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## The Legacy of Slavery

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# The Legacy of Slavery

Rita Bender

Presented at the University of Mississippi, October 25, 2005

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"Run away, on the 9th instant, October, in the Morning, from the Subscriber, a Negro Man named JACK, a well-fed Fellow, about 5 Feet 8 Inches high, full faced, much pitted with the Small-pox, snuffles when he speaks, reads English, pretends much to understand the Scriptures: Had on when he went away, a Pair of coarse Trousers, stripped Jacket, and a Frock over it. Whoever takes up the said fellow, and brings him to the Subscriber, shall have FORTY SHILLINGS, and all reasonable charges paid.—All Masters of Vessels etc. are desired not to harbour him, or carry him off, as he or they may depend on being prosecuted, as the Law directs. --Manuel Myers"

This ad was published in New York City in 1760.

Slavery is our common history. It was present at the start, with the importation of the first Blacks from Africa in 1619—to Jamestown in the Virginia Colony. In 1639, a Maryland statute introduced the term "slave." New York had a slave population when the English took the colony from the Dutch in 1664.

Rhode Island shipyards built the ships for the slave trade, and investors in various of the colonies owned the ships and reaped the profits of their human cargos. Laws were passed in the colonies in the 17th and early 18th centuries, making the children born of a slave mother, themselves slaves. Thus was human property passed down from one generation to the next.

In New York State, the 1800 census showed 20,500 slaves. Each counted as 3/5 of a person in the constitutional calculation of proportional representation. Slavery was not abolished in New York until 1827.

African American slaves provided much of the labor in the colonies and for the construction of the new country. Slave labor was used in various ways around the country, depending upon local conditions. Slaves labored in the building of the nation's capitol. Slavery was the economic engine which produced the wealthy planter economy of the ante-bellum South. Slavery ended in the North as the industrial revolution changed the need for labor.

The involuntary capture and forced servitude of people of color is the common history of the United States. Its inevitable consequences define us as a nation and resonate among us to this day.

We are still a racist society, and will be so long as we refuse to confront our legacy of slavery. Racism is the elephant in the living room of America. White folks don't want to talk about it, among themselves, and certainly not with people of color. Until we all do talk about it, acknowledging the deeply entrenched assumptions that affect all of our lives, we won't get past it.

We have to come to terms with the realities of race, and the legacy of slavery, if we are to move forward. We must have truth before we can have reconciliation.

In the former Confederacy, during the Reconstruction period of the 1860s and 1870s, former slaves were voters, so many that Mississippi sent the first African American Senator to the United States Congress. The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was passed to abolish not only the institution of slavery, but also "the badges and indicia of slavery." Following the dismantling of Reconstruction and the abandonment of the promises of the Thirteenth Amendment, the white hierarchy regained control, and imposed a rigid form of Jim Crow which affected every aspect of people's lives. Education, jobs, and electoral participation were restricted to such a point that in most communities, conditions were hardly better than during ante-bellum times. By the 1950s, the badges and indicia of slavery had been so aggressively reestablished that there were only a few thousand African Americans in the entire State registered to vote. Few of them dared go to the polls on election day.

Throughout Mississippi, attempts to register were met with cross burnings, beatings, fire bombings, and murders. Indeed, in communities in which people attempted to assert their civil rights, many who had no connection to the Civil Rights Movement became targets of violence. This was a society in which it was worth a Black man's life to speak to a white woman.

The Civil Rights Movement has been celebrated in the lives of famous people. Some did play significant roles. But at the heart of the Movement were the thousands of men and women, and often children, who at very great risk, and with enormous courage, stood up to the powerful forces of government and mob violence. This people's civil rights movement throughout the South challenged the pernicious legacy of slavery. The Movement sought to obtain the benefits of democracy where democratic participation had been denied to the Black population since the end of Reconstruction.

The effort to obtain voting rights was not symbolic. It was well understood that people who vote can have power, if they use their votes wisely.

The struggle to participate, to have a seat at the table where economic and governmental benefits are apportioned, was not easy.

The perception that only a small band of men, dressed in white sheets, were the perpetrators of violence is far too simplistic. Shortly after the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, resistance to the coming changes sent new shock waves through the south. In Mississippi, your State Legislature recognized the threat, and moved to counter it. Your legislature created the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission in 1956, with its stated purpose "to do and perform any acts deemed necessary and proper to protect from encroachment by the Federal Government and to resist the usurpation of the rights and powers of the State."

The Sovereignty Commission investigative reports and memoranda were not made public until 1998, following 16 years of litigation and several orders of the US Courts. We now know from the surviving records and some 87,000 entries that thousands of people were subject to the dangerous attention of the Commission.

The State has never admitted its involvement and culpability for the many heinous crimes that it aided and abetted. These crimes were not the isolated acts of a few crazed individuals acting as a mob. Rather, these crimes are heavily tainted with governmental misconduct. It is this misconduct that bears examination if we are to understand.

The Governor was Chairman of the Sovereignty Commission. The Commission was a branch of state government. The funding came from taxes paid by the citizenry. This means that the African American people of the State, then more than 40% of Mississippi's population, were forced to pay for the governmental entity which existed to preserve an unconstitutional and oppressive system of government, by whatever means.

The Sovereignty Commission funded the White Citizens Councils. The Councils used this money to launch a campaign of disinformation both within the state, and in the northern states. The Councils spread racist ideology which served to encourage violence.

The Sovereignty Commission hired staff investigators and private detectives. It employed informants. State funding for the Commission's activities continued until 1973.

Its investigators spied on people, the reports were transmitted to the governor and disseminated with a deliberate intent to cause damage to persons who were perceived as enemies of the status quo.

Bear in mind that these were not persons charged with any crime. They were simply people who threatened, deliberately or not, the Jim Crow society.

Some examples:

The Commission gathered information about would be Black voter registrants and passed their names on to their employers or landlords. For engaging in the revolutionary act of attempting to vote, people lost employment or housing. Since many Black workers in rural areas were sharecroppers, they were forced off plantations upon which their families may have lived and worked for generations. Fannie Lou Hamer was just one such person.

Bankers were notified of the identity of African Americans who attempted to register to vote, and bankers then called in loans.

The Commission disseminated information about persons in the community who were providing housing or other assistance to civil rights workers, resulting in beatings, fire bombings and murders. Civil rights activists were assassinated. Herbert Lee was killed in Amite County in 1961, and Lewis Allen in 1964, after he gave information to federal investigators about the Lee murder. Medgar Evers was shot to death in Jackson in 1963, Vernon Dahmer was killed when his Hattiesburg home was fire-bombed in 1966. The list goes on and on.

The information gathered by the Sovereignty Commission investigators included license numbers and vehicle descriptions for persons identified as civil rights activists, as well as physical descriptions of these persons and their day to day activities, and the people with whom they had contact. Medgar Evers was spied upon in this manner for years before his death.

At the request of the defense, the Commission investigated the jury panel in the 1964 trial of Byron de la Beckwith for the murder of Medgar Evers. The Commission secretly reported back its findings as to which members of the jury panel were not expected to be favorable to de la Beckwith. The defense could then eliminate these jurors from the panel by exercising its preemptory challenges. An arm of the state was assisting the defense in a murder case which the state was supposed to be prosecuting. The jury refused to convict. This is a grotesque perversion of the criminal justice system.

Mickey Schwerner and I had gone to Mississippi in January 1964, as field workers for the Congress of Racial Equality. We worked with local people, including James Chaney, to establish a community center. This was a place where Black youth could gather, talk, play ping-pong, borrow books and be safe. The center had a library with several thousand donated books, many related to subjects of Black History. Women received sewing lessons and made clothing from materials which had been donated. People attended voter registration classes. Both at the center and out in the community we were part of the campaign to assist African-American citizens in exercising their constitutional right to vote.

In February, 1964, a month after we arrived in Meridian, a local state legislator, Representative Betty Jane Long, requested the Sovereignty Commission to investigate us. Unknown to us, there followed a series of reports back to Representative Long and to the Governor's office about where we were living, who visited with us, and with whom we met in the community. Further, the Sheriff and deputies of Lauderdale County were keeping us under surveillance and receiving information from other sources. The information they gathered was passed on to law enforcement officers around the state, many of whom were themselves members of the Ku Klux Klan. There was no secret that the Klan and the police, sheriffs' departments, and state highway patrol officers were often one and the same.

In the days prior to the Neshoba murders, the Commission agents had circulated information as to the church in Philadelphia which would host voter registration training. James and Mickey had been meeting with church members for several months. On June 16th, several church members were badly beaten by a mob of Klansmen. The church was burned to the ground. This terrorism was part of a plot to lure Mickey into a trap.

Edgar Ray Killen had organized this mob from a group of some 75 Klansmen from Philadelphia and Meridian meeting together the night of the church burning. Killen served as Klan Klegal. He had recently organized the Lauderdale Chapter of the Klan.

A Sovereignty Commission informant passed on intelligence as to when Mickey and James Chaney planned to visit the burned out church to check on the injured members. Mickey and James drove from Meridian to Philadelphia, along with Andy Goodman, who had arrived in Mississippi only twenty-four hours earlier. The Neshoba deputy sheriff was alerted to arrest them while Edgar Ray Killen gathered the other Klan members. The lynch mob included the sheriff's deputy, Philadelphia and Meridian police, and other assorted thugs. Two state highway patrol officers abandoned the assassination plot at the last minute, but did nothing to stop the murders even though they knew that the killings were about to occur. The Neshoba County Sheriff may not have been present at the murder site, but he is known to have been a likely member of the conspiracy.

The Sovereignty Commission, an official arm of this State, was directly involved in providing the intelligence that led to these murders. In the weeks which followed the killings, the Governor, Paul Johnson, and Senator James Eastland, Chair of the United States Senate Judiciary Committee, publicly commented on the missing men. Both of these Mississippi high officials accused the civil rights movement of staging a hoax, saying alternately that the three men were in Chicago or Cuba, drinking beer and laughing.

The Sovereignty Commission files expose the fact that the Commission provided all of its investigative reports, apparently from the Commission's inception until 1967, to the Jackson Clarion Ledger and other newspapers in the state. Those reports were used by the newspapers to distort and defame the civil

rights movement, further encouraging violence. (The Clarion Ledger has recently apologized for its activities.) The Commission instructed newspapers to suppress the reporting of violence against Black persons.

The Commission succeeded in preventing the reporting of the beatings and church burning in Philadelphia on June 16, 1964. This coverage regarding the lead up to the Neshoba murders was omitted from news reports to accommodate the request of a Philadelphia banker, who was seeking to convince an out-of-state investor to bring his business to Mississippi.

The Commission actively engaged other agencies of state government to act in perpetuating segregation, including by illegal interventions. A 1964 report to the Governor states that the Sovereignty Commission had asked the Public Service Commissioner to use the influence of his office with a Black Philadelphia, MS motel owner. The Commission wanted the motel owner to refuse the request of a civil rights organization to lease his motel. The owner was a trucker, the report stated, and his trucking license subject to rules and regulations of the Public Service Commission. The motel was not leased.

In 1967, a white mother contacted the Commission to complain that a Black teenage student was paying attention to her daughter. The worried mother was assured that the problem would be solved by the Commission agent, who promised her that he would personally contact the young man's draft board.

The Sovereignty Commission spent five years trying to decide whether one family of children who had birth certificates showing them to be white, but whom the Commission determined were 1/32nd African American, should be attending a white or a colored school. While the debate went on within the Commission, for five years, the children were not permitted to attend any school, lest they taint the other children, or be tainted by them.

The Sovereignty Commission was an apparatus of the State, used to control the Black population, as well as anyone else who might oppose the stifling Jim Crow society, or who offered assistance to the Movement.

Each successive governor served as the Sovereignty Commission Chairman. He received the investigative reports of the Commission. Each governor had knowledge of the full range of shameful, illegal, and often violent activities encouraged or aided and abetted by the Commission.

Mississippi has never apologized for its governmental misconduct.

In the context of the Jim Crow South, a highly structured class system developed to protect the property rights of the wealthy. Poor whites were convinced that they had something of value, which they needed to protect at all costs—their white skins. The results were continued poverty and violence.

In such a society, it is easy to convince those who have little, that someone with less will take what little they have. The only power many people have is the power they can assert over those who have less. In that way, the men who joined the Klan, and the women who sewed their robes, became the weapons in the hands of the people who held the true power, with which to manipulate and assert control.

Any who dared express objection were branded as subversive and were fair game for abuse. Few people spoke up.

Despite the intimidation and violence, the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement accomplished remarkable things through the courage of thousands of ordinary men and women who took extraordinary risks. These were the people who had lived in the poverty and terror of the place, and who well understood that after all the rest of us—the civil right workers from far away and lives of privilege left, they would remain to face the consequences. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was born, and by its efforts no all white national convention delegation would ever again present its credentials, claiming to represent the people. The poll tax was abolished. Thousands of African American people would register, and would vote.

Despite these triumphs, we cannot permit ourselves to believe that racial violence and disparate treatment based on race does not continue.

Edgar Ray Killen, one of eight surviving members of the Neshoba murder conspiracy, was convicted on three counts of manslaughter in June, 2005. No one had ever before been charged by the state with these murders. Even so, some members of the jury could not bring themselves to vote murder convictions, which would have required them to find that Edgar Ray had the intent to kill, not just to organize the Klan mob to kidnap and beat the men. This inability to unanimously find Killen guilty of the murders was despite clear evidence that Killen set the trap by burning the church. He organized the mob and directed the purchase of rubber gloves and the preparation of the burial site in an earthen dam.

There was also testimony by a former Meridian police officer, then a fellow Klan member, that Killen confessed after the murders and burials that "we got rid of them." Killen gave a Meridian police officer and Klan member a pistol to be disposed of following the night of the murders.

This is a painful history to confront. It has left a stain of fear and shame on this state.

Yet, at present, interracial groups in various places in the state are taking the first steps at coalition building, in an effort to address their painful past, and to move forward together to work on the very real social and economic burdens facing the state. The members of the Philadelphia Coalition are one such group, whose work in pushing the state to bring murder charges in the Neshoba case was a very significant factor in the indictment of Edgar Ray Killen. The Coalition is an excellent example of what can be accomplished when people courageously stand up for what is right. They are continuing to engage in efforts to confront the past and to encourage changes in the Mississippi school curriculum, in order that children will be taught the true history of the State, and the civil rights struggle. They are also willing to confront each other and to share their own stories from this legacy. This takes great courage and is not an easy path.

But the work of those who are speaking of the history of the State and attempting to institute social change is hampered by a continuing unwillingness of some people in positions of power to become agents for positive change.

When I was in Philadelphia for the Killen trial in June, I was struck with the many positive changes in the State over the past forty years. I was also aware of some things that, unfortunately, remain the same.

Just after the verdict and sentencing of Killen, Governor Barbour stated his belief that this verdict closed the books on the crimes of the civil rights years, and that we all should now have "closure."

Yet, a day earlier, when Ben Chaney, the brother of the murdered African American, James Earl Chaney, criticized the Governor for wearing a confederate battle flag pin on his lapel daily, Governor Barbour responded by saying if anyone didn't like it, "tough." As you know, the Governor had actively resisted the effort in Mississippi to remove that confederate symbol from the state flag three years earlier. The confederate battle flag has long been the banner of segregation and racism, since Mississippi put it on the state flag following the demise of Reconstruction, and the rise of Jim Crow. The confederate battle flag has been widely embraced by the Ku Klux Klan, whatever else some people may see in it. It represents the Klan's hateful history, and there is no Black person in the nation who is unaware of that.

In the same week that the Neshoba jury returned its guilty verdicts, the two Mississippi Senators, Trent Lott and Thad Cochran, refused to join 92 other Senators in a resolution of apology for the Senate's repeated failures to pass anti-lynching legislation. Had such federal legislation been passed, it is likely that many lives would have been saved. Mississippi had the highest number of lynchings of any state in the country; the Jackson Clarion Ledger counted 581, and presumably there were others never included in the count. The message to those who refuse to move beyond the legacy of slavery and to continue to do harm is loud and clear—murder of African Americans deserves no apology.

So long as symbols and coded messages are conveyed by high public officials, government encourages racism, and the potential for the violence which it spawns.

Despite the remnants of the racist history, there has also been dramatic change. When I was in this state 41 years ago, African-American children did not have access to a decent public library. They were given out-dated texts in school. In June, I visited the public library in Philadelphia. It is a beautiful place. I saw children of different races, working together on projects and receiving assistance from a multiracial group of local volunteers. Children and adults were learning together and from each other. This microcosm of peace and progress offers hope that we can get past the shameful bequest of racism, not just in Mississippi, but in the nation as a whole. I met teachers who were interested in teaching the history of slavery and the civil rights struggles. These are very hopeful signs.

There is no place in our country which is free of racism. In many aspects of our society, treatment is based upon race. We need to each recognize our own responsibility not to ignore the complex inequities of life. The violence and mistreatment of people of color in all the many years since the abolition of slavery is indeed part of the legacy of slavery. To the extent that we duck responsibility for addressing the inheritance we all have been left with, we perpetuate this dreadful legacy. The result is as pernicious as the killings of the past. It is the destruction of hope and promise for future generations.

Governments are composed of people. The elected governmental officials—and the judges, agency heads, and commission members appointed by the elected heads of state. A government is not just the people who are elected to office or staff the bureaucracy, but the electors, the citizens. If we are complicit in a system in which there continues to be benefit based on color we must come face to face with that reality—that legacy.

Much positive change resulted from the efforts of so many people throughout the county who were part of the civil rights movement:

Beginning in the late '60's, the Federal government began to assume some responsibility for alleviating the crushing poverty in which many millions of people lived in this land of wealth. Housing programs



were expanded for the poor. Nutrition programs provided meals for the elderly and school children. Medicare and Medicaid began to address the health needs of the poor, disabled, and elderly. Head start programs were funded to encourage early learning, so that kids could get something like a start at education. Affirmative action programs resulted in people of color being admitted to institutions of higher education in significant numbers, and in job openings in previously all white, and often all male, positions which offered the chance at true advancement.

People of good will throughout the nation worked to institute local programs to help lift people out of poverty, to provide educational and employment opportunities and to ensure the equality of opportunity which we hold as a basic premise of our democratic society.

But as these changes were occurring, they were not greeted entirely with enthusiasm. The Republicans developed their "Southern Strategy." They sought to capture the votes of the deep south, where many white voters abandoned the Democratic Party in ever increasing numbers after the 1964 Democratic convention, and the compromise at that convention over the seating of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

At the start of the 1980 Presidential Campaign, then candidate Ronald Reagan chose to commence his campaign by giving his first speech at the Neshoba County Fair, a stone's throw from the burial site chosen by Edgar Killen and the Klan conspirators for the Neshoba murders in 1964. I suggest that the symbolism was not lost upon anyone in the south.

Beginning with President Reagan's election, the Federal Government began the process of dismantling the protections of the hard won Voting Rights Act. That effort continues presently with the Act coming up for extension next year.

The Southern strategy revitalized the Republican Party, which went on to meld a coalition of wealthy white voters, along with the religious right, and those working class people who could be convinced that they had lost their jobs to people of color, due to misguided Federal programs.

Unacknowledged in this propaganda was any discussion of the effects of the tax programs enacted by the Reagan and succeeding administrations, which increasingly benefited people of wealth at the expense of working people. Instead, the national budget has been deliberately bled, most effectively since the Bush II administration took office. Program after program has been cut or eliminated, so that poverty in this country has increased in the past several years, while the income and accumulated wealth of the top 5% has grown by enormous proportions.

Poverty is one of the legacies of slavery and its inevitable consequence. Jim Crow was designed to keep the former slave population poor and under educated.

In Mississippi, more than 38 % of Black families now live in poverty, in contrast to 14% of white families. According to the 2004 Census figures, the most recent year available, 24.3% of Black families nationwide live below the poverty line, defined by the Federal Government as \$17,029 for a family of four. 10.5% of white families nationwide live below the poverty line. Since 2001, the first year of the current federal administration, poverty has increased for four consecutive years, from 31.6 million living in poverty, or 11.3% of the total population, to 37 million, some 12.7% of our people.

According to the Urban Institute, Tax Policy Center, in testimony given to the United States Senate in June, 2005, the most recent tax cuts, by 2010, will result in a reduction of \$16 in taxes for taxpayers earning less than \$30,000. \$30,000 is the median income for Black households nationwide. But while poverty increases, taxpayers with income of over \$500,000 will save at least \$3,835 yearly, which represents approximately 26% of a poverty family's gross income.

People living in or near poverty do not have investment accounts, which generate investment income, and hence the capital gains upon which taxes have been drastically reduced. Indeed, one of the reasons why low income families find it so difficult to advance is that there is no ability to accumulate assets. These families cannot pass on wealth from one generation to the next, because they never acquire any assets. Without homeownership, other significant assets, and substantial insurance, they are far less able to weather unforeseen catastrophes.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reports that Social Security reduces the proportion of elderly living in poverty from 50% to about 12%, and lifts 12 million elderly people out of poverty. Yet our elected federal government proposes diminishing the protections of the social security system.

It is in neighborhoods throughout the country populated primarily by people of color, where public schools are often still at their worst. African Americans are disproportionately unemployed or underemployed. The prison population throughout the country is appallingly Black, often consisting of youngsters serving long sentences for minor crimes, while white young men and women, convicted of similar offenses, are on probation, or in drug rehab programs. In Mississippi, 75% of the prison population is Black.

We must address issues of poverty—the unequal apportionment of education, health care, housing and jobs.

We must recognize that the justice system is not working for people of color. Access to legal representation in criminal cases, more than 40 years after *Gideon v. Wainwright*, is a cruel hoax in many communities and cities throughout the nation, and for civil wrongs or the resolution of basic legal issues of family or housing or benefits law, it is often just non-existent.

Many in the majority population comfort themselves with the false image of a country now past the inheritance of slavery. Until we recognize that we are living the legacy of slavery every day, we will never move past it.

If you think this is not so, think about the attention the Neshoba case received this year, 41 years after the killings. Two of the victims were white. And at the time of the murders, there was no attention paid to the other black bodies found during the search. Two of those young men were murdered and thrown in the Mississippi River. The murderers were identified but never charged or tried. Another victim, found in the Big Black River wearing a CORE tee shirt, was about 14 years old. He was never even identified. When it was determined that none of these were James Chaney, the press and the public moved on.

When hurricane Katrina struck last month, the insidious nature of racism was exposed to all of us. Those with resources could evacuate. Not only could enormous numbers of the poor not do so, but our government officials were unable to grasp the reality. So, FEMA Director Brown declared that the people remaining in New Orleans choose to be there. President Bush assured us that Trent Lott would have aid in rebuilding his Gulf Coast house, apparently oblivious to the fact that many of the poor of Mississippi

and Louisiana do not own homes in the first place. Thousands of people, most of them Black, were left without food or water in an abandoned city for a week or more. People died unnecessarily, as a result not of the storm, but of governmental indifference.

As we watch the first efforts now of reconstruction after the storms, we see the disproportionate burden upon the poor. There is, in fact, a subtle irony of racism. While most of the poor nationwide are people of color, certainly not all poor people are Black. Yet, if negative attitudes continue to prevail, such as the belief that people of color are poor because they are inherently lazy, the poor—neither Black nor white, are valued. The result of this lack of empathy for poor people, the notion that they are "undeserving," is that they are denied the opportunities necessary to success. Whether Black or white, they are assigned to continue in their poverty together.

We are living through a repetition of aggressive governmental indifference and misconduct. Just as in the past when the majority of the southern white population was willing to defer to governments who would use "whatever means," to repress civil rights, our national populace has thus far been unwilling to confront the misconduct of government, and the dismantling of progress towards a just society.

The consequences of the dismantling of domestic efforts to assist people in rising out of poverty, and in eliminating the discrimination of past generations, have been revealed to us by a series of recent and tragic events. The poor among the hurricane evacuees will continue to experience the results of governmental action and inaction. We see the permanent loss of housing, as land is cleared to make way for casinos or high income dwellings. People without proper education and training have been scattered throughout the country, where employment is not available for many. Long term health care does not exist. All of the problems were part of the national shame long before the recent storms. The aftermath of the hurricanes simply brought a sharper focus to the inequities.

We must understand what has been happening, and our individual obligation to speak out. We cannot turn aside, assuming that it is not our responsibility.

Our nation is presently in a state of crisis, and we have an obligation not only to understand how we have arrived here, but to assume the responsibility to protect our collective future. We must understand our history, or we are destined to repeat it.

We cannot abdicate individual responsibility to government which, at best, doesn't care. Don't assume that the legacy of slavery has not been passed on to you. However painful to acknowledge, this is part of the inheritance of each of us. Do not leave this room, this University, without acknowledging your obligation. The task of building the nation we would be proud of must be shared by us all. Our children and their children are owed a better birthright. If we want a just society, it is ours to create.

*Rita Bender (formerly Schwerner) is the widow of Mickey Schwerner, one of the three civil rights workers murdered in Neshoba County in the summer of 1964.*