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Citizens' Councils of America

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Citadel of the Citizens Council

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

By HODDING CARTER III

GREENVILLE, Miss.

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

But one state, which shares with Alabama and South Carolina the distinction of maintaining total segregation at all levels in the public schools, shows no signs of yielding to a process of mounting pressure, even if the isolation of Mississippi, the disengagement from the community's Who's Who. When meetings are held, which isn't often, the same rough form of Robert's Rules of Order followed in most civic clubs is observed. The chairman begins by calling on a minister—most often a Baptist—for a prayer. Committee reports, if any, are heard, and the main business of the evening follows.

As often as not, the meeting will be open to the public, and will feature a main speaker and several lesser lights. The featured attraction inevitably urges continued adherence to segregation and states' rights, lashes the Supreme Court, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Justice Department promptly asked what the Justice Department promptly asked the state which showed no signs of yielding to a process of mounting pressure, even if the isolation of Mississippi, the disengagement from the community's Who's Who. When meetings are held, which isn't often, the same rough form of Robert's Rules of Order followed in most civic clubs is observed. The chairman begins by calling on a minister—most often a Baptist—for a prayer. Committee reports, if any, are heard, and the main business of the evening follows.

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In fact, from the moment it was clear the Freedom Riders were coming to Mississippi after their violence-packed journey through Alabama, the Council took the lead in urging public order, while its spokesmen poured out a steady stream of vituperation upon the organizations and individuals connected with the group. As each new busload arrived in Jackson, Council membership efforts intensified and, if its leaders are to be believed, Council membership grew. The same was true in south Mississippi after Negro registration attempts resulted in beatings recently. In counties where the Council had been either dormant or nonexistent, new units sprang up overnight. Revitalization was reported in other areas where there were no incidents, but be continued fierce resistance long after the first battle is lost. And in Mississippi, the final alternative of a statewide school closing in the face of a desegregation decree is one which is most likely to be used.

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

In the election (ironically enough by an opponent who was considered more "liberal" on the race issue), and the advent of the Freedom Riders were sufficient to blur the issue. The spurt of civil rights activity has had one positive effect, of course. The Negro community, which makes up almost half the state's population, is far more militant, as a result of the events of the past half year.

Yet it is just this spirit, when it is publicly expressed by words or deeds, which feeds the Council's mill. Here, at home, is the very threat its spokesmen have been warning of for seven years. White Mississippians may be unable to see the obvious point that the process of change had reached the state despite the Council, but they are quick to embrace any group which
It is difficult to explain to an outsider just how powerful a force this white-supremacy group has become. Perhaps the hardest point to grasp is that the Citizens Council in Mississippi—no matter how dubious its aims, repugnant its methods or despicable its philosophy—is not made up of hooded figures meeting furtively in back alleys.

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

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

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

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

Governor Barnett's major appointments were of men who were on the Council's state board of directors.

Individual Councils vary from town to town, but the general pattern is much the (Continued on Page 125)
THE Council is infinitely strengthened in Mississippi by the fact that the state is still basically agrarian, made up of small communities and towns in which the dissenter can find few allies. There is no large metropolitan center here, no Memphis or New Orleans or Atlanta. The largest city is Jackson (population: 145,000), and there the Council has been most successful at organizing. The city's three dailies either echo the Council's beliefs or remain silent. It is almost impossible to find a business or professional man who is not at least a nominal Council member. It just isn't good business not to belong.

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

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

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