studied only in school. As he departed on that journey, he remarked that it felt like the first time he tried rappelling down a cliff.

Many of you have had to face comparable challenges. I honor you for the courage you have had to muster up on occasion. I do not want to minimize its value.

We are fortunate if we are not faced with circumstances and choices like those that confronted Hugh Thompson, Mordechai Growas, Henryk Iwanski, Samuel Block, and Annie Devine. In our own ordinarily mundane lives, however, we are occasionally faced with challenges stemming from racist attitudes or oppressive practices which we may find it difficult and uncomfortable to address. It takes courage to resist the small as well as the large manifestations of injustice. I encourage you to rappel down that cliff.