

MISSISSIPPI MAU MAU:
MEDGAR EVERS AND THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE, 1952-1963

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By

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School,
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MEDGAR EVERS AND THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE, 1952-1963

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ABSTRACT

Mississippi Mau Mau expands upon existing historical analysis of the ideological connections between African liberation struggles and the Black Freedom Movement in the United States by concentrating on the ways in which American civil rights activists absorbed and utilized knowledge from anti-colonial movements. This dissertation focuses on the career of NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers and connects the growth and development of his approach to fighting white supremacy in Mississippi to his interpretation of the Mau Mau movement in British colonial Kenya. While Mississippi may have felt as though it was worlds apart from Kenya, Evers was profoundly influenced by the Mau Mau use of force and mass participation to compel political and social change. *Mississippi Mau Mau* explores how, after being introduced to the story of the Kenyan uprising in both the mainstream and African-American press, Evers examined the racial climate in Mississippi through a transnational lens and transformed his analysis into grassroots strategies for change through his work with the NAACP. In realizing the significance of grassroots mass participation, unremitting dedication to action in the face of massive retaliation, an emphasis on class unity, and the use of a publicity campaign to highlight select cases of discrimination for broadcast on the national and international stage, Evers sought to permanently cripple Mississippi's white power structure. His determination to achieve his and the NAACP's objectives sometimes led to his frustration with the reactions of the National Office to the movement's failures in Mississippi, as well as with the numbers of black Mississippians who did not participate due to pressure from state authorities and private organizations resolute in their mission to maintain white supremacy. Nevertheless, Evers' strategic efforts not only helped lay the foundations for a mass movement in Mississippi, but also positioned it at the heart of the global struggle for black liberation.

INTRODUCTION

On June 1, 1963, three individuals carrying picket signs stepped onto the sidewalk in front of the Woolworth department store in Jackson, Mississippi. Though the first official day of summer was three weeks away, hot sticky air permeated the downtown commercial district as Medgar Evers, Roy Wilkins, and Helen Wilcher marched with placards decrying police brutality and imploring passersby not to buy from white-run stores on Capitol Street. Within minutes, police officers brandishing electric cattle prods arrived on scene, confiscated the signs, and arrested the picketers. At the nearby corner of Capitol and Farish, Justice Department officials and newspaper reporters documented the incident. This was not the first arrest of protesters in Jackson that week, nor would it be the last. Only a few blocks away, almost five-hundred teenagers seized in earlier mass demonstrations lingered inside a makeshift jail at the state fairgrounds. Thrown into garbage trucks for transport to the temporary stockade, the young detainees staved off uncertainty and boredom by discussing the significance of that afternoon's arrests. Evers, Field Secretary of the Mississippi state office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Wilcher, a member of the Jackson branch, were no strangers to the oppressive tactics employed by city law enforcement to shut down civil rights demonstrations. Wilkins, Executive Director of the NAACP, personally experienced Jackson's notorious brand of justice for the first time.¹

¹ "Jackson Exhibit Halls Are Converted to Jails," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, May 31, 1963; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 163.

At the Hinds County Courthouse, they were each booked on felony charges of restraint of trade and released on \$1,000 bonds. The bail money was authorized by NAACP Director of Branches Gloster Current, recently arrived from New York City headquarters with Wilkins and other high-ranking Association officials to assist with coordinating movement operations in Jackson.² A boycott of Capitol Street businesses launched the previous December had expanded to include a succession of protest marches, picket demonstrations, and sit-ins collectively labeled the Jackson movement. Students from local black high schools and colleges served as its primary foot soldiers, inspired by the wave of direct-action protests moving across the South. By the hundreds, they risked life and limb to engage in mass demonstrations that brought worldwide attention to the plight of Mississippi's black communities and connected their struggle to the national movement for black freedom. For Medgar Evers, the militant, grassroots movement evolving in Jackson was a culmination of nine years of efforts to grow the NAACP in Mississippi and a representation of the future of civil rights activity within its borders. As he returned to the Association's Jackson headquarters, he was greeted by two-hundred students lined up two and three abreast, ready to initiate another mass march against the forces of segregation.³

On that same day in Nairobi, Kenya, newly elected Prime Minister Jomo Kenyatta climbed atop a dais to take his oath of office. When he solemnly promised to uphold the governing principles embedded in the national constitution, the man nicknamed "Burning

² John R. Salter, Jr., *Jackson, Mississippi: An American Chronicle of Struggle and Schism*, (Malabar, Florida: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1987), 155.

³ M.J. O'Brien, *We Shall Not Be Moved: The Jackson Woolworth's Sit-In and the Movement It Inspired*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013), 171-172.

Spear” set the British colony on a new course of independence and legitimacy. Afterward, with a beaded tribal cap atop his head and his famous *bakora* walking stick in hand, he led British officials and cabinet members in a parade through the streets of the capitol to rapturous applause. It was an extraordinary moment. Nine years prior, Kenyatta had been arrested and convicted of organizing the Mau Mau Rebellion, a bloody uprising of native Africans against supporters of the Kenyan colonial regime. He denied masterminding the insurrection to the High Court, but colonial officials conducted a show trial to justify a violent counter-insurgency campaign and offset the growing hysteria of the white settler population.⁴ Imprisonment of nationalist leaders, however, was not enough to offset the slow death of Britain’s empire in Africa. By 1961, intensifying anti-colonial agitation blew winds of change across the continent that rendered imperialist rule no longer feasible in Kenya. That year, Kenyatta was released from prison after a nation-wide election and assumed a principal role in the transformation of the colony into a parliamentary democracy. Resolved to faithfully guide the new nation to prominence, Kenyatta’s rallying cry was *karambee*, a Swahili word meaning “let us get up, put our shoulders to the wheel and go.”⁵

Though they lived over eight thousand miles apart and never physically crossed paths, the lives of Medgar Evers and Jomo Kenyatta intertwined in a world characterized by the intersection of geopolitical tensions and destruction of global white supremacy. As

⁴ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), 63-64.

⁵ “Kenyatta Sworn; Nairobi Jubilant: Prime Minister and Cabinet Take Over in Kenya,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1963; “Kenyatta Takes Over Leadership of Kenya,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 1963; Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (Henry Holt and Company: New York, 2005), 358-359.

the Allied defeat of fascist states in World War II gave way to rising Cold War tensions, millions of colonized peoples utilized the global conflicts as a means to alter their physical, political, and social conditions. India, long considered the “jewel in the crown” of the British Empire, emerged as a democratic republic after achieving independence in 1947. In Africa, liberation movements developed or intensified in several regions of the continent. Eager to point out the hypocrisy of empires condemning native “barbarism” while they viciously exploited the labor of subjugated masses and drove the world to the brink of nuclear disaster, African anti-imperialists rooted their arguments for independence and sovereignty in the rhetoric of human rights and self-determination. These assessments were best summed up in the words of Nigerian political leader Dr. Nnamdi Aykiwi when he remarked that West Africans would no longer wear chains or allow the British to “fatten on the backs of the colonists.”⁶ For weakened European empires, the specter of decolonization loomed like a hydra with a thousand heads as they struggled to contain the rise of nationalist sentiment within their vast territorial holdings. When an insurrection was vanquished, others sprouted in its place.⁷

As colonialism teetered on the edge of collapse, African Americans reexamined their attitudes toward worldwide liberation struggles and drew on their wartime experiences as justification for intensifying their aims to destroy white supremacy in the United States. Since the first decade of the twentieth-century, prominent voices in the fight against racial inequality connected the experiences of black Americans to those of oppressed peoples of color around the world. Pan-Africanist organizations such as the

⁶ Bill Brinkley, “Africans Seek Free Rule, Nigerian Says,” *Washington Post*, December 28, 1949.

⁷ “Africans Call ‘Family of Nations’ Same Old British Imperialism,” *Chicago Defender*, July 12, 1947.

Marcus Garvey-led United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the work of NAACP founder W.E.B. Du Bois promoted the formation of a collective Afro-American consciousness. As urbanization and access to information increased in the interwar period, the expansion of black institutions and international studies programs at historically black colleges fostered interests in world affairs. This expanded conception of ethnic kinship translated into widespread condemnation of the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia by dictator Benito Mussolini. For black Americans, enthusiastic support for Ethiopians was both a means of championing black power and achievement in the face of fascist aggression and of viewing their own experiences within transnational frameworks. Whether through religiously oriented peace organizations, gender-based associations such as women's clubs, or Popular Front groups, black men and women articulated programs for racial progress in global terms. World War II witnessed the construction of a new double-pronged campaign built upon those institutional building blocks that focused on defeating fascism abroad and racial oppression at home. In its aftermath, black Americans demanded nothing less than full political rights and inclusion at the postwar peace table.⁸

Recent scholarship in the fields of African American history and American foreign relations has shed much needed light on the connections between twentieth-century liberation movements abroad, U.S. foreign policy, and the Black Freedom

⁸ Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1-36, 42. For more on the history of Afro-American responses to the Italo-Ethiopian War, see also William R. Scott, *The Sons of Sheba's Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1941* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1993); Joseph E. Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia, 1936-1941* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994).

Movement in America. Building on the work of Paul Gordon Lauren, who placed the issue of global white supremacy at the center of his study on international relations, studies followed that focused on the role transnational pressures played in prompting US government action on racial reform.⁹ Works by Mary Dudziak and Thomas Borstelmann spotlight the impact accusations of American hypocrisy by the Soviets and foreign critics in Africa and Asia had on U.S. foreign policy. Presidential administrations from Truman to Nixon preached the superiority of American democracy over Soviet communism, but the reality of race relations at home consistently threatened to derail policy decisions abroad. In his analysis of the U.S. State Department, Michael Krenn expands on earlier histories to include the efforts of black diplomats to influence foreign policy through the application of their distinctive perspectives on global affairs.¹⁰ Studies by Brenda Gayle Plummer, Carol Anderson, and Gerald Horne concentrate on the interest and actions of the NAACP and other African American organizations to link struggles for desegregation at home with the ideals embedded in the Atlantic and United Nations Charters. Far from being outside observers but unable to play a more direct role in crafting policy, these organizations were forced to narrow their goals to work within the political margins.¹¹

⁹ Paul Gordon Lauren, *Power and Prejudice: The Politics and Diplomacy of Racial Discrimination*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988).

¹⁰ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Michael L. Krenn, *Black Diplomacy: African Americans and the State Department, 1945-1969* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999); Plummer, *Rising Wind*.

¹¹ Brenda Gayle Plummer, ed., *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs 1945-1988* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944-1963* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

Scholars have also studied the ways organizations ranging from the NAACP to leftist associations such as the Council on African Affairs (CAA) worked to support and influence African liberation movements through the spread of intellectual ideas, money, and manpower. In her analysis of the politics of the African diaspora, Penny Von Eschen pinpoints the myriad of ways internationalist anti-colonial discourse shaped the lenses through which black Americans viewed themselves and formulated their political demands. These lenses often pinpointed the importance of specific African nations or liberation struggles, including work by Kevin Gaines on the influence of African nationalism on the experiences of African American expatriate experiences in Ghana.¹² Despite the contributions of these works, James Meriwether has noted historical accounts “generally have understated the role that African liberation struggles played in promoting action by black Americans,” adding that the myriad of ways in which African freedom movements inspired the leaders and participants of the black freedom struggle in the United States has frequently been overlooked. “The domestic civil rights movement,” he argued, “in fact absorbed knowledge and lessons from African liberation struggles, which in turn helped shape ongoing interpretations of the domestic struggle.”¹³

One example lay in the career and civil rights activism of Medgar Evers, who served as Field Secretary for the NAACP in Mississippi from 1954-1963. Murdered at age thirty-seven by a member of the Ku Klux Klan, Evers’ role in the history of the Black Freedom Movement is mostly celebrated in the context of his martyrdom for the cause of

¹² Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997); Kevin K. Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

¹³ James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 6.

civil rights and for carrying of the torch for the NAACP in an area of the United States infamous for its brutal racial violence. Less has been written, sans the memoirs of his wife and brother, about what influences led him to devote his life to the cause of freedom in Mississippi.¹⁴ Following his return from military service overseas, Evers developed an interest in the Mau Mau Rebellion. Stretching from 1952-1960, the uprising included members of several displaced African ethnic groups, the largest of whom were the Kikuyu, who sought to rebel against the white colonial government and its repressive social, political, and economic policies towards Africans. In response to the mounting crisis of violence, the colonial governor declared an official state of emergency. For the next seven years, a bloody war raged between the Mau Mau and British and African loyalist troops.¹⁵

Looking towards Kenya and recognizing a system of racial caste and violent oppression similar to Mississippi, Evers was inspired by the movement's proclaimed leader, Jomo Kenyatta, and the Mau Mau use of force and mass participation to draw attention to their cause. Though colonial authorities were unclear whether the uprising was a centralized independence movement or a more dispersed, tribalist insurrection, its violent nature and the resulting consequences for the British colonial system captured the attention of millions around the world. Evers was motivated to create a Mau Mau army in Mississippi to retaliate against perpetrators of racist violence and bring attention to the horrors of white supremacy. But the logistical realities of carrying out a campaign of

¹⁴ Myrlie Evers-Williams and William Peters, *For Us the Living* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1967); Charles Evers and Andrew Szanton, *Have No Fear: The Charles Evers Story* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997).

¹⁵ Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 9-53.

guerilla warfare and an internal philosophical struggle regarding the ethics of fostering mass violence eventually turned him off to the idea. Nonetheless, Evers' examination of the Kenya uprising helped shape the strategies for dismantling Mississippi's racially oppressive system he implemented in his work as NAACP Field Secretary. Through his dedication to grassroots organizing and his construction of Association-sponsored campaigns to bring national and international attention to the statewide fight for civil rights, Evers' efforts embodied the militant spirit of Mau Mau resistance and centered the Mississippi Freedom Movement within the global struggle for black liberation.¹⁶

The significance of the Mau Mau as an inspirational symbol of black resistance to white oppression is familiar to historians of foreign relations and African American history. In addition to Meriwether's work, Gerald Horne has focused on the role the Kenya emergency played in the way black Americans interpreted their struggle for equality at home. In *Mau Mau in Harlem*, he noted African Americans equated the phrase Mau Mau with the notion of fierce resistance. Evers was one of many black Americans to connect their struggles to one that projected strength, fierceness, and determination. Horne's work extends beyond these experiences to the ways in which US colonialists and Dixiecrats in Washington framed the violent uprising in Kenya to argue Africans – including those of African descent in America – were not ready for freedom or first-class citizenship. Seeking to offset such ridiculous notions, black Americans embraced the desire for Kenyan liberation as part of the larger struggle to destroy global white

¹⁶Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 49; Evers and Szanton, *Have No Fear*, p. 76; Myrlie Evers-Williams, *For Us the Living*, 93.

supremacy, and when Kenyan students or labor leaders entered the United States they were warmly welcomed by their African American supporters.¹⁷

A prominent black champion of the Mau Mau was Malcolm X. In his speeches, he argued the militant defiance of the Mau Mau signaled the right way to seek independence from white oppression and called on black Americans to “even the score with whites” by creating their own Mau Mau armies.¹⁸ In his analysis of these statements, historian Mickie Mwanzia Koster argued Malcolm’s praise “facilitated a much needed conversation between Africa and its Diaspora” that pushed black Americans toward greater militancy.¹⁹ His framing of the Mau Mau as freedom fighters who transformed their fear and frustrations into aggressive action can also be placed within the context of the tradition of armed resistance to which many black Southerners, including Medgar Evers, adhered. The significance of this tradition in the movement for racial equality in Mississippi is explored in Akinyele Omowale Umoja’s work, *We Will Shoot Back*, which argued armed resistance was a key ingredient of a successful civil rights program in Mississippi. According to NAACP Regional Director Ruby Hurley, Evers “always wanted to go at it in Mau Mau fashion.” While he refrained from creating a black commando unit, his decision to keep and carry guns signified his desire to push back against the system of white supremacy in an aggressive manner.²⁰

¹⁷ Gerald Home, *Mau Mau in Harlem? The U.S. and the Liberation of Kenya* (New York: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2009), 12-14.

¹⁸ Arnold H. Lubasch, “Malcolm Favors a Mau Mau in US,” *New York Times*, December 21, 1964.

¹⁹ Mickie Mwanzia Koster, “Malcolm X, the Mau Mau, and Kenya’s New Revolutionaries: A Legacy of Transnationalism,” *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 100, No. 2 (Spring 2015): 250.

²⁰ Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013), 44-48.

Mississippi Mau Mau builds upon this body of literature by analyzing how the interplay of ideology and influence between black America and Africa played a significant role in the ways a younger generation of civil rights leaders interpreted and defied Southern systems of white oppression. In Mississippi, the strategies employed by Medgar Evers to build an organizational base for the NAACP and inspire Mississippi's youth to directly challenge the white power structure were inextricably linked to his interpretation of the movement for independence and sovereignty in Kenya. Throughout its colonial history, Kenyan economic growth and its position of importance within the British Empire was reliant on the exploitation of black African labor and the elevation of white landholding settlers to positions of authority. The Kikuyu ethnic group, subjugated and rendered powerless by racist imperialist policy, existed alongside black Mississippians in a transnational framework of white supremacist oppression. From Jomo Kenyatta and the Mau Mau, Evers drew inspirational examples of militant resistance to white rule that emphasized the significance of mass participation and attracting publicity as tools for dismantling oppressive structural systems. Through his work with the NAACP, Evers encouraged mass action among black Mississippians to break the back of Jim Crow by forcing the federal government to actively intervene in protecting the rights of its black citizens.

To understand how Evers' background influenced the way he conceptualized the struggle for black equality, chapter 1 details the entrenchment of the Jim Crow system in Mississippi, begun in the wake of post-Civil War Reconstruction's demise. To redeem southern society through the restoration of white supremacist power, Southern Democrats masterminded the dismantling of Republican governments that had empowered

freedmen. Stripped of their citizenship rights, black Mississippians were forced into positions of socioeconomic subservience through acts of terror. By exacting control in this manner, the white power structure renewed its sense of authoritarian dominance and constructed a vision for a “New Mississippi” upon a foundation of capital investment predicated on black economic exploitation. Given the high levels of violence required to maintain control over a sizeable black population, Mississippi developed a reputation as distinctly repressive and resistant to outside criticism. In this environment, blacks turned inward for survival and protection through the creation of family, religious, and economic institutions that challenged white supremacist conceptions of black identity.

As Medgar Evers came of age in this repressive system, his observations of racial terror and participation in these local support networks informed the development of a sense of racial consciousness, activist sensibility, and understanding of how the black experience in Mississippi fit within a global framework of white supremacist oppression. Chapter 2 focuses on Evers’ efforts to transform this analysis into action when he returned home from the European battlefields of World War II. Like all black soldiers, he fought to defend democracy and was welcomed as a liberator abroad but treated like a second-class citizen in the military and at home. These experiences helped shape the lens through which he viewed the plight of black Mississippians and black liberation movements in Africa. In news reports on Kenya, Evers discovered a system of racial caste like the one in Mississippi and developed a deep admiration for how the Mau Mau inspired the masses to rise up for freedom and shed light on the injustices perpetrated against Africans in the British colonial system. Initially, he considered creating his own army of Mississippi Mau Mau to bring attention to the systematic oppression of blacks

through violent means, but eventually decided against it for logistical and moral reasons. Instead, Evers joined the NAACP and set out to transform the definition of Mau Mau to fit the specifics of the Association's fight for racial equality in Mississippi.

Chapter 3 chronicles the beginning of Evers' work with the NAACP. Ultimately, this led to his decision to accept the position of Field Secretary in Mississippi and build a grassroots base for the organization in the wake of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. While the case was a major victory in the fight to dismantle the Jim Crow system of separate-but-equal across the South, white reaction to *Brown* led to the inception of a campaign of massive resistance and hysteria that gripped Mississippi. Officials utilized legislative obstruction, fear-mongering, and violence to block any attempts to integrate the halls of public education that threatened to turn the state on its head. In this unstable environment and with the lessons of the Mau Mau firmly embedded in his consciousness, Evers worked to carry out the NAACP's organizational directives and publicize every attempt by whites to humiliate, threaten, and carry out open acts of violence against black citizens. In the process, he emerged as the primary leader of the Mississippi movement for black equality as he helped push the state's antidemocratic, white supremacist system front and center onto a world stage beset by Cold War pressures.

In due course, those pressures placed British colonial authorities in a precarious position regarding the purposes and design of imperialism. Chapter 4 examines the ways Evers transposed his knowledge of those international pressures and concerns into ways the NAACP could fight Mississippi's white power structure on the ground. By the mid-1950s, British forces managed to successfully quell Mau Mau resistance in Kenya, but

their reactionary policies – including the mass imprisonment of thousands of Kikuyu in prison camps rife with human rights violations – aroused criticism and debate at home and abroad. At stake was Britain’s rationale for empire. At the same time, NAACP efforts to push forward with its civil rights campaigns met with waves of massive resistance that wiped out early Association gains and left Evers and fellow black Mississippians bruised and battered. To overcome these set-backs, Evers altered his approaches on the ground in a way that mirrored the Mau Mau tactic of enticing their enemies to fight on treacherous terrain. For Mississippi’s white supremacists, that terrain was the international stage, and Evers worked to ensure every strategic move by officials was spotlighted. If the Mau Mau could bring down the colonial system in Kenya, his work as a Mississippi Mau Mau could bring down white supremacy at home. As he sought to provoke federal intervention, it intersected with the rise of direct-action protests across the South.

Chapter 5 expounds on this juncture of direct-action and Evers’ work in Mississippi as the movement for Black Freedom shifted in a new direction. Across the South, young people participated in the Freedom Rides, sit-ins, and other forms of disruptive protest. In Mississippi, these actions built upon the grassroots foundation Evers worked so tirelessly to construct and convinced him that utilizing direct-action was the best means to harness the militant energy of the black youth, encourage mass participation, compel federal intervention, and drive a wedge between various factions in the white power structure. In doing so, he created his own army of Mississippi Mau Mau, united in their desire to be a vanguard for change. By the summer of 1963, that strategy culminated in the entrance of James Meredith to the University of Mississippi and the

emergence of the Jackson movement. Yet as it picked up steam, the movement in Mississippi ran head-on into significant barriers that threatened to curtail its momentum entirely. A trade-off of sorts emerged: while federal authorities supported the passage of civil rights legislation, they called for mass demonstrations to end. National NAACP officials, concerned about the potential for increased violence, agreed to the compromise. Evers was dismayed, and considered leaving the NAACP altogether to form his own organization, but before he could come to a decision on the matter, he was assassinated.

His legacy, however, could not be killed. He helped embolden a new generation to action – an army of Mississippi Mau Mau - and worked to position Mississippi at the center of the struggle for black liberation. Rather than being left behind in the fight for racial equality, Mississippi became ground zero for the movement.

CHAPTER 1:

HOLD HIGH THE WALL: ERECTING THE BARRIERS OF INSTITUTIONALIZED RACIAL SEPARATION IN MISSISSIPPI

In the Hall of Governors, located on the first floor of the Mississippi State Capitol in downtown Jackson, stands a life-sized statue of former governor and state senator Theodore Gilmore Bilbo. Despite the short stature of the subject (Bilbo stood only five feet, two inches tall), the bronze figure looms large in the gallery. Constructed by German sculptor Fritz Behn, a native of Munich who fled to Vienna after the Nazis took power in the 1930s, the statue portrays Bilbo in a manner many of his former colleagues likely considered befitting of the deceased statesman – defiant. In a double-breasted suit, the bronzed Bilbo stands stern faced with his feet set in a wide stance, chest puffed outward, chin up, and right arm aloft as though in the act of delivering an impassioned speech. On April 12, 1954, almost seven years after Bilbo’s death, state officials and special guests gathered at the capitol to dedicate the statue. In his memorial address, Secretary of State Heber Ladner praised the virtues and accomplishments of his long-time friend, described as a man who worked for the state’s laboring class, believed in the preservation of “the racial integrity of the races,” and fought to “expose the treasonous conspiracy of those who would destroy our way of life in the United States.”¹

Colloquially known as “The Man” (a self-administered moniker, given his tendency to speak in third person), Bilbo was also called “the Builder,” “the number one spokesman for the south,” and “the little pistol-butt-scarred, piney-woods lawyer and

¹ Heber Ladner, Memorial Address: Secretary of State: at the acceptance and unveiling of the statue of Theodore Gilmore Bilbo, April 12, 1954, in the Hall of Governors, General Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, MDAH.

licensed Baptist preacher” who had become “a Mussolini for our most backward State.”² Born in October of 1877, Bilbo was raised on a small farm in Poplarville, Pearl River County, Mississippi. He attended local public schools, continued his studies at Peabody College in Nashville, Tennessee and the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, and ended his academic career studying law at Vanderbilt University, though he did not graduate. He was admitted to the Mississippi Bar in 1908 and entered state politics that same year. By the time of his death on August 21, 1947, Bilbo had served Mississippi as a state senator from 1908-1912, Lieutenant Governor from 1912-1916, Governor from 1916-1920 and again from 1928-1932, and was elected as a Democrat to the United States Senate in 1934, 1940, and in 1946. A self-professed man of the people, he prided himself on his work to improve the health and welfare of Mississippians, including the establishment of charity hospitals as well as state tax and highway commissions. John Stennis, who was elected to Bilbo’s senate seat after his death, declared his predecessor “never lost the common touch, and never lost a keen sense of understanding of the problems of the average man,” further adding that “the poor and the downtrodden of Mississippi, regardless of race or creed, knew of this warm, human characteristic, and provided him with many opportunities to be of service.”³

While these public works programs benefitted the state’s white inhabitants, Bilbo’s notoriety among Mississippi’s black community tended more toward virulent

² Hilton Butler, “Bilbo – the Two-Edged Sword,” *The North American Review*, Vol. 232, No. 6 (December 1931): 496.

³ John C. Stennis, Memorial Address: at the memorial services held in the House of Representatives and Senate of the United States: together with remarks presented in eulogy of Theodore Gilmore Bilbo; late Senator of Mississippi. General Collection, B/B49u. US 80th Congress, Second Session, 1948. United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1950, 56-57, 60.

racist than it did benevolent man of the people. An ardent segregationist and devotee to the concept of innate black inferiority, Bilbo exalted himself as a defender of the white supremacist conception of state's rights. His rise to political prominence in Mississippi was built on a platform of populist reform and tyrannical race-baiting his critics referred to as "Bilboism." As an orator, he possessed a keen ability to toss out witty retorts and was prone to spewing diatribes intended to instill fear in the hearts of white and black citizens. In Bilbo's estimation, a shift toward racial equality would not only mark the death of Mississippi as a sovereign state in the union, but as a society. According to historian Steven F. Lawson, Bilbo's anti-black tirades were virtually unmatched by his political peers.⁴

Perhaps few black Mississippians had better first-hand knowledge of the terrifying and absurd nature of Bilbo's race-baiting rants than Medgar and Charles Evers. When they were not yet teenagers, the two brothers began attending Bilbo's campaign speeches near the Newton County Courthouse in Decatur. While most blacks avoided Bilbo's political rallies, Charles and Medgar attended them for entertainment. After occupying seats with good sight lines to watch the speaker on the platform and the reactions of the crowd, Charles noted that Bilbo would "start out high-toned, but soon he'd be waving and sweating at the forehead, rearing and stomping, waving his arms." During one speech, Bilbo noticed the two brothers sitting on the courthouse steps and specifically pointed his finger at them, stating "if we fail to hold high the wall of separation between the races, we will live to see the day when those two nigger boys

⁴ Steven F. Lawson, *Black Ballots, Voting Rights in the South 1944-1969*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 99.

there will be asking for everything that is ours by right. If you don't keep them in their place," he bellowed, "then someday they'll be in Washington trying to represent you." In response, Medgar leaned over and whispered "ain't a bad idea," while Charles aimed a wide smile at Bilbo, prompting the senator to squawk "he's even got the nerve to grin at me!"⁵

Bilbo's tirades were representative of a longstanding tradition of racial intimidation and fear-mongering among Mississippi's politicians. Rooted in the conception of whiteness as the pinnacle of the social order, the exclusionary nature of race relations permeated every aspect of Mississippi's political, economic, and cultural institutions, powered the decision-making processes of its leaders, and garnered it a reputation among blacks at home and abroad as the most backward, stifling, and violent state in the union. It was into this oppressive society Medgar Evers was born on July 2, 1925 in Decatur, Mississippi. Charles was older by two years and the troublemaker of the family's seven children, while Medgar was considered "the saint of the Evers kids." He was known for taking long contemplative walks, speaking with a soft voice, and being carefully attuned to the feelings of others. But Charles noted his brother's gentle nature was coupled with an air of determination to "prove that this wasn't a white man's world – or if it was, we'd at least get our share of whatever there was worth getting and see that some other black folks could, too." He displayed a relentless quest for knowledge and study of the world around him that manifested in efforts to read any available books and newspapers. As a result, Medgar Evers honed a sound ability to investigate problems and

⁵ Evers and Szanton, *Have No Fear*, 30-31; Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, the Living*, 17.

strategize solutions. Charles explained that Medgar “always planned what he did, always measured the consequences,” and “when he set his mind to something, he could be as cold as ice.”⁶

His dogged determination, insatiable curiosity, and strategic competence proved valuable as Medgar Evers came of age in Mississippi. In addition, his examination of the surrounding world and immersion in the religious, economic, and social institutions of the black community influenced his understanding of the enormous challenges black Mississippians were up against and fostered a growing activist sensibility within him. Despite the inevitability of violent white responses to their actions, local and national networks of churches, agrarian organizations, and social clubs cultivated support systems and opportunities to advance black interests. In the process, they facilitated a race consciousness that countered the image of blacks as savages in need of the civilizing hands of white masters. The development of a strong black identity and capacity to contextualize surrounding environments informed Evers’ interest in the stories of African liberation. In analyzing the causes of the Mau Mau Rebellion, Evers concluded landless Kikuyu and disfranchised black Mississippians endured similar efforts by white supremacist structures to terrorize and control black bodies. At the same time, he understood Mississippi maintained a unique distinction as the most racially repressive state in the Jim Crow South. Possessing a personal understanding of Mississippi’s distinctiveness as a bastion of whiteness and the history of its barriers to equality was key

⁶ Given this description of his quiet demeanor, it might have seemed somewhat ironic that Medgar was named for his maternal great-grandfather Medgar Wright, a half Indian slave with a reputation for refusing to take abuse from others and causing trouble in the process. Charles Evers, *Evers* (New York and Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1971), 22-30; Evers and Szanton, *Have No Fear*, 8-9.

in convincing Evers the liberation of black Mississippians required the application of Mau Mau-inspired strategies to cultivate grassroots mass participation and publicize the state's racial horrors on the national and international stages.

While blacks suffered under the Jim Crow system across the South, Mississippi garnered a reputation for racial violence that centered it in the national imagination as the symbol of white supremacy. In his classic 1949 work *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, V.O. Key, Jr. highlighted Mississippi's uniqueness, writing, "Northerners, provincials that they are, regard the South as one large Mississippi. Southerners, with their eye for distinction, place Mississippi in a class by itself." Though "darker political strains" ran throughout the South, Key argued "the beginning and end of Mississippi politics is the Negro."⁷ Racial superiority was deemed the birthright of the white population, commanded by their Creator to hold dominion over the race whose blackness equated to depravity, ignorance, and dishonesty. Any disruption of the social order brought about by interracial "mixing" portended the polluting of bloodlines and subsequent regression of civilization to a state of savagery. For the white ruling class, the key to upholding the principles of white supremacy was to keep blacks "in their place" by any means necessary - whether legal or extralegal in design or practice. In Mississippi, Theodore Bilbo was not an aberration. He was an example of the type of public official produced, cultivated, and protected by the state's power structure, constructed upon the concept of white supremacy, and ruthless in its dedication to the sustainment of racial segregation.

⁷ V.O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 229-230.

For black Mississippians, most of whom lived in a state of permanent economic uncertainty, survival was a foremost goal of existence. To hope that adherence to its discriminatory laws and customs would grant them the chance to achieve much beyond subsistence living was to assume the society in which they lived defined them as anything other than an exploitable labor force, which it did not. Those who did manage to elevate themselves above the poverty line were considered anomalies or marked for destruction by jealous whites. In Mississippi, to be black damned one to second-class status from birth. It also carried with it the possibility of being subject to violent harm or death without explanation, legitimate reason, or due process under the law. Of the fragility of black existence in Mississippi, historian Charles M. Payne noted “the point was that there did not have to be a point; Black life could be snuffed out on a whim, you could be killed because some ignorant white man didn’t like the color of your shirt or the way you drove a wagon.”⁸

This oppressive reality was not the result of accidental events or the convergence of random sociocultural forces. The entrenchment of the Jim Crow system in Mississippi was a historical process borne of violence and carried out in a calculated manner by a white power structure resolved to maintain its socioeconomic status through control of the black population. In Mississippi, Neil R. McMillen argued “the color line was drawn in the attitudes and habits of its people, black and white, well before it was sanctioned by law.” Located in the lower Mississippi Valley and settled by Europeans in the 1600s, a bifurcated, race-based social order developed alongside a growing plantation system

⁸ Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 15.

controlled by a small number of white planter elites. In the Natchez District, an area of rich loess-and-loam covered hills located on the eastern bank of the Mississippi River, the first cotton plantations arose in the early 1800s. Black slaves were transported from ports along the river to labor in the cotton fields that served as the foundation upon which the regional economy was built. As the plantation system expanded across the state, ownership of land and slaves became the defining characteristic of wealth and social status. By the time sectional tensions reached a boiling point and the nation descended into civil war in the early 1860s, Mississippi's black population numbered around 400,000, most of whom were enslaved.⁹

In the chaotic wartime environment, many slaves fled northward toward approaching Union armies, while others were forced to work for Confederate officers. To dispense aid and supplies to such large numbers of runaways and emancipated slaves, the War Department established the Freedman's Bureau in 1863. Tasked to assist blacks in their transformation to freed men and women, the agency not only provided food, clothing, and medical aid, but was also authorized to redistribute confiscated Confederate property to ex-slaves. Yet despite the efforts of Bureau officials, many slaves felt compelled to remain on their plantations when the war ended, unsure of where to go and lacking the skills necessary to find employment elsewhere. Others exercised their

⁹ By 1850, slaves made up 51.2% of Mississippi's total population though they were not counted as persons but as the personal property of their masters. Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Mississippi in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 3; James W. Loewen and Charles Sallis, eds., *Mississippi Conflict and Change*, (New York: Pantheon House, 1974), 19, 94-95, 140.

newfound mobility and scattered across the countryside to locate lost family members or seek out the chance for a new life elsewhere.¹⁰

Mississippi's white population did not celebrate the emancipation of slavery. Lost and bewildered by war's end, most struggled to comprehend the defeat of their military insurrection. Of the 78,000 white Mississippians who fought for the Confederacy, one-third were killed or died of disease in the war. Bitter fighting and offensives by Union armies left farmland, towns, and railroads destroyed or in states of near ruin. Once prosperous plantations lapsed into various states of disrepair, food shortages loomed, Confederate money was rendered worthless, and theft abounded. The complete upheaval of the antebellum social system was also reinforced by the Union army's confiscation and redistribution of Confederate lands to former slaves. Disputes over land ownership were commonplace, and the presence of black troops did nothing to assuage white planter fears that their complaints would not be heard or handled fairly. For these planters, black landownership represented the greatest threat to their plantation system. Historian Edward Royce explained "if blacks were able to secure an autonomous existence, planters would be denied an exploitable labor force and the system of plantation agriculture would collapse."¹¹

Because Southern wealth was constructed on a foundation of slave ownership, planters and poor white farmers struggled to come to grips with the reality that their value system had been undercut by black liberation, and the question of how to maintain

¹⁰ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1988), 68-76.

¹¹ Loewen and Sallis, *Mississippi Conflict and Change*, 184; Edward Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 87.

economic and psychological superiority over former slaves emerged as a chief concern. Firmly wedded to the belief that blacks were naturally lazy and would not work unless compelled under some form of bondage, many whites maintained that freedmen did not constitute a dependable labor force and called for the ejection of blacks from the state to be recolonized elsewhere. The group most in favor of this plan were poorer whites who considered free black labor the greatest threat to their wellbeing. In his work on Mississippi, historian David Oshinsky explained that emancipation destroyed the dreams of poor white farmers to own slaves and “erased one of the two great distinctions” to which whites clung. “The farmer was white and free; the Negro was black – and also free.” Despite their enthusiastic responses to black colonization proposals, however, poor whites lacked the influence of the state’s larger planters and merchants who, though bitter at the prospect of hiring them as free men, sought to develop varying means to bring blacks back under white control.¹²

Perhaps the greatest source of postwar anger and anxiety among white Mississippians revolved around the issue of interracial sexual relations. A pillar upon which the Southern system of slavery stood, the separation of the races was deemed necessary to the preservation of blood purity and, perhaps more importantly, an effective means of ensuring color was tied to the notion of servitude. In both the antebellum and postbellum eras, black men in Mississippi were deemed threats to what constituted the very heart and soul of southern society – white womanhood – and white men vowed to

¹²David M. Oshinsky, *“Worse Than Slavery”*: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 12-14; Vernon Lane Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi 1865-1890* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1947), 48-50.

protect it by any means necessary. This reinforced what they believed to be their God-given right to maintain control over blacks while placing the onus for preserving the white race on white women. In the process, white men provided for themselves a means of validating their own tendencies to sexually exploit and rape black women. The irony of this double standard was not lost on blacks across the region, many of whom were the offspring or descendants of interracial unions between white men and black women.¹³ Nevertheless, it provided a cultural basis for the continued economic exploitation of black labor. “The unspeakable horrors of ‘race degeneracy,’” McMillen explained, “justified the most barbarous forms of interracial violence and made the injunction against ‘amalgamation’ the first law of white supremacy.”¹⁴

Determined to retain their hold over the region and their labor force, former white landowners worked with political allies in Washington to ensure the distribution of presidential pardons and reestablishment of land ownership.¹⁵ Then in November of 1865, seven months after Robert E. Lee signed documents of surrender in Appomattox, Virginia, the Mississippi legislature met to discuss “the nigger question.” Anger over the

¹³ The history of sexual exploitation and birth of interracial offspring stretched back as far as slavery existed in the South, and as Danielle L. McGuire pointed out in her study of black women and their methods of resistance in the civil rights movement, many black Southerners “shared a family history that involved interracial couplings ranging from tragic love to brutal rape.” Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Random House, 2010), 4.

¹⁴McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 14-23. In her study on the role of women in the political economy of Jim Crow in North Carolina, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore expounds on Southern white men’s justification for continued exploitation and violence, explaining “...they realized that African American success not only meant competition in the marketplace and the sharing of political influence but also entailed a challenge to fundamental social hierarchies that depended nearly as much upon fixed gender roles as they did on the privileges of whiteness. Black progress threatened what southerners called ‘place.’” Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill and London: The North Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁵Foner, *Reconstruction*, 69-71, 158-161; W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 254-256.

Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, was palpable. Many within the legislature sought to prohibit its ratification entirely on the basis that it violated Mississippi's right to govern its own people. However, legislators concerned with the possibility of further federal interference proposed the adoption of legal statutes that accepted the abolition of slavery but advocated for control of the black population through other means. In a statement urging the legislature to act quickly, Governor Benjamin Grubb Humphreys, a former general in the Army of the Confederacy, stated Mississippi had abolished slavery "under the pressure of Federal bayonets" and "urged on by the misdirected sympathies of the world." But freedom from slavery did not mean racial equality would follow, and Humphreys and his colleagues in the legislature set out to ensure Mississippi's laws and cultural mores would forever reinforce the doctrine of white supremacy.¹⁶

In response to this call for action, the legislature crafted a series of laws known as the Black Codes. These statutes conferred upon former slaves the rights of property ownership, to sue and be sued in state courts, and to legally marry. However, they also required the procurement of yearly labor contracts, prohibited black ownership of firearms, and assigned to them specific crimes that did not apply to the white population. These included the crimes of "mischief," "insulting gestures," "cruel treatment to animals," and the "vending of spirituous or intoxicating liquors." Refusal by freedmen and freedwomen to comply with the Black Codes resulted in imprisonment, the length of which varied depending on the legal and extralegal assessment of the severity of the

¹⁶ Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi*, 84.

infraction committed. Those who were not entered into labor contracts with employers by a specific date each year were deemed vagrants under the law and fined fifty dollars. If the vagrant had no way to pay the fine, he could be hired out to a white man willing to cover the fee. Usually, the white man in question was an old master who deducted the fine from the wages of the convicted man or woman. If the individual hired out to pay off the fine eventually did so, the cycle would repeat itself if no new work could be found.¹⁷

The desire to tie blacks back to the land was central to construction of the Black Codes. In doing so, legislators not only addressed white fears of black autonomy, but also developed a means for white planters to adjust to the new political economy of post-emancipation Southern society. Given the outcome of the war and the subsequent expansion of free labor market principles throughout the region, Mississippi's white power structure erected a socioeconomic system intended to reinforce white supremacy by coercing ex-slaves back under the control of their former masters. While they could not be re-enslaved as private property, blacks often found themselves trapped in a state of wage slavery within the state's growing sharecropping and tenancy structures. Under these systems, planters allotted plots of land to individuals or families who then bequeathed a certain percentage of their crops – as stipulated per a signed contract - with the landowner each year. While tenant farmers were at liberty to decide what or when to plant, sharecroppers were required to adhere to the guidelines and close supervision of

¹⁷Foner, *Reconstruction*, 197-199; Oshinsky, "Worse Than Slavery," 21. In the aftermath of Mississippi's passage of the Black Codes, other Southern states quickly followed suit. See Theodore Brantner Wilson, *The Black Codes of the South*, (University of Alabama Press, 1965), 96-115, and William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 26-28.

their employers. In Mississippi, tenant farmers and sharecroppers almost always grew cotton, which despite a drop in price after the war remained the region's largest and most lucrative cash crop. Laborers usually fell into continuous cycles of debt, unable to break even at the end of each growing season.¹⁸

To add insult to injury, local militias and urban police forces tasked with enforcing the Black Codes generally consisted of former Confederate veterans, many of whom still wore their gray uniforms and unleashed a reign of terror on blacks who had not signed labor contracts. Victims who looked to the legal system in the hopes it would dispense fair and impartial justice quickly came to the realization that local officials often worked hand in hand with planters to ensure an adequate labor supply and would not prosecute whites accused of criminally abusing blacks. Mississippi's legislature actively attempted to dissuade blacks from using the courts at all by passing a statute stipulating that any black man or woman who brought false or malicious charges against a white person would be subject to fines, imprisonment, or hired out as labor. Thus, though *de facto* slavery had been abolished throughout the Southern states, in post-emancipation Mississippi it existed in an alternate, though eerily similar form.¹⁹

While Mississippi whites considered the Black Codes essential to the wellbeing and future of their society, the laws rankled Northern Republicans. Intent on ensuring black male suffrage, ensuring federal authority, and breaking the back of the Southern plantocracy through the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the

¹⁸ Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping*, 180-222. For more on the evolution of the centralized plantation to a decentralized sharecropping system across the South, see Ralph Shlomowitz, "The Origin of Southern Sharecropping," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (July 1979): 557-575.

¹⁹ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 203-204., Oshinsky, "Worse Than Slavery," 35.

United States Constitution, in 1867 the radical faction of Republicans led by Senator Thaddeus Stevens pushed a plan for Southern Reconstruction through Congress. Rooted in “the image of the small-scale competitive capitalism of the North,” Eric Foner argued that Radical Republicans hoped to establish the South as a “modern republic” based on free labor principles and equal protection under the law. What resulted was a plan that “combined idealism, expediency, and Northern self-interest, all in the service of a far-reaching social revolution.” The Radical Republican Reconstruction plan divided the Southern states into five military districts, declared martial law, and required each state to ratify the two new amendments to be readmitted to the union. In response, the new state government in Mississippi, formed with a Republican majority, dismantled the Black Codes. What followed was a decade of political, cultural, and economic transformation defined by contrasting episodes of increased autonomy for black citizens and racially charged violence fueled by white resistance.²⁰

For the first time in the state’s history, black men registered to vote en masse, outnumbering white voters 60,197 to 46,636 in the 1867 election. In January of the following year, elected delegates (16 of whom were black) met at a constitutional convention in Jackson. There, they constructed a new state constitution that afforded black and white citizens equal rights under the law, freedom of the press, speech, petition, and assembly, eliminated property qualification requirements for voting, office-holding, and jury service, prohibited racial discrimination in public facilities, and established a free public education system. In 1869, James L. Alcorn, a Coahoma plantation owner and

²⁰ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 235, 239-280.

Southern Republican - known as a scalawag - ran a successful campaign for governor by publicly declaring his desire to unite the races in a moderate fashion. A defender of the Reconstruction amendments, Alcorn was also known as a man who would defend the state from additional Radical Republican-backed federal intervention. By demonstrating his awareness of the difficulties faced by ex-slaves, he gained the support of Mississippi's black leaders and formed a coalition within the government of scalawags and old Whigs who had stood against Southern secession prior to the war.

In his analysis of this period in Mississippi politics, Vernon Lane Wharton noted that during the first four years of Republican control, both houses of the state legislature were controlled by Northern white and native Republicans who sought to meet the needs of their black constituents but also encouraged the growth of white membership in the party. Their support for black Mississippians, however, was rooted more in a Southern paternalist ethos than it was in a belief in black equality. Wharton added that many white Republicans in the legislature avoided any type of social interaction with and "were absolutely opposed to any real control of their party by the Negroes." By 1873, the offices of lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and House speaker as well as numerous other public positions were held by black men, but the holding of these positions did not translate to real power. Their abilities to suggest, influence, and enact legislation beneficial to black Mississippians was hindered by a continuation of the color-line within the Republican Party, and anger over this certainty fueled black resentment and white

fears that unless more whites joined the party's ranks, it would become a "party of Negroes."²¹

Predictably, many whites angry over federal intervention and the bestowal of citizenship rights to ex-slaves reacted to the state's Reconstruction plan with disdain. In their estimation, the state's right to govern itself without federal interference and the restoration of white supremacy was one in the same. To promote this, a large contingent of white planters and businessmen formed the Democratic White Men's Party of Mississippi and denounced the new constitution as "the nefarious design of the Republican party in Congress to place the white men of the Southern States under the government control of their late slaves and degrade the Caucasian race as the inferiors of the African Negro," a state of affairs described as "a crime against the civilization of the age, which needs only be mentioned to be scorned by all intelligent minds." For these whites, the Reconstruction government in Mississippi combined all their fears about blacks and federal intervention into one entity to be reviled and destroyed by both informal and extralegal means.²²

To undercut the work of Republican legislators to endow Mississippi's black population with political and economic rights, Democrats formulated campaigns to shore up support among white citizens that cut across party lines. Though they could not directly violate federal law, they preyed upon the uneasiness felt by many whites with regards to the 1868 constitution, arguing its existence was the work of outsiders,

²¹ Loewen and Sallis, *Mississippi Conflict and Change*, 149-155; Warren A. Ellem, "The Overthrow of Reconstruction in Mississippi," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 54 (1992): 184-187; Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi*, 172-180.

²² Loewen and Sallis, *Mississippi Conflict and Change*, 151.

Northern carpetbaggers, and uneducated blacks with no respect for Mississippi society. At the same time, white Mississippians worked to circumvent statutes that ensured blacks access to social spaces. While equal treatment on public transportation and in restaurants was protected by law, whites demanded the races be segregated or worked to ensure that civil rights laws remained largely unenforced. Thus, while Mississippi passed a law ensuring “full and equal rights” were afforded to citizens on railroads, steamboats, and in hotels and theaters, public pressure resulted in the continued segregation of those accommodations. Interracial contact in public settings saw significant decreases in this period, and as Reconstruction continued, the separation of the races solidified in both law and social custom.²³

Mississippi’s growing industrial economy also played a significant role in the maintenance of white supremacy throughout the Reconstruction era, as Southern industrialists found themselves pitted against a planter class with no love of free labor principles. Rather, they desired the restoration of their plantation system worked by a permanent black underclass. Because former slaves were tied back to the land, industrialists found it increasingly difficult to recruit black labor. At the same time, both white and black laborers not trapped in the sharecropping or tenancy systems tended toward employment opportunities that allowed them greater mobility than was possible when laboring full-time for a single firm. Industrialists found the solution for their labor problems in a developing convict leasing system. Due to vagrancy laws and other statutes designed to curb black upward mobility, Mississippi’s penal system overflowed with

²³ McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 38-39; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 370-372.

cheap convict labor contracted out to employers who placed them in mines, mills, brickyards, railroad camps, and on farms. The price for convict labor was cheaper than hiring out free laborers, and the pool of prisoners deep. In exchange for the profits of their labor, employers agreed to feed, clothe, and house the prisoners, most of whom were separated by race. Black convicts were particularly subject to deplorable treatment, including beatings and whippings at the hands of their overseers.²⁴

If neither formal nor informal means were not enough to convince blacks of their second-class status in society, whites turned to extralegal violence as a method of conveying this message. According to historian Philip Dray, fear of black uprisings was “a central motif in whites’ rationale for extralegal violence against blacks.” In cases of suspected revolts, slaves and white allies believed to have conspired against white slaveowners fell victim to lynchings. The first applications of “lethal lynch law” that became widespread national stories occurred in Mississippi in the summer of 1835. Dozens of slaves and white accomplices were hanged in Madison County for allegedly conspiring to incite a slave revolt on the Fourth of July. On that same day in Vicksburg a local militia set upon two unpopular gamblers with the intent to lynch them as punishment for their unscrupulous behavior. The first gambler was tied to a tree, whipped, and driven out of town, while the second man, having fled to a local saloon in the hopes of escape, was captured and hanged from the gallows with four others. After the lynching, Vicksburg’s town fathers issued a proclamation asserting “the revolution has been conducted here by the most respectable citizens, heads of families, members of

²⁴ Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South*, (New York and London: Verso, 1996), 4-6; Oshinsky, “*Worse Than Slavery*,” 37-40.

all classes and professions and pursuits...,” adding “none have been heard to utter a syllable of censure against either the act or the manner in which it was performed.”²⁵

During the Reconstruction period, vigilante violence persisted despite attempts by state Republican officials to stop the carnage. Though federal soldiers were embedded throughout the South, the number of them placed in Mississippi was not enough to prevent the growth or actions of mobs that grew larger and bolder over time. Several local organizations formed with the intent of terrorizing black Mississippians back into subservience and destroying the Republican Party within the state. The largest and most notorious of these was the Ku Klux Klan, which comprised of white men from every region and social class in Mississippi. According to David Oshinsky, the Ku Klux Klan’s form of violence “was often random, spontaneous, and poorly planned,” but also “spread quickly and took every imaginable form.” This included attacks on black voters, officeholders, white and black Republicans, and teachers of black schoolchildren. Due to the large number of violent incidents, during Reconstruction Mississippi “led the region in every imaginable kind of mob atrocity.”²⁶

In 1870 and 1871, Congressional Republicans pushed through legislation that classified voting discrimination based on race and vigilantism as a crime subject to prosecution in federal courts. Known as the Enforcement Acts, these laws were specifically designed to provide freedmen and other Klan victims with federal protections not covered under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

²⁵ Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown* (New York: Random House, 2002), 24-26.

²⁶ Oshinsky, “*Worse Than Slavery*,” 27-29; Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1971), 287-294.

Unsurprisingly, the laws were incredibly unpopular with both white Democrats and Republicans who deemed them a federal encroachment on the sovereignty of the states. But there was no doubt that the Enforcement Acts worked to decrease the Klan violence across the South. In Mississippi, almost 700 indictments were secured by United States Attorney G. Wiley Wells. Unfortunately, most of the convicted Klansmen were given suspended sentences rather than subjected to prison time. Nevertheless, while vigilante violence was not eliminated, the threat of federal prosecution certainly diminished the scope and intensity of Klan-sponsored activity by driving many of its practitioners underground.²⁷

While they provided a ray of hope for victimized black men and women across the South, the success of the Enforcement Acts proved short-lived. Their passage exacerbated the existing split within the Republican Party between advocates of extended federal power and reformers who deemed the laws an unconstitutional violation of state's rights. Moreover, as Northern as well as Southern states continued to industrialize and entrepreneurs looked toward the west for economic expansion, national politics began to shift away from an emphasis on egalitarian ideology and towards a form of organizational politics anchored by government relationships with railroads and other nascent corporations. Because of these changes, Republican reformers modified the

²⁷ Of particular concern to Republican reformers uncomfortable with the expansion of federal power was the passage of the Enforcement Act of 1871 (also known as the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871), which granted the president power to suspend the writ of habeas corpus and send in federal troops in response to Klan activity. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 454-459.

national conversation regarding race relations in the South and allowed the Enforcement Acts to expire in May of 1872.²⁸

In the 1874 state elections, Democratic rhetoric evolved into action in Vicksburg, where whites were slightly outnumbered by the black population. To intimidate black voters into silence, whites armed themselves and marched to the courthouse to demand the resignation of the county's black sheriff. Fighting broke out when a large group of blacks arrived to block the white mob. Hoping to quell the violence with military intervention, Governor Ames called on President Grant to deploy federal troops to Vicksburg. However, the president refused. While he was not ideologically opposed to the continued deployment of federal troops to Southern states to curb violence and the intimidation of black voters, due to Democratic labeling of the administration as a "military dictatorship," Southern sympathizers in his Cabinet advising against intervention, and an inadequate number of soldiers available for deployment, the president encouraged Governor Ames to utilize inadequately supplied, inactive state militias to put down the violence. Unsurprisingly, the reign of terror directed at blacks continued largely unabated for several days. By the time the fighting ended, twenty-nine blacks and two whites had been killed.²⁹

Even if the Grant administration had stood strong in its opposition to the violence and intimidation directed at blacks throughout the South, beginning in 1873 a series of Supreme Court decisions hindered the executive branch's ability to intervene in state

²⁸ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 683-684.

²⁹ Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi*, 178-179; Loewen and Sallis, *Mississippi Conflict and Change*, 157-159; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 558-563.

affairs by narrowing the definition of federal power. Writing for the majority in the *Slaughter-house Cases*, Justice Samuel F. Miller argued that Fourteenth Amendment protections only applied to rights expressly set forth by the federal government. These included equal access to travel on the seas and waterways, to the seat of government, and the right to run for office. This was followed in 1876 by the Court's decision in *U.S. v. Cruikshank*, which overturned the convictions of three white men who had killed blacks during a Louisiana race riot three years prior because their indictments, brought under the Enforcement Act of 1870, did not specify race as the motivating factor for their actions. The Court went on to declare that due process and equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment only applied to state action and that citizen violators of civil rights were to be tried at the local level. With these decisions under their belts, Southern Democrats successfully neutralized further federal attempts to safeguard Southern blacks from discrimination. A Civil Rights Bill, ensuring equal access to public facilities regardless of race, was pushed through Congress in 1875. However, Democratic control across the South meant that the law was rarely enforced.³⁰

Though Republicans managed to carry the 1874 elections, Democrats considered Grant's inaction and the state government's ineffective efforts to stop the violence a promising indicator of times to come. Calling themselves "redeemers," they announced their intentions to implement a color-line strategy – referred to as the Mississippi Plan – in the 1875 state legislative election. As election day drew near, redeemers lobbied the white citizenry to join their cause, both through racial antagonism and fear-mongering.

³⁰ Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 109-111; *Slaughter-house Cases*, 83 U.S. 36 (1872); *U.S. v. Cruikshank*, 92 U.S. 542 (1875).

White rule was declared of paramount importance to the growth and sustainability of Mississippi society, and the state's newspapers echoed this sentiment with slogans such as the *Yazoo City Banner's* "Mississippi is white man's country, and by Eternal God we'll rule it," and the *Handsboro Democrat's* assertion that Mississippi would be run by "A white man's Government, by white men, for the benefit of white men." Whites whose political opinions stood contrary to these ran the risk of being renounced in the newspapers and subject to economic and physical intimidation. Race riots broke out in towns across the state, including Yazoo City, Columbus, and Water Valley. When the violence ended, over two hundred black Mississippians were dead. The result of the election was a Democratic victory by over thirty-thousand votes. In all, they carried 62 of Mississippi's 74 counties. What followed was a period of Democratic retrenchment maintained by an elaborate blueprint to suppress the black vote.³¹

At the same time, Democrats worked diligently to buttress the economic foundations of white supremacy and entice capitalist investment in the region by portraying Mississippi as a goldmine of business opportunity. In addition to promises of corporate tax breaks, Southern Democrats and other "redeemers" lured Northern manufacturers and rail companies with the promise of cheap convict labor. To fortify these assurances, legislators passed new laws increasing the amount of prison time for specific crimes in order to exponentially grow Mississippi's convict labor system. One such piece of legislation, known as the "Pig Law," expanded the definition of grand

³¹Loewen and Sallis, *Mississippi: Conflict and Change*, 156-167; Oshinsky, "Worse Than Slavery," 37; McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 38-39, 84; Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 686-689; Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi*, 182-183; Ellem, "The Overthrow of Reconstruction in Mississippi," 175-178.

larceny to include theft of farm animals or any property over ten dollars in value. It carried with it a prison sentence of up to five years in a state penitentiary. Within four years of the law's passage, the convict labor pool increased almost 300 percent.

According to Christopher R. Adamson, "The black criminal population represented a threat to the economic supremacy of the white race, but was also a resource that could be easily exploited. Crime control and economic oppression," he argued "were one and the same thing in the South after the Democrats seized power."³²

In 1876, Southern Reconstruction came to an end in the wake of a contentious presidential election. Not since the election of 1800 had an electoral race been so close or controversial, and the uproar over the result once again threatened to tear the nation in half. The Republican candidate, Ohio Governor Rutherford B. Hayes, ran his campaign on a platform of sectional reconciliation and fiscal orthodoxy anchored by the defense of private property rights. His Democratic opponent, Samuel J. Tilden, was well connected to Wall Street but championed himself as a supporter of reform, highlighting examples of Republican corruption throughout the North. When the votes were tallied, Tilden emerged as winner of the popular vote and led Hayes in the electoral vote 184 to 165, with 20 electoral votes disputed in the states of Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina. Because the Constitution contained no specific provision to deal with the situation, fifteen members of the Republican-controlled Senate and Democrat-controlled House

³² Christopher R. Adamson, "Punishment After Slavery: Southern State Penal Systems, 1865-1890," *Social Problems*, Vol. 30, No. 5, Thematic Issue on Justice (June 1983): 562; Oshinsky, "Worse Than Slavery," 40-41; Thompson, *Lynchings in Mississippi*, 9-10; Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi*, 237. For more on the passage of the "Pig Law," see Philip A. Klinkner and Rogers M. Smith, *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 91.

formed an Electoral Commission. Due to a last-minute replacement of a swing vote congressman with Republican Justice Joseph P. Bradley, the commission leaned 8-7 in favor of Hayes. Outraged at having been outmaneuvered, Democrats planned to obstruct a final electoral vote to prevent the presidential inauguration from taking place. To avoid additional turmoil, Republicans agreed to a compromise in which Hayes kept the White House in exchange for agreeing to noninterference in Southern affairs, which included ordering remaining federal troops to stand down throughout the region.³³

Because of the political power shift at both the national and state levels, the end of Reconstruction combined with depressed economic conditions had far-reaching consequences for Mississippi's black community. Despite the efforts of redeemers to entice Northern investment in Southern industry, the economy continued to stagnate and the region remained overwhelmingly rural. Democrats adhered to their promises to cut tax rates and state expenditures by pushing for budget cuts that reduced government services. The amount of money allocated to the public school system lessened to ten times below the national average. To bring additional funds into state coffers without raising taxes, the government leased out convicts to planters, merchants, and railroad contractors at fifty dollars per person. Small farmers and sharecroppers were hit particularly hard by the downturn, as falling crop prices and increased production costs sent them spiraling into deeper debt. By 1880, Mississippi's per capita income was among the lowest nationwide. Between 1870 and 1898, cotton prices fell from twelve to four cents per pound.

³³ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 564-582.

Consequently, agrarian discontent surged across the South and Midwest and swept up black and white Mississippi farmers into the Populist Movement. Determined to hold government officials and moneyed interests accountable for the depressed economic conditions, they organized farmers' alliances which emphasized the class-conscious notion that the livelihoods of white farmers were inextricably tied to those of their black counterparts. They also advocated for the end of convict leasing, railroad regulation, and the injection of more currency into circulation. Aware of the dangers any form of dissent against the racial status quo wrought in the absence of federal protections, black farmers were careful to wrap their demands in the ideology of separatist economic advancement. Nonetheless, Mississippi's Democratic leadership balked at the demands and correctly perceived the pushback of discontented farmers of both races as threats to their grip on power. Democratic legislators took to the streets and newspapers to implore white voters not to turn the state back to the days of "Negro Domination." By rooting their messaging in the language of white supremacy, Democrats managed to convince white voters not to abandon the "white man's party" and doomed the agrarian-based Populist Movement to failure.³⁴

As Mississippi's black farmers fell into endless cycles of debt, the state's white power structure initiated the process of transcribing racial restrictions into the Jim Crow laws that ensured racial segregation and black oppression by law and social custom for the next eighty years. Much of the pressure to do so came from white farmers and

³⁴ Loewen and Sallis, *Mississippi: Conflict and Change*, 170-174; Gerald Gaither, *Blacks and the Populist Movement: Ballots and Bigotry in the New South* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), 198-210.

middle-class reformers, both of whom resented the granting of citizenship rights and suffrage to blacks in the Mississippi Constitution of 1868. A new constitutional convention was called in 1890, during which delegates called for the state to only count white citizens when determining representative apportionment or appropriations.³⁵ Of the 134 delegates present at the convention, 130 were Democrats who believed the issue of restricting black suffrage to be of paramount importance to the future of Mississippi.³⁶

Speaking candidly on this matter, Senator James Zachariah George remarked “our chief duty when we meet in Convention is to devise such measures...as will enable us to maintain a home government, under the control of the white people of the state.”

Convention President S. S. Calhoun was even less circumspect, declaring “we came here to exclude the negro.” For convention goers, three essential issues spurred the need for black disfranchisement. The first concerned the nature of black suffrage itself. In the minds of white Mississippians, black men were not capable of understanding the notion of citizenship, much less exercising the rights proffered them by the Fourteenth Amendment. Secondly, the expansion of the black population, which already outnumbered whites in the state, worried redeemer politicians who perceived black disfranchisement as the most logical means through which to maintain power. And finally, when the Republican Party took back control over the White House and Congress in the 1888 presidential election, Mississippi Democrats believed it imperative to formalize white rule at home lest Republicans call for additional measures to protect

³⁵ Bradley G. Bond, *Mississippi: A Documentary History*, (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2003), 167-168.

³⁶ Loewen and Sallis, eds., *Mississippi Conflict and Change*, 184.

black suffrage. To do so, they constructed voting laws that circumvented the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the United States Constitution through the implementation of voter qualifications such as poll taxes and literacy tests.³⁷

Violence was the preferred method of cementing black political disfranchisement as a foundation of post-Reconstruction politics in Mississippi. Between 1882-1890, the lynching of Mississippi blacks was most severe in Republican counties. Republican regions also had over sixty percent more lynchings than non-Republican regions.³⁸ Those able to overcome the threats against their lives and property and press the issue on the national stage once again found themselves on the losing end of U.S. Supreme Court decisions regarding matters of Southern race relations. In 1896, the Court dealt a lethal blow to black civil rights and legitimized the practice of Jim Crow in law and custom with its decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, declaring the “separate but equal” segregation of public facilities constitutional. Two years later, in *Williams v. Mississippi* the Court upheld Mississippi’s use of poll taxes and literacy tests as nondiscriminatory voter qualifications so long as they were applied to all voters regardless of race. The power to decide whether potential voters met these qualifications was left to county registrars, who generally allowed whites to bypass the restrictions. As the twentieth century dawned, the state of race relations in Mississippi reached its lowest point since the end of the Civil

³⁷ McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 38-44.

³⁸ Terence Finnegan, “Lynching and Political Power in Mississippi and South Carolina,” in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 191-192; Loewen and Sallis, eds., *Mississippi Conflict and Change*, 177.

War. In addition to the destruction of their voting rights, black Mississippians found themselves forcibly excluded from political and social life.³⁹

In the era of Jim Crow in Mississippi, reminding blacks of “their place” was not only deemed the birthright of whites, but considered a necessary component of economic and social order. “You knew you were a nigger the very first time you rode in a car, couldn’t use the bathroom at the service station, and had to relieve yourself in the woods just off the road,” noted Charles Evers. “You knew you were a nigger the first time you went driving with older Negroes and they warned you to avoid the highway patrol and never let a white man pass you after dark because he might run you off the road or put a bullet through your head. You knew you were a nigger when the nicer restaurants wouldn’t serve you and the nicer hotels wouldn’t let you spend the night there, or even get a cup of coffee.” When asked to enter a white person’s house or a doctor’s office through the back door, told to address a white person as “sir” or “ma’am,” or warned never talk to a white girl for fear of being killed,” Evers reiterated “you knew you were a nigger.”⁴⁰ In an interview he gave a year before his death, Medgar Evers claimed his first memory of racial violence was the lynching of a family friend for talking “sass” to a white woman. Following the lynching, the man’s body was left on the ground and his bloody clothes hung on a fence to serve as a warning to Decatur’s African-American

³⁹ William Cohen, *At Freedom’s Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1991), 207; McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 7, 38-48. See also Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson*, (New York: Collier Books, 1965), 105-124.

⁴⁰ Charles Evers, *Have No Fear*, 3-5.

population. “Every Negro in town was supposed to get the message from those clothes,” he asserted, “and I can see those clothes now in my mind’s eye.”⁴¹

Decatur, a small town with less than 3,000 inhabitants at the time of Medgar Evers’ birth, sat nestled in the center of Newton County in an area of Mississippi known as the north-central hills.⁴² In his work *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, John Dittmer declared this region the “geographical and cultural heart” of the state, comprised of “rich bottomlands along creeks and rivers” that “give way to less fertile soil on the hillsides.”⁴³ In nearby Scott County, Medgar and Charles’ paternal grandfather, Mike Evers, had worked as a farmer cultivating over two hundred acres before he lost his land because of missed tax payments. Believing better job opportunities could be found in the sawmill industry of Newton County, Medgar and Charles’ father James Evers moved his family to Decatur. There, he and his wife, Jessie Wright Evers, a laundress for local white families, worked to build a home and provide for their children as best they could in the stifling racial conditions of 1920s and 1930s Mississippi. Both Medgar and Charles often spoke of their father’s determination to maintain financial independence, working sun up to sun down as a hired laborer and contractor to save up enough money to purchase his own home.⁴⁴

James Evers was also known as a man not to be crossed, having come out on the winning side of several precarious confrontations with local whites. This was significant

⁴¹ Interview with Medgar Evers by Ben H. Bagdikian, 1962, in Jack Mendelsohn, *The Martyrs: Sixteen Who Gave Their Lives for Racial Justice*, (Harper and Row: New York, New York, 1966), 64.

⁴² Population amount taken from the *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920, Vol. III, Population 1920* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), reprinted in Michael Vinson Williams, *Medgar Evers: Mississippi Martyr* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2011), 14.

⁴³ Dittmer, *Local People*, 10.

⁴⁴ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 14; Evers, *Have No Fear*, 1-2, 17.

in a town where, according to Medgar Evers, a popular Saturday night sport for whites was to run down blacks with their cars. The first time the Evers brothers saw their father stand up to a white man was as children when they accompanied him to pay his bill at the local sawmill commissary. The white manager, aware of James Evers' inability to read or write well, charged an additional five dollars to the bill. While James Evers did not possess adequate reading skills, he was adept at math and quickly caught the error, refusing to pay the totaled amount. In response, the commissary manager accused Evers of concocting a lie and reached behind the counter for his pistol. Before he could retrieve his gun, Evers blocked his path, broke a soda bottle in half, and pointed it at the manager as he backed himself and his sons out of the store. Later that evening, he sat on the front porch of his house with a loaded .22 rifle, expecting retaliation from the manager or local Klan members. None came. This willingness to stand up against white discriminatory actions and terror tactics was of great importance to his sons. Throughout his career, Medgar Evers stressed the need to push through fear to achieve movement goals and drive resistance efforts.⁴⁵

His father was not the only role model Evers looked to for inspiration. Though politically voiceless, Mississippi's black citizens did not quietly acquiesce to the injustices perpetrated upon them under the new state constitution. In 1879, at least six thousand left the state and emigrated west in the hopes of starting their lives anew. Known as Exodusters, these black migrants joined thousands of others fleeing the violence and disfranchisement of the Jim Crow South to carve out economic

⁴⁵ Evers interview in Mendelsohn, *The Martyrs*, 65; Evers, *Have No Fear*, 15.

opportunities for themselves in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Colorado.⁴⁶ Those who remained in Mississippi worked to develop tight-knit family structures that emphasized the importance of self-sufficiency and group support. Networks of churches, schools, and social organizations encouraged black advancement through the cultivation of civic virtue and self-help espoused by Booker T. Washington, national black leader and president of Alabama's Tuskegee Institute. Several black colleges and universities were founded by churches or affiliated organizations during this period including Tougaloo College, Jackson College (later renamed Jackson State University), and Rust College. In 1887 Isaiah Montgomery, a former slave of the Jefferson Davis family, purchased land in the Delta area of the state and founded the city of Mound Bayou, Mississippi's first all-black town. There, black Mississippians could freely congregate, do business, and navigate within the state's hostile anti-black environment.⁴⁷

Yet despite their attempts at uplift through education and social work, racial violence continued to plague the black community. Terror reigned in Mississippi, and there was no denying that facing up to whites and challenging Jim Crow was a dangerous proposition. This was especially true in the era Medgar Evers came of age and had a profound influence on how he translated lessons from his analysis of the Mau Mau within the context of Mississippi's distinct white supremacist system. The cultivation of grassroots mass participation required the participation of black support networks as

⁴⁶ This westward shift of Southern blacks represented one of the first major migrations out of the South following the Civil War. For more on these Exodusters and the development of black economic power in the Midwest, see Nell Irvin Painter *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 1992).

⁴⁷ David T. Bieto and Linda Royster Bieto, *Black Maverick: T.R.M. Howard's Fight for Civil Rights and Economic Power* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 45-46.

unifying and motivating entities for change. Without the means to reinforce bonds of black identity and self-worth, publicizing the state's racial horrors would prove extremely difficult as individuals and mobs tortured blacks to maintain the unequal state of race relations and the actions of Mississippi's white leadership reached towering levels of cruelty.⁴⁸ Perhaps no Mississippi politician better exemplified this merciless tenor than James Kimble Vardaman, who roared onto the state political scene as a champion for the poor whites of Mississippi and exited decades later as one of the most famous demagogues to ever climb the steps of the Jackson statehouse. Born in 1861 to a confederate soldier and his wife in Yalobusha County, Vardaman spent the early years of his life with wealthy relatives in the Mississippi Delta region, home to some of the state's largest plantations and its richest soil. He developed a growing disdain for Mississippi's wealthy planters and their large numbers of black tenant farmers, whom he felt did significant damage to the livelihood of poor white farmers throughout the state. It was for this reason he entered Mississippi politics, vowing to tax the planters, regulate the railroads, aid the poor, and work to grow the state's economy.⁴⁹

In his biography of Vardaman, William F. Holmes explained that "in the rural state of Mississippi there were few modes of public entertainment that equaled political rallies in popularity, especially those featuring colorful candidates who spoke enthusiastically and movingly." And perhaps none was as colorful or terrifying as Vardaman. If Theodore Bilbo was "The Man," then Vardaman was the father who beget a son in his political image – a white Prince Albert suit-wearing, fear-mongering, race

⁴⁸ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us the Living*, 17-18; Evers, *Evers*, 22.

⁴⁹ Oshinsky, "Worse Than Slavery," 85-87.

baiting, populist rhetoric-spewing haranguer. Unlike his eventual successor, Vardaman stood tall at six feet with broad shoulders, a dark complexion, and shoulder length hair. Nicknamed “The White Chief,” his demeanor was brash and cocky, but his air of self-confidence was essential to winning over crowds of largely rural Mississippians, most of whom made their living in the state’s agricultural sector and proudly displayed signs at rallies emblazoned with the terms “Rednecks,” “Cattle,” and “Hillbillies.” To these “honest yeomen,” Vardaman was the champion of the common man who would rid Mississippi of the moneyed interests and federal interventionists intent on destroying its peaceful, paternalistic society from the top-down.

The group for whom Vardaman held the greatest contempt, and who he believed lay at the heart of the state’s problems, was Mississippi’s black population. A virulent proponent of white supremacy, Vardaman believed blacks posed continuous threats to local communities and swore if they were not kept in a subservient position they would push for full equality and destroy the purity of white families in the process. In his speeches, Vardaman demeaned blacks as biologically inferior and praised their lower position in the social hierarchy. In doing so, he hearkened back to a “moonlight and magnolia” interpretation of the antebellum South in which slaves happily lived side-by-side with their white masters, content to labor for them in exchange for the civilizing influence only whites could bestow upon their charges. This image was quickly juxtaposed with that of the sexually voracious free black man and ex-slave, who without the civilizing experience of slavery was predisposed toward raping white women and polluting the bloodlines of white Mississippians. Regardless of class or even religious

differences, Vardaman argued that black equality, and the miscegenation that would surely follow if such a notion ever came to fruition, was a peril that must unite all white Mississippians.⁵⁰

When running for governor, Vardaman not only utilized the issue of race as a means of unifying his white constituents, he also used it to make a name for himself on the national scene. In 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington to dine with him at the White House. Roosevelt was no champion of black equality, having at one point exclaimed that blacks belonged to a “youthful race...much closer to savagery than civilization in the evolutionary scale.” However, he loathed the practice of lynching and was an outspoken critic of the extralegal violence that plagued the South. Perhaps more than anything else, Roosevelt was a keen politician who, when seeking to revitalize the Republican Party throughout the Southern region, was all too willing to enlist the help and support of some of the nation’s most prominent black leaders, the foremost of whom was Washington.⁵¹

Whites across the South reacted with near universal outrage to the president’s invitation. Editorials in some of the region’s leading newspapers skewered the president for his decision, swathing their condemnations in racial fears of miscegenation and interracial marriage. An editorial in the *Richmond Times* claimed Roosevelt’s invitation indicated blacks should “mingle freely with whites in the social circle – that white women may receive attentions from Negro men,” and that “it means that there is no racial

⁵⁰ William F. Holmes, *The White Chief: James Kimble Vardaman*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), viii-ix, 36-38.

⁵¹ Willard B. Gatewood, “A Republican President and Democratic State Politics: Theodore Roosevelt in the Mississippi Primary of 1903,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Summer 1984): 429.

reason in his opinion why whites and blacks may not marry and intermarry, why the Anglo-Saxon may not mix Negro blood with his blood.” The *Memphis Scimitar* declared that Roosevelt’s decision to let “a nigger dine at the White House” was “the most damnable outrage which has ever been perpetrated by any citizen of the United States,” adding that “any nigger who happens to have a little more than the average amount of intelligence granted by the Creator of his race, and cash enough to pay the tailor and the barber, and the perfumer for scents enough to take away the nigger smell, has perfect right to be received by the daughter of the white man among the guests in the parlor of his home.”⁵²

Throughout his 1903 gubernatorial campaign, Vardaman positioned himself as the state’s foremost champion of white supremacy and enemy of Roosevelt. In addition to voicing his disgust regarding Washington’s invite to the White House, Vardaman referred to the president as a “coon-flavored miscegenationist” for supporting Minnie M. Cox, a black woman who ran the Indianola, Mississippi post office. Though she had a good reputation with both black and white patrons, Vardaman took advantage of deteriorating racial conditions in Indianola when he campaigned there, declaring “we are not going to let niggers hold office in Mississippi!” Cox’s employment, Vardaman argued, was nothing more than the result of a “Yankee conspiracy” by “nigger-loving” Republicans to undermine the Southern way of life. If elected governor, he promised to handle “the coon

⁵² Robert J. Norrell, “When Teddy Roosevelt Invited Booker T. Washington to Dine at the White House,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 63 (Spring 2009): 71-72. Edith Roosevelt, wife of the president, and their daughter, seventeen-year-old Alice Roosevelt, were also present at the dinner, which added to the white Southern hysteria over the event. See, Norrell, *Up From History: The Life of Booker T. Washington*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 244-245.

problem,” by ridding Mississippi of black education as well as fighting to repeal the Fifteenth Amendment and the Declaration of Independence, the latter of which Vardaman declared “did not apply to wild animals and niggers.” Cox offered to resign her position as postmaster, but Roosevelt refused her resignation, choosing to close the post office instead. Fearful for her life, Cox fled town shortly afterward. Indianola whites, who duly acknowledged they had pushed for Cox’s ouster because of her race, blamed Roosevelt for inflaming racial hostility and damaging the town’s economy and public image.⁵³

While Roosevelt was a popular target for Vardaman, his most histrionic rants concerned the rape of white women by “black fiends,” a crime he believed rated above all others. In need of a singular issue to unite divided voters struggling in the aftermath of a nationwide economic depression, Vardaman focused on the defense of white womanhood and the evils of social equality. Of this approach, David Oshinsky noted “Vardaman knew that white fears about social equality grew stronger in rough economic times, and he sensed that for poor white men, the ability to protect one’s wife and daughter from the ‘black beast’ had become a vital substitute – a compensation of sorts – for the inability to shield them from the ravages of hunger and debt.” By extolling the virtues of white womanhood and demonizing black men as menacing threats to Mississippi society, Vardaman exploited the fear of race degeneracy for his political benefit. At the same time, he rendered an air of legitimacy to the notion of racial regression, a turn of the century theory that held emancipation had eliminated the civilizing influence of slavery from Southern blacks and rendered them a race of criminals. The popularity of

⁵³ Willard B. Gatewood, “Theodore Roosevelt and the Indianola Affair,” *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (January 1968), 61.

Vardaman's message and his election as governor made clear that most white Mississippians agreed with the assessment that black men and women lay at the root of the state's socioeconomic problems. They were an enemy to be protected from and controlled at all costs. "Not since the 1870s," Oshinsky declared, "had a political campaign in Mississippi been mired in so much hate."⁵⁴

Given the popularity of Vardaman's race-baiting vitriol, incidents of mob violence and lynchings during the first three decades of the twentieth century increased to some of the highest levels in Mississippi history. Between 1901-1910, 166 known lynchings occurred in Mississippi. 153 victims were black males, 104 of whom were lynched for the crimes of attempted murder, murder, rape, or attempted rape. Of Mississippi's 82 counties, one or more lynchings occurred in all but 27, the highest number of which took place in Kemper County, located along the Mississippi-Alabama border. There, the number of victims reached 13. Over the next two decades (1911-1930), 142 individuals fell victim to Mississippi lynch mobs. 127 of those victims were black men, 91 of whom were lynched for attempted murder, murder, rape, or attempted rape. These crimes constituted the most heinous of offenses, whether proven or merely assumed, and white mobs did not care to differentiate between the possibilities. If a white woman accused a black man of rape, it was all the proof most white men needed to take matters into their own hands. Even the act of looking at a white woman or speaking out of turn could result in death. On March 22, 1914, a black man named Elliott Brown was

⁵⁴ Oshinsky, "*Worse Than Slavery*," 88-90.

shot to death by a mob in Bolivar County upon accusation he had written an insulting note to a white woman.⁵⁵

Vardaman himself proudly condoned the lynching of black men, particularly for the crime of rape, despite the small number of such assaults occurring. “If I were a private citizen,” he once noted, “I would head the mob to string the brute up, and I haven’t much respect for a white man who wouldn’t.”⁵⁶ But Mississippi lynch mobs did not stop at carrying out their extralegal forms of justice for the suspected or proven crimes of black on white murder or sexual assault. Rather, they also utilized the act of lynching as a means of silencing black Mississippians who dared speak out against racial discrimination or in favor of equal rights. Notable lynchings for these actions during the first three decades of the twentieth century included the beating of Rachel Moore in Rankin County for attempting to incite “race hatred,” and Edward McDowell, who was beaten and shot in Pike County on September 19, 1921. While the details of McDowell’s supposed crime are unknown, according to what little information is available, he had “a reputation for being impudent to white people.” In some cases, mobs attacked random men and women to make an example of them and remind the black population of their place in society. Such was the case of a black man lynched on July 2, 1919 in Perry County for “discussing a recent lynching,” a crime for which he was shot, burned, and hanged. No record of his name exists.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Jan Hillegas, New Mississippi Inc., “Preliminary List of Mississippi Lynchings,” General Collection, MDAH.

⁵⁶ Oshinsky, “*Worse Than Slavery*,” 91.

⁵⁷ Jan Hillegas, New Mississippi Inc., “Preliminary List of Mississippi Lynchings,” General Collection, MDAH.

Perhaps the most appalling form of extralegal violence that exploded in popularity over the first three decades of the twentieth century was the “spectacle lynching.” Sometimes described as “negro barbeques,” these were gala occasions, often published days in advance by local newspapers, in which entire communities were invited to witness the torture and death of the victim. In some instances, food would be provided for the onlookers, adding to the picnic atmosphere of the occasion. The victims, most of whom were black men, were slowly tortured for hours by mobs of men wielding weapons such as knives, guns, hot irons, and blow torches. In cases where the victim’s supposed crime was rape, he was usually castrated. It was also customary to allow the father of the white accuser to strike the first blow. Once the victim was dead, it was common for attendees to collect body parts including fingers, toes, and teeth as souvenirs.⁵⁸ In her study of spectacle lynchings, Amy Louise Wood explained that across the South, such horrific scenes united white citizens across class, gender, and geographic lines and reinforced the core beliefs of white supremacist ideology. What is more, the spectacle aspect of lynchings provided for the crowds a sense of community togetherness. “In this respect,” Wood explained, “spectators did not watch or consume a lynching so much as they *witnessed* it – that is, they beheld or experienced it with active engagement.”⁵⁹

A spectacle lynching occurred in Vicksburg, Mississippi on May 14, 1918 when Lloyd Clay, a twenty-two-year-old black man, was arrested for attempted rape of a white woman. He was taken to a city jail to await identification, but once there his victim

⁵⁸ McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 233-234.

⁵⁹ Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 9-11.

failed to identify him in a line-up. Outside, a crowd of angry whites gathered and increased in number throughout the day. By nightfall, agitated and determined to see Clay punished, the crowd stormed the building and dragged the prisoner out into the street. There they stripped him, covered him in oil, hanged him from a tree, set him alight, and fired bullets into his body. After he was declared dead, Clay's body was cut down and the pieces divided up among members of the crowd as mementos. Across the state, these types of spectacle lynchings continued over the course of the 1920s. In New Albany, Mississippi in September of 1925 a black timber-cutter was tied to a stake and burned to death for the alleged rape of a white woman. A thousand men, women, and children attended his execution. Another spectacle lynching occurred in Macon, Mississippi on May 27, 1927. Thirty-two-year-old Dan Anderson, charged with the murder of a white farmer, was apprehended by local law enforcement officials and driven across the county line to Alabama. There he was turned over to a mob of five-hundred persons including prominent city leaders, physicians, and clergymen. After conducting a short ceremony to mark the hand-over, the mob tied Anderson to a tree and shot him over two-hundred times.⁶⁰

In a study of lynching in America by the Southern Commission on Interracial Cooperation in June of 1930, Arthur Franklin Raper, Research and Field Secretary for the organization wrote "the toll of the mob reckons not alone the victims but the lynchers

⁶⁰ Julius E. Thompson, *Lynchings in Mississippi: A History, 1865-1965*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001), 69-70; "Wave of Lynching Sweeps Country, Man Burned at Stake in Mississippi," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 25, 1925; "Mississippi Mob Stages Lynching Bee: Victim's Body Riddled with Bullets," *Chicago Defender*, May 28, 1927.

themselves and the economic, social, and cultural meaning of their lawlessness.”⁶¹ In Mississippi, which led the nation in mob violence and lynching deaths over the first three decades of the twentieth century, those words rang out as dreadfully true from both social and economic standpoints. Despite constituting over fifty percent of the state population, the political and social systems deprived black Mississippians of upward economic mobility or a public voice. After experiencing a small, temporary upward spike in the size and worth of their holdings, black landownership steadily decreased as the number of black tenant farmers increased, largely due to a declining agricultural economy and the efforts of white planters to restrict black mobility and trap them in the sharecropping system through the passage of discriminatory property restrictions and the utilization of extralegal violence. In the Delta, disproportionate landownership and economic disparity remained the most extreme. By 1934, a federal study of land tenure revealed blacks constituted seventy-four percent of that region’s population but owned only 2.3 percent of the farms in operation.⁶²

Not even natural disasters were immune from intersection with white supremacist ideology, violence, and the economic disfranchisement of black laborers. In 1909, when the dreaded boll weevil invaded the plantations of the lower Mississippi Delta, the region’s large cotton planters rejected recommendations by the Mississippi Department of Agriculture to diversify their crops and grow less cotton. Instead, they worked to eliminate or suppress all state-sponsored, public discussions regarding the destructive

⁶¹ Arthur Franklin Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching*, (Chapel Hill, the University of North Carolina Press, 1933), 1.

⁶² McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 112-113, 118-120.

power of the weevil. The reasoning for this manipulation, according to historian James C. Giesen, was rooted in the desire of the planters to maintain their grip over the black labor force for fear they might flee the state for work in other agricultural regions. If outright manipulation and active attempts to keep information from tenants failed to offset a mass exodus during natural disasters, white planters utilized threats and extralegal violence to frighten tenants into acquiescence. This was a particularly common tactic employed two decades after the weevil invasion when the Mississippi River flooded. According to Giesen, forcing laborers onto levees rather than allowing them to leave was “more clearly and insidiously about protecting their investment in labor, rather than motivated by an environmental ethos.”⁶³

While extralegal violence in Mississippi primarily targeted the black population, it also had detrimental socioeconomic impacts on whites. In the post-Reconstruction era, property tax rates increased under the guise of redeemer leadership across the lower South, largely to offset financial downturns caused by the depression of the 1870s without abandoning the doctrine of white supremacy. Michael R. Hyman’s study of taxation and public policy in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi revealed state governments imposed new series of high taxes specifically intended to target black property owners and negatively impact their debt-to-credit ratios. However, because so few blacks in the region owned property, white property owners took the brunt of the financial hit. They also suffered greatly from the exemptions doled out by the Redeemer governments to large manufacturers and railroads, which heaped a disproportionate

⁶³ James C. Giesen, “The Truth about the Boll Weevil,”: The Nature of Planter Power in the Mississippi Delta, *Environmental History*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (October 2009): 691-695, 699.

amount of the state tax burden on the white laboring class. To deflect anger over these economic conditions and defend their taxation policies, planters and policymakers employed racialized language as a rallying issue, warning that a loss of economic and social control over the black laboring classes would result in societal degradation.⁶⁴

Thus, in exchange for disproportionate levels of wealth concentrated among a tiny percentage of the state's white population, white Mississippians received constant affirmations of their racial supremacy and the opportunity to exercise their frustrations and fears through the systematic torture and disfranchisement of the black population. For white men in particular, the directive to protect the purity of white womanhood was passed down through generations like a birthright, offering them the chance to assert what Amy Louise Wood has referred to her in study of spectacle lynchings as an "idealized sense of manliness." In the process, they domesticated the violence by indicating such events were socially acceptable moments in which all white men, women, and children could participate.⁶⁵ Lynching in Mississippi was a cornerstone of economic, cultural, and social life.

But lynching was not confined to Mississippi, or even to South, and an increase in its numbers alongside the rise of race riots sweeping the nation in the 1920s placed the issue of extralegal violence front and center in American political discourse. In the aftermath of World War I, economic instability and large-scale demographic shifts increased racial tensions nationwide. In the hopes of eradicating social problems through

⁶⁴ Michael R. Hyman, "Taxation, Public Policy, and Political Dissent: Yeoman Disaffection in the Post-Reconstruction Lower South, *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (February 1989): 52-60.

⁶⁵ Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 99-101.

the application of science and reason, progressive reformers argued for justice with regards to mob violence and lynching. Among the solutions proposed was the establishment of federal antilynching legislation to punish the extralegal act as a federal crime and afford equal protection under the law to victims across the nation. For both black and white Mississippians, the proposed antilynching bill served as a clarion call to eradicate the practice, but differences in approach and application of antilynching rhetoric signaled the tangled duplicity of white supremacy within the state. Whereas black Mississippians hoped passage of the legislation would serve as a stepping stone toward racial equality, white Mississippians utilized demands for the elimination of lynching to defend and reinforce their desire to handle race relations at the state level. In the process, these efforts highlighted both the strength of Mississippi's white supremacist system and the chink in its armor: federal intervention in state affairs.

Since the 1890s, antilynching advocates had fought back with publicity campaigns that concentrated on the high number of lynchings and the "lynching for rape" discourse that permeated Southern white society. Frederick Douglass, former slave and famous advocate for the causes of abolition and racial equality, published multiple pamphlets highlighting Southern white rationales for lynching. These included claims that vigilante violence prevented "Negro domination" in politics and was paramount to the protection of white womanhood. Following the demise of the slave system, Douglass dismantled the "myth of black criminality," noting white women had been left alone with black slaves when white men left to fight for the Confederacy. Rather, the assertion that black men were iniquitous by nature served as justification for their continued

subjugation in the post-emancipation era. In his article “Lynch Law in the South,” published in the *North American Review*, he underscored the blatant hypocrisy of Southerners. “How can the South hope to teach the negro the sacredness of human life while it cheapens it and profanes it by the atrocities of mob law? The morality of the negro,” he maintained, “will reach no higher point than the morality and religion that surround him.”⁶⁶

Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a black investigative journalist and suffragist born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, launched her own antilynching campaign in 1892 with a pamphlet titled *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*. Filled with detailed accounts from newspapers across the nation, Wells-Barnett used her pulpit as a journalist to identify the Southern practice of lynching as a means of protecting the virtue of white womanhood, a concept she argued was predicated on lies borne of Southern white male desires to restore their manhood taken by the emancipation of slavery and granting of citizenship rights to blacks during Reconstruction. In her autobiography, she noted “the more I studied the situation, the more I was convinced that the Southerner had never gotten over his resentment that the Negro was no longer his plaything, his servant, his source of income.” To justify their desires to keep blacks in their place, Southern white men branded black men as rapists lusting after white women. Just as Douglass had highlighted the hypocrisies inherent in Southern lynch law, so too did Wells-Barnett. “I also found” she claimed, “that what the white man of the South practiced as all right for himself, he

⁶⁶ Frederick Douglass, “Lynch Law in the South,” *The North American Review*, Vol. 155, No. 428 (July 1892): 17; Finnegan, “Lynching and Political Power in Mississippi and South Carolina,” in Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death*, 189.

assumed to be unthinkable in white women.” This included raping or engaging in secret relationships with black women. “Whenever they did so and were found out” she continued, “the cry of rape was raised, and the lowest element of the white South was turned loose to wreak its fiendish cruelty on those too weak to help themselves.”⁶⁷

In his study of the demise of lynching in the twentieth century, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy argued that “the lynching-for-rape discourse became an almost unassailable constellation of ideas that worked to motivate lynchers, derail their critics, and assign particular roles to every segment of society.” To expose and destroy this discourse, female antilynching activists not only felt compelled to identify the ways in which Southern white men engaged in and condemned rape, but also placed the blame for the act on black women. Dating back to the earliest days of slavery in America, white men had declared themselves victims of the lascivious nature of black women, who like their black male counterparts were accused of being insatiable creatures. That sense of victimization was then turned on its face and utilized as a means of asserting white racial dominance. When they raped black women, white men exonerated themselves through the assessment that their actions civilized the lesser race. In her 1894 pamphlet *A Red Record*, Wells-Barnett laid bare such double-standards when she noted “true chivalry respects all womanhood, and no one who reads the record, as it is written in the faces of the million mulattoes of the South, will for a minute conceive that the southern white man

⁶⁷ Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Afreda M. Duster, ed., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 70-71.

had a very chivalrous regard for the honor due the women of his own race or respect for the womanhood which circumstances placed in his power.’⁶⁸

Despite the efforts of Douglass, Wells, and others who spoke out against mob violence and lynchings, however, the extralegal killings continued to occur at high rates across the South. In the aftermath of World War I, the number of incidents increased due to the departure of blacks from the region. The prospect of losing their cheap labor force, combined with the existence of black soldiers they believed harbored dangerous notions about racial equality influenced by their experiences abroad, incensed Southern whites. On account of the escalating violence, other activists and organizations joined the crusade against lynching. Black newspapers with national readerships including the *Chicago Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier* condemned lynching as acts of terror meant to reinforce the doctrine of white supremacy and destroy black progress. Black intellectuals and artists also joined in the outcry, inspired by the transformative tenor of the Harlem Renaissance to utilize their mediums for social justice. But the foremost organization leading the crusade against lynching was the NAACP. Since its inception in 1909, it had served as a leading organization advocating for black civil rights in America, highlighting and seeking to eliminate racial oppression within the national political, economic, and social climate. Comprised of dedicated, resolute individuals determined to change the nature of race relations and protect African American citizens in the exercise of their rights, the organization set its sights on the passage of federal antilynching legislation.

⁶⁸ Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, *The End of American Lynching*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 10-11; Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894*, (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, 1894) 12-13.

These organizational efforts to bring attention to lynching and classify it as a federal crime gained traction by 1922, when the Association threw its support behind a bill proposed by Congressman Leonidas C. Dyer, a Republican from Missouri who represented a district comprised of a large black population. After a bitter debate on the floor of the House, the bill passed by a vote of 231 to 119. But the bill was suppressed in the Senate by John K. Shields of Tennessee, who filibustered to kill the measure. In 1924, the Dyer bill was reintroduced before Congress but defeated by a coalition of Southern and Western congressmen who had previously worked together to pass a contentious anti-Japanese immigration bill. Frustrating though the Dyer bill's demise had been, its public defeat, alongside the increased exposure of lynching by antilynching activists, organizations, and networks, shone a bright light on the South and forced it to openly grapple with the issue of extralegal violence on the national stage. In the process, it reinforced long held white fears of federal intervention into Southern state affairs. In Mississippi, that fear resulted in public appeals by leading members of the white power structure to end extralegal violence or risk federal interference into their "way of life."⁶⁹

In 1925, the Mississippi Bar Association organized a campaign to "condemn mob violence and call on officers to do their sworn duty." Numerous public officials, leaders of the Bar Association, and other prominent citizens took part, denouncing lynching as the state's "blackest blot" and agreeing that the practice "constitutes a challenge to our citizenship, our civilization, and our Christianity." As part of its campaign, the organization distributed booklets to the public containing breakdowns of lynching

⁶⁹ Robert William Dubay, "Mississippi and the proposed federal anti-lynching bills of 1937-1938," *Southern Quarterly* 7 (October 1968): 74-75.

statistics, tips for how law enforcement officials, attorneys, judges, and the courts could ensure the safety and fair treatment of the accused, and a special section titled “Rape Not the Usual Cause” in which it was argued that three-fourths of all Mississippi lynchings from 1921-1924 were driven by mob reaction to “some other offense than a crime against our womanhood.” The Association’s condemnation of lynching as a social and moral problem was also coupled with demands that eradication of the evil practice be left to the state of Mississippi. In his words on the matter, Congressman B.G. Lowrey argued that “lynching is not right. It is murder indeed of the most horrible kind, when a mob takes the life of an innocent being” and promised to do all he could to “strengthen the arm of the law in Mississippi and to drive lynching out.” However, he also noted that “this is a State problem, not a Federal problem,” adding “I shall do all in my power to keep the Federal government out of a sphere in which it has no business.”⁷⁰

In this period, many Southern white women also became vocal advocates against lynching. With its roots in a growing movement for interracial cooperation and suffrage, their crusade to eliminate lynching arose out of the laity rights and faith-based interracial outreach movements within the Southern Methodist Church, Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC), and the white and black divisions of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YMCA). Drawing from their experiences within those networks, antilynching advocates formed the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL) in 1930. In her study of the life and career of ASWPL founder Jessie

⁷⁰ Mississippi Bar Association, “Mississippi and the Mob: State Officials and Outstanding members of the State Bar Association, and other prominent Mississippians condemn mob violence and call on officers to do their sworn duty.” General Collection, MDAH.

Daniel Ames, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall explained that “the goals of the organization were ambitious indeed: it proposed to use the moral and social leverage of organized women to prevent lynchings in the rural and small-town South.” In a broader sense “it hoped to create a new climate of opinion by challenging the association between racial violence and sexual attitudes.” In Mississippi, ASWPL members called on church bodies and organizing conventions to sign pledge against lynching, but their advocacy fell short of supporting the passage of federal antilynching legislation, preferring instead to categorize the problem of lynching as a state issue.⁷¹

By the time New York Representative Hamilton Fish – with the backing of the NAACP - introduced another federal antilynching bill in the House of Representatives in 1937, the number of recorded lynchings in Mississippi had dropped precipitously. When asked about this decline, Sociologist Arthur Raper attributed it to the work of Ames and other activist organizations to publicize the hypocrisy of Southern white rationales for mob violence.⁷² Yet while the zenith of lynching had passed in Mississippi, it did not disappear entirely. Most importantly, the white supremacist framework it stood upon remained firmly entrenched. Just as Dyer’s bill had fallen to defeat by a southern filibuster, Fish’s effort met the same demise. By publicly decrying extralegal violence in the face of federal interference, white officials across the South bolstered their authority to handle race relations at the state level. As young Medgar Evers sat atop the Decatur

⁷¹ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 66, 159-160; Carolyn Renee Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013), 33-34.

⁷² Arthur Raper, interview with Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, January 30, 1974, interview B-0009-2, transcript, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), the University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC.

courthouse steps and listened to Theodore Bilbo bellow on about the dangers of Negro equality, the outlook for black Mississippians remained bleak. Yet its uniquely destructive horrors offered up lessons for Evers on what it would take to dismantle Mississippi's white supremacist system: the application of tactics intended to stab at the chink in the state government's armor by forcing federal intervention in matters of race relations.

CHAPTER 2:

VIEWING HOME THROUGH FOREIGN EYES: BECOMING A MAU MAU IN MISSISSIPPI

On April 8, 1953, Ransley Thacker, a First Class Magistrate in the High Court of Kenya, read aloud his decision in the trial of Jomo Kenyatta, president of the moderate nationalist Kenya African Union (KAU) and accused leader of a conspiracy against the colonial government. The verdict, handed down fifty-eight days into the trial, asserted Kenyatta was guilty of heading a violent insurrection commonly known as “Mau Mau.” In his concluding statement, Thacker claimed Kenyatta had thrust his people “back to a state that shows little humanity,” persuading them to “murder, burn, and commit atrocities.” In response to the verdict, Kenyatta stood and calmly stated that while the Europeans and loyalists to the British colonial cause emphasized that his trial was fair, he did not believe that was the case. Furthermore, in reference to the work he had done in the KAU, he avowed “what we have done and shall continue to do is to demand rights for the African people as human beings so that they shall enjoy the same facilities as other people.”¹

Kenyatta’s statement concerning the prejudiced nature of his hearing was not without warrant, because the outcome of the trial had been a foregone conclusion. In October 1952, in response to a mounting crisis of violence and murder carried out by militant Kenyan nationalists on Africans loyal to the central government and a handful of white settlers, Governor Evelyn Baring declared an official State of Emergency. By doing

¹ “Jomo Jailed, Africans Restless,” *Chicago Defender*, April 18, 1953.

so, he was able to request military aid from British army regiments to track down and arrest any leaders of the African political associations believed to be behind the uprising. Though Kenyatta was one of several senior KAU officials taken into custody, misunderstanding and false accusations surrounding the nature of the uprising led to allegations he was its principal organizer. To validate his call for Emergency powers and as a way of placating white settler fears, Baring was determined to conduct a show trial. Thus, despite Kenyatta's moderate position within the Kiambaa Parliament and his efforts to speak out against militant violence, his trial was conceived with the purpose of showing "the watching world how Kenya's colonial government proposed to deal with the menace of Mau Mau."²

The Mau Mau uprising occurred in Kenya from 1952-1956. Though debates raged among participants and observers as to whether the uprising was a centralized independence movement or a more dispersed, tribalist insurrection, both agreed the bloody conflict was rooted in the policies of white supremacy that permeated the Kenyan colonial economy and political system. As violence escalated, British authorities became increasingly alarmed as large numbers of Kenyans took up arms and participated in militant unrest against the colonial government. Newspapers reported stories of horrifying slaughters, descriptions of ostensibly mystical tribal rituals, and attempts to shed light on the history of race relations within the British colony. In the United States, the militant nationalists labeled Mau Mau were referred to in the *New York Herald-Tribune* as barbarians, intent on driving the white man out of Kenya by "spreading fear,

² Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 63-64.

destruction, and death throughout the land.”³ Kenyatta was of particular interest to journalists covering the story, not only because of his conviction but also because British authorities made concerted efforts to create a propaganda campaign of their own, demonizing and labeling him a blood-thirsty terrorist. Kenyatta was also not immune from allegations of communist influence serving as the reasoning behind his apparent leadership of the Mau Maus, as was evidenced by a *New York Times* article titled “Soviet-Trained Mau Mau Terrorist is Sentenced to 7 Years’ Hard Labor,” which described Kenyatta as a “Moscow-educated tribal leader... guilty of organizing the dreaded Mau Mau secret society, which aims to throw the white man out of Kenya.”⁴

Not all American newspaper coverage of Kenyatta painted him in such a censorious light, nor was the Mau Mau uprising always interpreted as a communist-influenced terrorist rebellion aimed at overthrowing British colonial authorities. Journalists working for African-American newspapers in the 1950s provided nuanced coverage of the conflict emphasizing the political, economic, and social complexities involved. They also offered balanced, extensive exposés on suspected Mau Mau leaders, including Kenyatta. Because of this coverage, many African Americans viewed the Mau Mau uprising as a legitimate liberation struggle, even if no consensus was reached regarding the justification of violent rebellion as a political tool. Of this assessment, historian James Meriwether explained the Mau Mau embedded itself into the collective consciousness of black America as a “potent symbol of black resistance against both

³ “Verdict in Kenya,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, reprinted in the *Chicago Defender*, April 25, 1953.

⁴ “Soviet-Trained Mau Mau Terrorist is Sentenced to 7 Years’ Hard Labor,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1953.

white supremacy and the established civil rights leadership.” At the same time, it served as a crucial lynchpin in the long-standing debate over the use of nonviolence versus strategies of armed resistance for liberation.⁵

Established civil rights organizations, including the NAACP, primarily fought against white supremacy through political lobbying and legal challenges in the judicial system, battling the forces of segregation in public education and voter discrimination in the courts. Militant black leaders preferred to promote the use of violence as a strategy against racial discrimination, and at times used the Mau Mau as a successful example of such an approach. Perhaps the most famous example of this occurred in 1964 when Malcolm X spoke at a Harlem rally benefitting the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Proclaiming that Kenyans were going about achieving independence the “right way,” he declared a Mau Mau-type response was needed in Alabama, Georgia, Harlem, and in Mississippi. “A black man has the right to do whatever is necessary to get his freedom,” he stated, adding “we will never get it by nonviolence. If the language is a shotgun, get a shotgun. But don’t waste time talking the wrong language.”⁶

For Medgar Evers, determining what constituted the right language with which to fight for freedom was crucial to his future in Mississippi. In Kenya, he discovered a system of racial caste and oppression similar to the one at home and developed a profound admiration for Kenyatta as a strong leader justifiably seeking the liberation of his people. Evers was also impressed by the violent nature of the Mau Mau response and

⁵ James Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 148-149.

⁶ Arnold H. Lubasch, “Malcolm Favors a Mau Mau in the US: At Harlem Rally, He Urges Negroes to ‘Even Score,’” *New York Times*, December 21, 1964; Gerald Horne, *Mau Mau in Harlem?* 3.

the attention it brought to the injustices perpetrated against Africans in the British colonial system. Given the suffocating culture of white supremacy in Mississippi, Evers considered creating his Mau Mau-style army of poor black sharecroppers to kill whites in retaliation for white-on-black violence and bring attention to the systematic oppression suffered by the state's black population. Yet his proposed campaign of guerilla warfare and violent retribution never came to pass. Instead, Evers chose to join the NAACP and work full time as a Field Secretary carrying out the Association's campaigns for desegregation and voting rights in Mississippi. However, to assume Evers abandoned his dream of leading a local, militant rebellion in exchange for the nonviolent tactics of the NAACP oversimplifies the nature and intent of his actions. From his examination of the Kenya uprising, Evers identified successful elements of the Mau Mau struggle - including the means through which it drew worldwide attention and relied on mass participation at the local level – and employed the logistical capacity of the NAACP to put them into practice. In doing so, Evers transformed the definition of Mau Mau to fit the specifics of the fight for racial equality in Mississippi.⁷

Established as a British Protectorate at the turn of the century and later formed as a colony after World War I, Kenya was quickly opened to development and British settler immigration. In 1896, the construction of the Uganda Railway began as a means of introducing Christian missionaries to East Africa and transporting supplies and troops toward the coast in case of invasions by European imperialist competitors. Citing cheap land and abundant labor sources, British authorities encouraged enterprising and

⁷ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 49-51; Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 31-32, 35-37.

adventurous citizens to pull up stakes at home in England and settle in Kenya. By enticing white settlers to relocate to the colony, it was hoped agricultural production would develop in its interior regions.⁸ But justifications for settlement were not only inherent in the language of economic or religious necessity, they also included calls for British citizens to take up the “civilizing mission.” Simply put, Caroline Elkins explained in her study of the Mau Mau uprising that “according to their own line of reasoning, the British were not actually stealing African land or exploiting local labor but were instead self-appointed trustees for the hapless ‘natives,’ who had not yet reached a point on the evolutionary scale to develop or make responsible decisions on their own.” This, she explained “was cultural imperialism par excellence. This was the ‘White Man’s Burden.’”⁹

Over the course of the early to mid-twentieth century, a multitude of white settlers accepted the government’s challenge and flooded into the territory seeking cheap land and opportunities to break free of the constraints of the class system in Britain. Thousands of the native African peoples, including the largest – the Kikuyu tribe – were summarily displaced from their lands and homes. In their place came ambitious British aristocrats seeking to establish a foothold in Africa to “re-create the seigniorial lifestyle in the highlands of Kenya that had been increasingly difficult to maintain at home.” Intent on bringing a “civilizing influence” to the native African populations and their beliefs in white racial superiority, Elkins maintained that these new aristocrats shared an

⁸ Wunyabari O. Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 24.

⁹ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 5, 7.

“ambition to create a plantocracy modeled on the American South.”¹⁰ Landless and without legal recourse, many of the Kikuyu were forced to leave their land in the central highlands and take up residences as squatters on white settler farms or relocate to African land “reserves.” Other Kikuyu moved to urban centers to seek employment in low wage jobs. Thousands ended up living in tent cities outside the walls of Nairobi, where abject poverty and crime were the mainstays of existence. By the early 1950s, 40,000 thousand whites maintained political, social, and economic power over 5 million Africans in Kenya.¹¹

Many Kenyans, however, refused to accept the discriminatory practices of the white minority and attempted to work within the channels of the provincial system to articulate grievances and demand redress from the government. To some extent, this was supported by colonial authorities, who deemed the introduction of Kenyans into political life a means of civilizing them. In the early 1920s, a younger generation of Kikuyu, educated in missionary schools, took the first steps of political representation by forming their own organization, the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA). Focused on the growing land problem and lack of educational opportunities, the Association claimed ten thousand members at the peak of its popularity. Among them was Jomo Kenyatta, who eventually rose to the rank of KCA Secretary. Inspired by the opportunity to call for reform, the

¹⁰ Ibid, 10.

¹¹ Robert B. Edgerton, *Mau Mau: An African Crucible*, (New York: The Free Press, 1989), viii. For further information on the economic, political, and social conditions in colonial Kenya and historians’ debates over the definitions of the Mau Mau uprising, see Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya & Africa* (London: James Currey, Ltd, 1992); David Throup, *Economic and Social Origins of Mau Mau, 1945-1953* (London: James Currey, 1988); Carl G. Rosberg and John Nottingham, *The Myth of Mau Mau: Nationalism in Colonial Kenya* (Stanford, California: The Hoover Institution, 1966); Tabita Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau, 1905-1963* (London: James Currey, 1987); and Frank Furedi, *The Mau Mau War in Perspective*, (London: James Currey, 1989).

KCA also reinforced ethnic bonds of personhood and cultural identity by defending the Kikuyu cultural practice of female circumcision, considered savage by colonial authorities and missionaries alike. This placed the organization in the crosshairs of government officials obsessed with protecting their civilizing mission. In 1940, they labeled the KCA subversive and banned it entirely. Nevertheless, its existence served as a crucial building block in the construction of a broader sense of African cultural nationalism taking hold in Kenya.¹²

In the aftermath of World War II, the rise of the KAU marked the first attempt by an African political organization to extend its influence in Kenya beyond regional concerns. A sense of militancy had arisen during the war and centered in the cities, where many landless Kikuyu worked as urban laborers. Under the leadership of a moderate political elite drawn from the former KCA, the KAU incorporated trade unionists, landless squatters, and members of other African ethnic groups into its organization. When fighting fascist forces in the war, Kikuyu soldiers witnessed British imperialist hypocrisy first-hand. Though they had placed their lives on the line for the empire, they returned home to continued oppression and a new awareness of nationalist movements around the globe. Squeezed to the economic margins, these ex-soldiers formed a militant faction in the KAU and advocated armed rebellion by urban and rural Kikuyu against colonial authorities and Africans loyal to the British government. To reinforce their bonds of ethnic and cultural identity, solidify their allegiance to their cause, and organize

¹² Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya*, 48-49.

grassroots support, the young militants radicalized the traditional Kikuyu practice of oathing and the Mau Mau movement was born.¹³

Kenyatta, one of the moderate nationalists, was elected president of the KAU on June 1, 1947. Preferring to advocate a political platform predicated on the rights of Kenyans to fair land practices, he worked tirelessly to prevent the militant faction of the party from accumulating a powerful hold over the landless Africans in the colony. But as oathing ceremonies that pledged unity and demands for freedom spread among Kikuyu masses in the reserves, Kenyatta's efforts to appeal for change through traditional government processes failed. Colonial officials had little interest in altering their oppressive land policies anyway, and as Mau Mau grew they deemed it a major threat to the colony's stability. By the time the violent attacks on loyal Africans and white settlers began, Kenyatta found himself fighting a losing battle against British authorities, militants in his own party, and in the court of public opinion, where he was blamed for inciting and leading the rebellion. After his conviction by the colonial court, Kenyatta spent the next seven years in prison while a bloody war raged between the militant Kikuyu faction and the British and African loyalist troops.¹⁴

As the Mau Mau uprising broke out in late 1951, Evers was finishing up his last semester at Alcorn Agricultural & Mechanical College in Lorman, Mississippi, where he was pursuing a degree in business administration and entertaining thoughts of becoming a lawyer. It was there he met his future wife, Myrlie Beasley. Not long after they first met, he declared that she would someday be mother of his children. Much like Kenyatta, Evers

¹³ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 22-25.

¹⁴ Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 9-53.

possessed a ‘no nonsense’ style and assertiveness, and Myrlie noted that when meeting Medgar for the first time “there was something about the way he spoke, the way he carried himself, in his politeness, that made him stand out even from the others I met that day.” There was also a maturity about him that registered immediately and an “air of having a goal and knowing precisely how to reach it” which further heightened her interest. On campus, Evers commanded attention with his words and actions. A natural leader, he served as editor of the campus newspaper and college yearbook, president of his junior class, vice president of the Student Forum, and was a member of the campus choir, debate team, and a star halfback on the football squad. According to historian Michael Vinson Williams, Evers was also “never content with just learning what professors taught from the text, nor was he willing to allow them to remain campus-fixed while the community suffered.”¹⁵

Although he had always been a studious child, Evers’ decision to attend college was not only rooted in his thirst for knowledge, but a hunger for action. That same hunger enticed him to enlist in the United States Army during World War II along with his brother Charles. During his time as an enlisted infantryman, Medgar served in the Red Ball Express and spent considerable time in England and France. According to Myrlie, his time in the army had a profound influence on his determination to continue his education, particularly after he was inspired to do so by one of his lieutenants. His experience also had a profound effect on Evers’ intolerance toward the system of white oppression in Mississippi. Just as colonized Africans fought under the control of

¹⁵ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, the Living*, 9-10; Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 46-47.

imperialist authority, Medgar and Charles Evers served in segregated units with white officers. Given Medgar's experiences growing up in the racist stronghold of Mississippi, this experience met the standards of discrimination he was used to and placed them in a precarious position within an ever-changing international arena. As a soldier of color, he was treated as a second-class citizen by the army, yet during his deployment in Europe, was treated as an equal by the liberated populations he came across, including a French family with whose daughter he enjoyed a brief romance. Having served as a liberator and defender of American democracy in Europe, Evers, along with thousands of other African-American servicemen, returned home more determined than ever to change the system of race relations in America.¹⁶

In the escalating Cold War environment, Medgar and Charles Evers made their first attempt to directly challenge Mississippi's white supremacist system when they tried to register to vote in 1946. Together with three friends, they marched down to the Decatur County courthouse, the same building where as children they had listened to Governor Bilbo excoriate them as dangerous foes. When they arrived, they were met by the circuit clerk who implored them to return home without registering. The Evers brothers and their friends refused. Of this moment, Charles recalled "I kept thinking about crawling around in that mud in New Guinea, fighting for my country. Now I was going to be counted as a man." Eventually, the circuit clerk gave in to their demands and allowed them to register. However, when the men returned on Election Day to cast their ballots, they were met by a crowd of over two-hundred men armed with shotguns, pistols,

¹⁶ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, the Living*, 23-25; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 47.

and other weapons. The Evers brothers were also armed. Charles recalled carrying a switchblade knife and a .38 pistol in his pocket. Once inside the courthouse, a standoff ensued.

Medgar and Charles made attempts to cast their ballots and were repulsed by a group of twenty armed men, including two who according to Charles “shoved shotguns under our ribs.” Aware that they were grossly outnumbered and that law enforcement inside the courthouse refused to protect them, the brothers agreed to leave the building. Once outside, they were verbally assaulted by armed men who followed them down the street, leaning out their car windows and threatening the lives of any black man or woman who intended to vote. That night, Charles and Medgar armed themselves and waited for the men who had threatened them to appear, just as their father had done years before when he waited for night riders after his quarrel with the white store owner. No one came. Nonetheless, both men learned valuable lessons from their failed attempt. Tearing down Mississippi’s white supremacist barriers required extensive organization and contingency plans. There was power in numbers and no amount of violence white Mississippians would not dole out to maintain their power. “Liberating Mississippi from the Great White Fathers,” Charles explained, “would be a lot tougher than liberating Europe from the Nazis.”¹⁷

For the remainder of his time at Alcorn, Medgar Evers turned his attention toward a future legal career. In his estimation, acquiring a keen knowledge of Mississippi’s system and understanding its specificities was a key step toward challenging its racist

¹⁷ Evers, *Have No Fear*, 62-64.

barriers. Remembered by his fellow Alcorn classmates as a serious student, this plan corresponded to his calculating personality and love of education. But law school would cost money, and Evers needed a good job to start on the right foot in his career and marriage. After graduation, he took advantage of an opportunity from Dr. T.R.M. Howard, who offered Evers a job with the Magnolia Mutual Insurance Company. The company was considered one of the best places of employment for Alcorn graduates in Mississippi and provided its employees with steady paychecks. Howard, one of the most wealthy and prominent African Americans in the Mississippi Delta, was also outspoken on the issue of racial discrimination. In addition to founding Magnolia Mutual Insurance, he served as a founding member of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL), the most powerful organization advocating for black business power in Mississippi. For Evers, a position selling insurance to black Mississippians guaranteed him a job that did not depend upon the graciousness of whites, provided him with firsthand knowledge of the oppressed conditions black sharecroppers endured in the Delta, and allowed him to network with African American business and community leaders in the RCNL.¹⁸

Established in 1951, the RCNL was created as a black version of the Delta Council, the Mississippi Delta region's all-white chamber of commerce. In his promotions, Howard framed the RCNL as an organization set out to "harness the talents of proven leaders in business, the professions, education, and the church," with a goal of "reach[ing] the masses through the chosen leaders of the masses." Its primary platform emphasized white and black business cooperation and "greater black representation in the

¹⁸ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 56-58.

leading economic and political agencies such as the Mississippi Farm Bureau.” At the same time, Howard also utilized the organization to push for equal accommodations in education and voter registration. By focusing on the problem of starved black children deprived of an education on par with white children, Howard highlighted the hypocrisy of the white politicians who praised the doctrine of separate-but-equal but refused to enforce it across Mississippi. According to historians David Beito and Linda Royster Beito, Howard’s philosophy for improvement in Mississippi race relations owed its organizational design to Booker T. Washington’s philosophy of racial uplift, while his emphasis on utilizing the abilities of black community leaders to reach the masses incorporated a dose of W.E.B. DuBois’s doctrine of the talented tenth.¹⁹

After he was hired by Howard, Evers and Myrlie, who had married a few days prior, moved to Mound Bayou, Mississippi. There, in the town that made its name for having an almost all African American population, Evers went to work selling insurance policies to black customers in the Delta.²⁰ His experiences significantly influenced the way he interpreted the situation for blacks in Mississippi. In Mound Bayou, Evers came face to face with a level of black impoverishment and disfranchisement that shocked him despite having been born and raised in the state. As an insurance salesman, Evers was required to sell life insurance policies door to door that brought him to the shacks of poor black sharecroppers. When he arrived home, he was desperate to tell his wife stories of his travels and describe the terrible conditions of the sharecroppers’ homes. He told her “of children without shoes, without proper clothing; of adults with nothing to eat; of

¹⁹ Beito and Beito, *Black Maverick*, 71.

²⁰ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, the Living*, 72.

unsanitary conditions no self-respecting farmer would permit in his pigpen.” Their sense of indifference, whether it was real or somewhat exaggerated by Evers, caused him further dissatisfaction. Yet “his anger was not really with them,” Myrlie Evers added, “for he returned to them again and again with gifts and help. His anger was with his own frustration at not being able to change it all.”²¹

Evers’ experiences with the Magnolia Mutual Insurance Company, as well as his developing professional relationship with Howard, had a deep and profound effect on his conception of how substantial white supremacist barriers against black progress were in Mississippi. While his childhood was not without its difficulties, his parents had worked hard to make sure the family was never destitute. Evers often confessed to his wife that the level of hopelessness and deprivation he had seen in the Delta sharecroppers’ shacks was beyond his comprehension. Historian Charles M. Payne noted Evers’ experiences working for the insurance company served as a new kind of education and exacerbated the anger already within him. These observations also informed his comparisons between the oppressive conditions faced by black Delta sharecroppers and the aggrieved, landless Kikuyu in Kenya. Though each faced distinctive systems of governance, both groups existed within a global system of white supremacy in which the exploitation and control of black bodies served as the foundation of economic and political power. In establishing relationships with poor black sharecroppers, Evers earned their trust, gleaned valuable information about how Mississippi’s white power structure maintained power over its

²¹ Ibid, 79.

Delta inhabitants, and began formulating a framework of action that would ultimately become transnational in scope.²²

At the same time, Evers' professional relationship with Howard provided him the opportunity to begin actively opposing the established system of white supremacy through work with the RCNL. In 1951, Evers joined the organization and was quickly appointed its program director. In much the same way the KAU functioned in Kenya, the RCNL's program of racial uplift sought to hold the white power structure accountable for its failures to provide equal accommodations and fairness between the races. This did not mean, however, the organization was accepting of racial segregation. Just as the KAU intended to give voice to people silenced through government policies, the RCNL aimed to provide those opportunities for Mississippi's black population. Its work served to embolden blacks to stand up and be recognized for the contributions to Mississippi society and demand full access to the political system. As program director, Evers played a central role in reinforcing a sense of self-worth among its members and learned important lessons about leadership, grassroots organizing, and promotion.²³

It was also through the RCNL that Evers established lasting relationships with individuals who would prove critical assets, and at times detriments, to the success of his civil rights work in Mississippi. This included Amzie Moore and Aaron Henry, both fellow veterans and local activists who openly opposed the racial status quo. Moore hailed from a plantation in the Delta county of Grenada and settled in the town of Cleveland, Mississippi. There, he put his entrepreneurial spirit to good use and opened a

²² Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 49, 85.

²³ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 57.

combination service station and restaurant that catered to customers of both races. Henry, a pharmacist from the Delta town of Clarksdale, had been fortunate to grow up within a slightly more progressive black community than existed in most other areas of the state. For this reason, he attended one of Mississippi's few all-black high schools and was introduced at an early age to the prospect of enacting change through community action. While very different in personality, the two men shared a common desire to stir the local black community to action that deeply resonated with Evers. They were also active members of the NAACP, which until he joined the RCNL, Evers knew little about.²⁴

That he was unfamiliar with the NAACP until he joined the RCNL seems, on its face, a curious circumstance, especially given his interest in voter registration following his return to Mississippi after the war. Since its inception in 1909, the NAACP had served as the foremost organization advocating for black civil rights in America, highlighting and seeking to eliminate racial oppression within the national political, economic, and social climate. Comprised of dedicated, resolute individuals determined to change the nature of race relations and protect African American citizens in the exercise of their rights, the organization tackled white supremacy in all its forms at both state and federal levels. However, the NAACP's own operational trajectory, coupled with the horrifyingly oppressive nature of Mississippi's white supremacist system, minimized the scope and impact of the organization in the pre-war period. Its connection with the RCNL opened much-needed avenues to black Mississippians worried about associating with an

²⁴ Clarksdale's more progressive atmosphere – by Delta standards – was largely due to its history of Black and Tan Republicanism during the Reconstruction Era, when black freedmen actively participated in Republican Party politics. Ibid, 29-33, 56-58.

Association dedicated to dismantling white supremacy. According to David Beito and Linda Royster Beito, the RCNL “acted as a kind of advanced guard for the NAACP” in that it encouraged blacks to risk openly associating with the Association.²⁵

In the first several decades of its existence, the NAACP declared its primary organizational directive was the fight to eliminate racially motivated mob violence - most often in the form of lynching - throughout the nation. The broad campaign against vigilante mob violence was intended to bring about an end to the use of terror tactics as the primary means of forcing African Americans to remain in positions of socioeconomic subservience. By calling attention to the horrors and realities of such violence, the Association also hoped its campaign could be used to foster support among white and black Americans for extensive reforms in the areas of education, employment, housing, and voting. For these reasons, the NAACP dedicated enormous amounts of funding and manpower to publicizing the horrors of lynching throughout the nation, lobbying government leaders to sponsor and pass federal antilynching legislation, and calling on elected officials and American citizens to put an end to vigilante mob violence and uphold the rights of African Americans as full citizens under the protection of the law.²⁶

Initially, the earliest attempts by the NAACP to bring the issue of mob violence to the forefront of national debate came in its formation of organizational anti-lynching rallies, marches, and the publication of informational pamphlets citing lynching statistics. However, while this approach was successful in calling attention to the reality that

²⁵ Beito and Beito, *Black Maverick*, 78.

²⁶ Robert L. Zagando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1980), 18.

lynching was a foremost stain on the American sociocultural fabric, it was not until World War I that the NAACP's approach to the issue underwent significant transformation. With the onset of American participation in the conflict, W.E.B. Du Bois, who served as both editor of the Association magazine *Crisis* and Director of Publicity and Research, encouraged African Americans to "close ranks," support the war effort, and "set aside their special grievances" in light of the gravity of the conflict and the horrific implications of German "military despotism," arguing "that which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and the darker races for equality, freedom, and democracy."²⁷ In response to this July 1918 directive, scores of African Americans joined the armed forces, supported war bond drives, and temporarily put aside their resentment over racial injustices. However, the move to "close ranks" did not stem the tide of racial violence, as lynchings and race riots occurred in record numbers into the early post-war years (in 1919 alone, twenty-five race riots and seventy-six lynchings of African Americans occurred in the United States). Black soldiers became

²⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Close Ranks," *The Crisis*, vol. 16, no. 3 (July 1918): 111. The reaction of African American leaders to "Closed Ranks" was controversial, as more militant black leaders such as William M. Trotter, founder of the National Equal Rights League, and some of Du Bois' NAACP colleagues, including Archibald Grimke, denounced the directive as mistake, reeking of accommodationism at a time when the special grievances of African Americans should be brought to the fore. The reasoning behind Du Bois' directive continues to be of significant debate among historians today, as some scholars, including Mark Ellis and David Levering Lewis, assert that Du Bois agreed to speak out in support of the war effort after having struck a deal with the army in exchange for a captaincy, while others, including Manning Marable, Jack. B. Moore, and David Howard-Pitney, argue that "Close Ranks" fit into Du Bois' beliefs that African American contributions to the war effort would aid in a reduction of white resentment against black Americans and spur on racial progress. For further discussion of the historical debate regarding the reasoning behind Du Bois' decision to pen "Close Ranks" see William Jordan, "The Damnable Dilemma: African American Accommodation and Protest During World War I," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (March 1995): 1562-1583; Mark Ellis, "'Closing Ranks' and 'Seeking Honors,': W.E.B. Du Bois in World War I," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 79 (June 1992): 96-124.

common targets, inciting the hatred of fellow white serviceman and other Americans determined to remind blacks of their second-class status in society.²⁸

Incensed by the reality that “closing ranks” had not resulted in the alleviation of racial discrimination in the armed forces or the domestic sphere, black Americans found themselves facing a post-war world in which, despite their having taken part in the fight to “save the world for democracy,” they remained second-class citizens. Within the ranks of the NAACP, the increase in wartime racial violence served as a catalyst for the organization to strengthen its stand against lynching and transform the means through which it operated at national and local levels. In 1916, James Weldon Johnson was hired as a field secretary for the purposes of establishing, organizing, and supervising local Association branches. In order to move forward and succeed in bringing about an end to white supremacy and mob violence, Johnson, who four years later went on to become the organization’s first black Executive Secretary, argued that the NAACP needed a strong network of branches which the Association could utilize for information collection, membership drives, and other organizational initiatives.

Johnson’s appointment as a field secretary was followed up two years later by the hiring of Walter F. White as Assistant Executive Secretary. Born and raised in Georgia, White was encouraged by Johnson to join the NAACP after meeting the field secretary in Atlanta. With a light complexion and blue eyes, White became an asset to the organization as an investigator of Southern lynchings because of his ability to pass as a white journalist, and later as Executive Secretary. Both men, having experienced first-

²⁸ Zagrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching*, 6, 34. Lynching statistics provided to the author by the archives at Tuskegee Institute, 1979.

hand the horrors of mob violence, took to their work with great determination and diligence, spearheading the campaign for a federal antilynching law and encouraging the growth of the organization through fundraising efforts, membership drives, and nationwide publicity campaigns.²⁹

By the 1920s, the NAACP expanded its campaign against lynching to include the creation of a separate legal defense fund, needed by the Association to cover the cost of legal expenses incurred in the defense of black citizens charged with violating the cultural, legal, and extralegal mores and regulations throughout the nation, particularly in the South. In addition, the fund was also expanded to cover the cost of the organization's campaign to end the white primary in Texas, publicize widespread voter disfranchisement, and fight against segregated education. Through the recruitment of bright young lawyers to the NAACP legal defense staff and the decision to expand the organization's directive against white supremacy and mob violence to an inclusion of efforts to push for an end to discrimination in voting and education, the Association hoped to use litigation as a tool for further recruiting black members and financial support throughout the South.³⁰ As a result, by the onset of World War II, the NAACP had established itself as the leading organization fighting for civil rights in all walks of American life.

²⁹ Johnson, who originally hailed from Florida, had barely escaped being lynched in Jacksonville for sitting and talking with a woman mistakenly thought to be white by a local mob, while White had suffered through the 1906 Atlanta race riot as a child. Ibid, 32-34.

³⁰ Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 32-33.

Part and parcel of a renewed determination for change was the rise of wartime campaigns among African Americans calling for an end to fascism abroad and racism at home. The most prominent - the Double V Campaign - arose in response to a race riots and white attacks on black servicemen across the nation. Many African Americans, including leading members of the NAACP, threw off speculation they would once again “close ranks” and set aside their “special grievances” as the conflict raged across the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa. In addition to the growing instances of violence directed at black citizens and servicemen during wartime, the rhetoric and concept fueling the Double V was further bolstered by the promises of the Atlantic Charter, utilized by President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, that “committed the Allied Powers to improving the quality of life for the world’s inhabitants, and promised a peace that would secure for all peoples the Four Freedoms, especially freedom from fear and want,” NAACP leaders declared that a fight to ensure democracy abroad must also include a fight to ensure the same principles at home.³¹

Initially brought to the attention of the NAACP and African Americans through press coverage of West African groups by George Padmore in 1942, who demanded that “Churchill clarify the meaning of the Atlantic Charter for Nigeria,” the NAACP picked up on the fight to lobby Roosevelt “on the importance of the charter’s application to all peoples.” Specifically, Walter White tied the fight against colonialism to the fight for freedom at home in America, arguing the Atlantic Charter “would be hypocritical if confined to those of white race, but if applied to all, it could have an important effect

³¹ Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*, 14-17.

upon peoples of color throughout the world and on American domestic racial politics.”³²

In order to expand on its demand for self-determination for peoples of color around the world, The NAACP brought W.E.B. Du Bois back into the administrative fold as the Director of Special Research in 1944. Tasked with guiding the Association on anticolonial issues and “fight for the emancipation of the world,” he immediately set out to revive its sponsorship of the Pan-African Congress. Scheduled to meet in 1945, the Pan-African Congress called together black intellectual and political leaders from around the world to discuss the future of people of color in Africa and the Caribbean and declared for their right to rule themselves. Within the NAACP, bitter disagreements over tactics to achieve those ends converged with the egos of Du Bois and White that threatened to muddle the Association’s efforts moving forward. But as the war raged on, the NAACP publicly positioned itself as an organization viewing the quest for black liberation at home through a transnational framework.³³

At home, African Americans actively spoke out against racism in all walks of life. On the fronts and on stateside military bases, black servicemen wrote to family members, friends, and black newspapers of their desire to return home to a land without Jim Crow. At the same time, African Americans in the labor industry threatened to march, one hundred thousand strong, in Washington D.C. to protest employment discrimination in the defense industries.³⁴ As a result of its participation in the fight to ensure democracy

³² Von Eschen, *Race and Empire*, 26.

³³ Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941-1960*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 37-43.

³⁴ Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 83-86; Daniel S. Davis, *Mr. Black Labor: The Story of A. Philip Randolph, Father of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1972).

abroad and end racism at home, the NAACP grew in popularity and gained never-before-seen levels of support from African Americans, even throughout the most oppressive regions of the South. Thus, when Medgar Evers returned to Mississippi in 1946, following his service in the United States army, the NAACP was experiencing a boom in popularity within the state. In the summer of 1952, when Myrlie Evers noted that her husband's anger with the white supremacist system reached its peak and his work with the RCNL entered him into the activist fold, he joined the NAACP. It was to be the beginning of a career with the organization that would place him firmly in the center of the political and social fight against segregation in Mississippi until his death ten years later.

By 1953, black membership had risen to 1,600 from 377 in 1940, and black voter registration, which served as a primary NAACP directive, also increased from 2,000 in 1940 to around 20,000 by 1953. In addition to the new sense of assertiveness among African-Americans following the war, David Beito and Linda Royster Beito argued that its association with the RCNL spurred the growth of the Mississippi NAACP. "During the 1940s," they argued, "many blacks had avoided identification with the NAACP out of fear of angering whites, many of whom considered it a communist front." While it mainly functioned as an organization that facilitated autonomous committees and sponsored public rallies, however, it also emboldened blacks to take the risk of open participation in the NAACP.³⁵ Moore and Henry were particularly zealous about conducting NAACP

³⁵ Beito and Beito, *Black Maverick*, 78.

membership drives, and together with Evers worked whatever avenues were available to spread word of the organization's directives.

L.C. Dorsey, a social worker born on a cotton plantation in Washington County who joined the Mississippi movement in the 1960s, recalled hearing Moore speak at her church in the early 1950s. To disguise his intentions from suspicious whites, Moore traveled around the state with a barbershop quartet and scheduled concerts in local black churches. Dorsey noted "there would always really be some singing," but when Moore visited he also spoke to the congregation about the NAACP and the work of its members across the state.³⁶ Moore's strategy, though stealth in design, was flamboyant in its aims and exemplified a key lesson about grassroots organizing. Just as sacred oaths played vital roles in reinforcing connections that elicited trust, fostered unity, and inspired action among the Kikuyu in Kenya, blacks in Mississippi reinforced those bonds through collective celebrations and prayer. The utilization of singing as a grassroots tool and instrument for overcoming fears was best explained by Unita Blackwell, a local movement participant from Mayersville, Mississippi. "Singing brought the people in and held us together," she noted. "We'd preach freedom and then we'd sing freedom, and everybody got it."³⁷ The freedom Moore preached and sang about included campaigns against segregated public facilities. In 1953, the RCNL launched a campaign concerned with enforcing the "equal" aspect of the separate but equal mandate. The black community was encouraged to boycott gas stations that would not allow black patrons to

³⁶ Interview with L.C. Dorsey, reprinted in Aaron Henry and Constance Curry, *Aaron Henry: The Fire Ever Burning* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 228.

³⁷ Unita Blackwell, *Barefootin': Life Lessons From the Road to Freedom*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 90.

use the restrooms. The slogan “DON’T BUY GAS WHERE WE CAN’T USE THE WASHROOM” was printed on over fifty thousand bumper stickers and handed out by Evers, Henry, Moore, Howard, and other RCNL members. At the same time, the men worked to construct programs to educate black Mississippians about basic voter registration procedures and conduct membership campaigns for the NAACP.³⁸

Yet while these campaigns represented important steps in the development of a sustained movement in Mississippi, low voter registration and widespread economic disfranchisement of black Mississippians remained the norm. In addition, the return of armed forces veterans to the state also resulted in an upswing in racial violence aimed at black servicemen, many of whom were determined to exercise the right to vote, just as Medgar and Charles Evers had done. One example occurred on June 12, 1946, when Etoy Fletcher, a decorated black army veteran recently returned home from a twenty-three-month deployment in the South Pacific, entered the office of the Rankin County Circuit Clerk in the small town of Brandon, Mississippi, located a few miles outside of Jackson, with the intent to register to vote in the state’s upcoming primary election. Upon entrance to the courthouse, Fletcher was directed to speak to an official responsible for veterans’ affairs, who promptly relayed to him a stern message that he would not be allowed to register because of his race. As he exited the building, Fletcher was abducted by a handful of white men, taken out to the woods, and beaten with a steel cable. Afterwards, his assailants drove Fletcher back into town and warned him any further attempts to vote would result in his death. A signed affidavit detailing Fletcher’s experience was then

³⁸ Ibid, 80-81.

forwarded to the NAACP and released to the public by the national office in New York. When questioned about the affair by reporters, the circuit clerk and sheriff in Brandon denied any knowledge of the incident.³⁹

Ten days after the attack on Fletcher, Senator Theodore G. Bilbo, up for reelection to the United States Senate at age sixty-nine, spoke to a crowd of enthusiastic campaign supporters in the town of Laurel. His speech contained an anti-Negro tirade concerning the upcoming primary election in which black Mississippians, several of whom were military veterans, were determined to vote. Aware of the challenge to the state's system of white supremacy the prospect of African-American votes presented, as well as his own senate seat, Bilbo issued a passionate plea to the crowd before him, calling on every "red-blooded Anglo-Saxon man in Mississippi to resort to any means to keep hundreds of Negroes from the polls in the July 2nd primary," adding that "if you don't know what that means, you are just not up on your persuasive measures." His incendiary remarks, which were also carried over local radio to listeners throughout the region, came on the heels of the public release of a letter five days earlier that Bilbo had addressed to his campaign opponents. In it, he explicitly declared that "thousands of Negroes, especially Negro soldiers who are exempt from paying poll taxes are registering or attempting to register" and "should not be permitted to do." Furthermore, he warned his opponents that "any straddling or dodging or equivocation on this important issue...must necessarily be construed as a desire on your part not only to secure the Negro

³⁹ "Bilbo Urges Mississippi Men to Employ 'Any Means' To Bar Negroes from Voting," *New York Times*, June 23, 1946; Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 107-108.

vote...but an open avowal of Negro voting and Negro control of the political life of our state.”⁴⁰

Because of his very public encouragement of black voter intimidation in the 1946 campaign, Bilbo was brought up on charges of voter fraud before the U.S. Senate Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures. The Committee was chaired by Allen Ellender of Louisiana, who shared the same feelings of disdain for outside agitation into Southern affairs.⁴¹ The charges of voter intimidation were brought against Bilbo by the local chapter of the National Progressive Voters League, organized by secretary of the Jackson branch of the NAACP in 1944.⁴² In response, Bilbo made sure to connect any efforts to contest his reelection with the NAACP and demonize the organization at any opportunity. As part of his defense, Bilbo utilized the growing Cold War-inspired hysteria among white Southerners regarding the threat of communism.⁴³ In a similar fashion to the attacks on Kenyatta, Bilbo publicly blamed “communist-inspired” elements

⁴⁰ “Veteran Beaten, Bilbo Urges Violence to Stop the Negro Vote,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 29, 1946; “Bilbo Seeks Pact Barring Negro Vote,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 22, 1946; “Bilbo Urges Mississippi Men to Employ ‘Any Means’ to Bar Negroes from Voting,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1946.

⁴¹ “Senate Committee to Probe Bilbo Victory: Edgar Brown Succeeds in Getting Investigation of Senator Bilbo,” *Atlanta Daily World*, September 7, 1946.

⁴² “Mississippi Voters League Leads Bilbo Fight,” *Atlanta Daily World*, December 13, 1946; “Bilbo Faces Two Way Tilt as Probe Opens,” *Atlanta Daily World*, December 13, 1946; “Lid Off at Bilbo Hearing,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 7, 1946; Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 100-101.

⁴³ This hysteria was a holdover from the first red scare following the end of World War I, when the NAACP and other groups advocating for racial equality and justice found themselves caught up in accusations of being tied to communist organizations, both on the domestic and international fronts. In the 1930s, the NAACP’s battle with the International Labor Defense arm of the American Communist Party over representation of the Scottsboro Boys during their trials for rape in Alabama, served as a primary example of the Association’s concern that being painted as a communist or communist-inspired organization would hinder NAACP efforts to lobby the U.S. government for antilynching legislation and other civil rights initiatives. For more on the Scottsboro cases, see Dan T. Carter’s *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969). For more on the NAACP’s concerns about communist-infiltration and accusations, see David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, Plummer, *Rising Wind*; Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, and Gerald Horne, *Black and Red*.

in Mississippi for any attempts to oust him from power. His main enemy was the NAACP, which he argued plotted with the communist party to bring about his political demise. Additionally, he claimed that the reasoning behind his prosecution lay in his “conviction and ideologies which are opposed to the great objectives of the all-out Negro groups and communist groups of America.”⁴⁴ Despite his obvious guilt, the committee divided along partisan political lines. Democratic members voted to acquit Bilbo of any wrongdoing, while Republicans voted to convict him. However, the Republican-controlled Senate refused to seat Bilbo, leading to a filibuster by Ellender. It might have droned on endlessly if not for Bilbo’s failing health eventually breaking the stalemate. He soon returned home to Mississippi where he died a few months later of mouth cancer.⁴⁵

Despite his death, Bilbo’s entrenchment and the Senate’s power to protect his efforts to suppress the black vote reinforced how difficult it was to break through the walls of white supremacy in Mississippi. Because of this, the National Office of the NAACP tended to place Mississippi low on the list of states it targeted in its national campaigns. Historian John Dittmer noted “the New York national NAACP office...gave low priority to work in Mississippi, believing that change must first come to the border states before the Deep South could be breached. National officials visited the state during the Depression years, but the organization’s work in Mississippi consisted mainly of limited solicitation of memberships.”⁴⁶ Though a target of criticism, the NAACP’s policy to first focus on breaking through in the border states was not without some degree of

⁴⁴ “Bilbo Blames All on the NAACP,” *Atlanta Daily World*, December 20, 1946.

⁴⁵ Dittmer, *Local People*, 9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 28-29.

strategic merit. The nature of economic disfranchisement in Mississippi was so severe, a large majority of black citizens lived in abject poverty in rural areas. Just as the Kikuyu's loss of land in the face of colonial policies drove them from their ancestral homes and locked them into a system of peonage, black sharecroppers in Mississippi remained trapped in a system that tied them to the land for the benefit of white landowners. The size of the overwhelmingly poor, rural black population highlighted the efficacy of the white power structure. To break through its barriers required organizational approaches focused on cultivating relationships between people of all economic backgrounds as the foundation for solidarity and collective action.

One of the individuals who understood this was Ella Baker. As a full-time assistant field secretary for the NAACP, she traveled the country to speak at fundraisers, launch membership drives, and interact with organization members. In the process, she gravitated to groups of black Southerners who were not organized, in the hopes that she could enlist their help to expand the base of the Association.⁴⁷ In a March 1941 letter to Assistant Secretary Roy Wilkins from Birmingham, Alabama, Baker relayed that she had spent the morning with a local pastor and NAACP member visiting “barber shops, filling stations, grocery stores, and housewives.”⁴⁸ In another letter to Wilkins written during a trip to Florida, Baker mentioned that as a way of “increasing the *Crisis* circulation and bolstering my campaign efforts,” she purported to visit “some of the pool-rooms, boot black parlors, bars and grilles” and “secure individual memberships if possible”, and in a

⁴⁷ Barbra Ransby, *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 114-115.

⁴⁸ Ella Baker, letter to Roy Wilkins, March 20, 1941, NAACP Papers, Part 17, National Staff Files, 1940-1955, reel 14.

letter to Wilkins from Montgomery, Alabama, Baker relayed that she expected to get “at least fifty new memberships” from the local branch of the International Longshoreman’s Association.⁴⁹ After visiting branches throughout the South, Baker also kept up a steady stream of correspondence with branch presidents and other leaders, in addition to providing long and detailed briefs over the state of each individual branch to Wilkins and others in the national office.

Baker was not the only field secretary spending large amounts of time on the road. In 1945, Leroy E. Carter of Atlanta, Georgia, joined the national staff as an assistant field secretary. For the first few months of his employment, he served as an assistant to field secretary Daisy Lampkin, traveling throughout the Midwest and parts of the upper East Coast. As a native Southerner, Carter’s understanding of the realities of racial oppression within the deep South was evident, particularly when he utilized the phrase “a bit of Mississippi” to describe the degree of intimidation faced by black workers in the mining town of Brownsville, Pennsylvania.⁵⁰ His travels in Mississippi reinforced the dire state of the Association there. In January of 1942, he visited twenty-two branches. In Greenwood, he reported “no success in organizing branch – leaders afraid,” while in Gulfport, he noted that the branch was becoming extinct. In Vicksburg, he declared that the branch leadership was “very poor.” However, in some areas of the state, his reports were more promising. In Greenville, he noted that local black citizens were enthusiastic

⁴⁹ Ella Baker, letter to Roy Wilkins, March 11, 1942, NAACP Papers, Part 17, National Staff Files, 1940-1955., Ella Baker, letter to Roy Wilkins, April 1, 1942, NAACP Papers, Part 17, National Staff Files, 1940-1955, reel 14.

⁵⁰ Leroy E. Carter, memorandum to Ella Baker, Walter White, and Roy Wilkins, December 3, 1945, NAACP Papers, Part 17, LeRoy Carter General Staff File, 1945-1947, reel 3.

about the branch meeting, held elections, and launched a voter and membership campaign, and in Natchez, located in the Mississippi Delta county that neighbored the town of Greenwood, he announced the local branch was closing in on reaching its goal of two-hundred members.⁵¹

Another field secretary who traveled extensively through Mississippi was Madison S. Jones, who in 1942 wrote a lengthy memorandum to Walter White about his trip through the state. In Shibuta, Mississippi, Jones reported a conversation he had with a local NAACP member, who had declared the Shibuta branch as inactive for several years. Jones also relayed to White the story of the “Shibuta Affair,” in which two fourteen-year-old boys, Ernest Green and Charlie Lang, were lynched after being spotted by white passersby while playing with a thirteen-year-old white girl and falsely accused of rape. According to the cousin of one of the boys who spoke with Jones about the incident, Green and Lang were “emasculated, then pliers were taken and pieces of flesh were torn from their bodies. One boy was made to open his mouth and a screw driver was pushed down his throat so that the end of it protruded through the side of his neck.” Following the lynching, Jones continued, “the white people came to their families and told them that they were through with them, you may have them.” The families of the boys, it was noted, said “we don’t want them either and the county had to bury them.” Finally, Jones concluded, even with two months having passed since the lynching, there remained a sense of “terror and fear” in nearby Meridian, Mississippi.⁵²

⁵¹ Leroy E. Carter, notes on Mississippi Visits, January 1947, NAACP Papers, Part 17, LeRoy Carter General Staff File, 1945-1947, reel 3.

⁵² Madison S. Jones, Jr., memorandum to Walter White, December 1942, NAACP Papers, Part 17, Madison S. Jones General Staff File, 1942, reel 8.

In light of the high probability for violence and intimidation, it was oftentimes difficult for field secretaries to properly grasp which solutions would work for certain branches and not for others. However, in the mind of Ella Baker, the foremost solution was to hire more field secretaries and build up working branches to facilitate the growth of the Association in the most dangerous, deepest regions in the South. In an October 1945 memo to Walter White, Baker, by then the Director of Branches, unleashed her thoughts regarding the overall health and status of the branch system. “I am still worried about our branch structure,” she explained, “and every trip out into the field increases this fear.” In an age where “the people are organization-conscious,” she maintained, “we are in a competition not only with forces which are opposed to our program, but also with forces that seem to be following our program. I am not as much interested in the preservation of the NAACP as an organization as such as much as I am interested in keeping the NAACP with its full force and effect because I believe that it is the only organization that can do the job that must be done.” The organization could not survive, she asserted, “unless there is the firmest foundation built up by our working branches in addition the National Office.” The way to do so, she concluded, was to set up a Regional Office in Atlanta, one in the Midwest, and put more field workers in the field.”⁵³

Over the course of the next decade, the NAACP sought to sponsor more leadership conferences, conduct workshops for local organizers, and establish regional offices that enhanced the lines of communication between the various branches throughout the South. However, on account of her growing disillusion with the direction

⁵³ Ella Baker, memorandum to Walter White, October 2, 1945, Papers of Ella Baker, Box 3, File 10, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY.

of the organization, Baker left the NAACP in 1946. Her direct manner of speaking and no-nonsense personality was considered abrasive by some of her colleagues, including Walter White. Moreover, Barbra Ransby argued “the view that common people were capable of identifying the problems they faced and learning how to address them was shared by some of Baker’s NAACP colleagues, but not all,” resulted in growing disagreements between Baker and other members of the national staff.⁵⁴ Regardless, Baker’s presence within the organization continued to echo long after she had left to pursue other means of community organizing, and her warnings reverberated against the Association’s walls. While the NAACP had won essential legal victories and gained support and publicity in doing so, many local branches, particular in the deep South, continued to falter under the yoke of unyielding racial oppression. Thus, despite the successful membership drives of a few local branches, in 1952 when Evers joined the NAACP in the hopes that it would serve as the vehicle to best push for black equality and an end to white supremacy in Mississippi, the organization at the state level was constantly under attack and struggling to keep its head above water.

Around the time, Evers first caught wind of the stories of violence and rebellion coming out of Kenya, which piqued his interest and influenced the ways he analyzed the problem of racial oppression in Mississippi. In his autobiography, Evers’ brother Charles noted that earlier that year, both men began to hear reports over the shortwave radio and read newspaper articles about Kenyatta and the Mau Maus. Inspired by the stories of violence against the whites of Kenya and the image of Kenyatta that the journalists

⁵⁴ Ransby, *Ella Baker*, 142.

painted, Medgar Evers became obsessed with Kenyatta, the Mau Maus, and the idea of violent reprisal as a means to fight back against the system of white supremacy in Mississippi. “We learned all we could about Kenyatta,” Charles Evers explained. “Fearless, they all said Kenyatta was fearless...[he] always seemed to be in jail, or threatened with detention. But whites didn’t scare him. He vowed to press on until Kenya was free. That inspired Medgar and me so much. We wanted to free *our* people.”⁵⁵ Yet while both the Evers brothers’ harbored ideas about freeing Mississippi’s black population from the shackles of white oppression, the local mainstream newspapers were certainly not painting Kenyatta and the Mau Maus as freedom fighters.

In fact, from the time the British declared an official state of emergency in Kenya in October 1952 until the trial and conviction of Kenyatta the following April, the local paper of record for Mississippi, the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, printed no more than a handful of articles on Africa in its daily editions. The first article relating to the Mau Mau uprising printed in the *Clarion-Ledger* was found in the January 26, 1953 issue, almost three full months after the official State of Emergency began. The reasoning behind its inclusion can most likely be found in the subject matter of the article - the brutal murder of the Ruck family - British colonists who were violently hacked to death by local Kikuyu loyal to the Mau Mau cause. The Rucks, according to David Anderson, “represented everything that Kenya’s Europeans held dear. Both were good looking, sociable and popular, playing an active part in settler society.” Additionally, their six-

⁵⁵ Evers and Szanton, *Have No Fear*, 75. See also Myrlie Evers-Williams and Manning Marable, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers: A Heroes Life and Legacy Revealed Through his Writings, Letters, and Speeches* (New York: Basic Civitas Books. 2006), 11-12.

year-old son, murdered alongside his parents, had been a familiar face playing games among the children of the Kikuyu workers who labored for the Rucks. The triple murder, which caused a sensation throughout the western world, was, according to David Anderson, “the definitive moment of the war for the white highlanders [of Kenya].”⁵⁶ The murders were also, according to the subject of the AP article reprinted in the *Clarion-Ledger*, the work of terrorists.⁵⁷ What was even more horrifying, at least in the minds of white settlers in Kenya and their allies throughout the western world, was that the murders had been perpetrated upon white settlers – “typical of ‘the very best type of settler’ that Kenya had hoped to attract in the post-war years” – by Kenyans who had stepped far beyond their boundaries, both literally and figuratively.⁵⁸

That the coverage afforded to the Mau Maus in the *Clarion-Ledger* focused mainly on black on white violence throughout Kenya was most likely related to the fact that much of the information about the Mau Maus and their violent acts was based on misconceptions about the nature of the uprising fed by the British colonial government to reporters and rehashed in newspaper articles throughout the western world. In addition, the *Clarion-Ledger* was not only the paper of record for Mississippi, it also openly advocated for white supremacy in its editorials and emphasized to its readers that most “race agitators” in the Mississippi were outsiders with communist connections. Thus, when the news of violent acts such as the Ruck murder came sweeping out of Kenya, it was just the type of negative, horrifying story of native black on white savagery the

⁵⁶ Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 93.

⁵⁷ “Kenya Terrorists Kill British Trio,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 26, 1953.

⁵⁸ Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 93. For more on the Ruck murders and their significance as a turning point in the war, see Edgerton, *Mau Mau: An African Crucible*, 71-72.

Clarion-Ledger often associated with African anti-colonial movements. In addition, what also did not help the case of the Mau Maus, insofar as their newspaper coverage in the *Clarion-Ledger* was concerned, was also that the high rate of fatalities perpetrated by the Mau Mau on Kikuyu loyal to the British government fostered an image that the Mau Mau were bloodthirsty villains, driven by mysterious rituals, who not only murdered their innocent white protectors, but their own people as well.

The *Greenville Delta-Democrat Times*, a smaller paper printed in the Delta region and run by editor Hodding Carter II, printed a few articles about the uprising in its early months. Among the white newspaper editors in Mississippi, Carter was perhaps seen as the state's most liberal white editor. A bit of a risk-taker, as well as an avowed progressive on matters of race relations, Carter used his newspaper to speak out against lynchings and other forms of extralegal violence in Mississippi, in addition to speaking out against the powerful Mississippi Senator Bilbo. According to his daughter, Carter's guiding principle "was that a newspaper should cover the news of the community in a way that represents the entire community while opposing what undermines the community."⁵⁹ However, despite Carter's determination to speak out against injustices perpetrated against the African American community in Mississippi, his criticisms of the system of white supremacy only went so far. While he opposed white on black violence, he stood in opposition to a federal anti-lynching bill, and while he advocated for better

⁵⁹ Ginger Rudeseal Carter, "Hodding Carter, Jr., and the Delta Democrat-Times," in David R. Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), 272.

education of black children, he did not come out in support of integration, but rather a system of equal, yet segregated, schools.⁶⁰

In his autobiography, Charles Evers noted he and Medgar read a few articles on Kenyatta in the Greenville paper, yet much like the articles printed in the *Clarion-Ledger*, the coverage was similar in tone and labeled the Mau Maus a terrorist group. On October 21, 1952, the *Delta-Democrat Times* printed a UP story that described Kenyatta as the “western-educated leader of the 100,000-strong Kenya African Union believed the front organization for the anti-white Mau Mau,” whose main announced aim was the driving out of the white man from Kenya for good.⁶¹ Two days later, a follow up article off the UP wire was printed on the situation, detailing the murder of one of the loyalist Kikuyu chiefs by “Mau Mau terrorists wielding long knives” which they used to hack their victim to death.⁶² While the article’s publication was significant given that the story was not focused on black on white violence, it still contained no discussion of the specific grievances of the Mau Maus or the history of the Kikuyu in Kenya.

One local black newspaper that did provide more widespread analysis of the Kenya uprising, and that both the Evers brothers read often, was the *Jackson Advocate*. The largest African American newspaper in Mississippi, it provided more extensive coverage of decolonization efforts in Africa than any of the white, mainstream Mississippi dailies. Published in Jackson, Mississippi, the *Jackson Advocate* had a history

⁶⁰ Dittmer, *Local People*, 67.

⁶¹ “86 Prominent Negroes Nabbed As Roundup of Terrorists Starts, Secret Group Blamed For Crimes,” *Greenville Delta-Democrat Times*, October 21, 1952.

⁶² “Police Rush to Kenya Forest After Terrorists Kill Leader,” *Greenville Delta-Democrat Times*, October 23, 1952.

of openly advocating for black voting rights. For this reason, it was considered “radical” by many of its critics.⁶³ Its editor, Percy Greene, who had been born in Jackson, was one of the state’s leading voting rights and equalized education activists throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, campaigning for Harry Truman in the black community during the contentious election of 1948, in which Southern democrats, known as the Dixiecrats, split from the Democratic Party and nominated their own candidate, Strom Thurmond, on the failed bid for the presidency. In light of the success of his campaign for Truman, Greene established the Mississippi State Democratic Association (MSDA), serving as its first president. Alongside the NAACP and the Progressive Voters’ League, the MSDA worked throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s to register black voters throughout the state.⁶⁴

⁶³ Julius E. Thompson, *The Black Press in Mississippi, 1865-1985* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1993), 27.

⁶⁴ Dittmer, *Local People*, 28. In 1954, following the handing down of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Greene refused to come out in support of a desegregated school system, a conservative stance that earned him the derision of many black Mississippians throughout the state. Greene’s popularity among black Mississippians and civil rights activists within the state then plummeted two years later when he agreed to become a paid informant for the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, a state agency created with the intent to oversee and protect the system of white supremacy within Mississippi. As a result, Greene attacked leading civil rights advocates in the pages of the *Jackson Advocate*. Often accusing civil rights activists of communist agitation, Greene’s paper continued to advocate for a moderate stance on race relations, calling for equality under the flag of segregation. Perhaps Greene’s most egregious act, insofar as his work as an informant was concerned, revolved around the death of Evers. According to Caryl A. Cooper, Greene provided the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission with information about Evers’ activities. While no direct link was ever made to the specific information provided by Greene and the death of Evers, Cooper noted that Greene never editorialized about the assassination or the trials of Evers’ assassin, Byron De La Beckwith. For further information on Greene and his role in the continuing conflict over race relations, particularly throughout Mississippi in the mid-1950s through the late 1960s, see Cooper’s “Percy Greene and the Jackson Advocate” in David R. Davies’ *The Press and Race*, 55-82, and Maryanne Vollers, *Ghosts of Mississippi: The Murder of Medgar Evers, the Trials of Byron De La Beckwith, and the Haunting of the New South*, (Boston and New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1995), 75., and Julius E. Thompson, *Percy Greene and the Jackson Advocate: The Life and Times of a Radical Conservative Black Newspaperman, 1897-1977*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1994).

Perhaps because of the *Jackson Advocate*'s support for an end to the unequal system of white supremacy in Mississippi, it came as no surprise to the Evers' brothers that the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, in which an ethnic group held down because of their race and fighting back against their white oppressors, received extensive coverage. Whatever Greene's specific thoughts on the matter, the *Jackson Advocate* provided its readers with the most detailed and balanced coverage of the Kenyan conflict of any newspaper in the state. Beginning with the British declaration of emergency in October 1952, the *Jackson Advocate* devoted ample space to the stories coming out of Kenya from the Associated Negro Press. In particular, news items on Kenyatta and the nature of the Mau Mau uprising were more focused on the demands of the Mau Mau participants and the history of white oppression in the colony than were the articles printed in Mississippi's mainstream dailies. Even in the earliest months of the uprising the *Jackson Advocate* contained several stories that detailed the development of the militant Mau Mau movement, the history of the more moderate African rights organizations in Kenya, and of the oppressive nature of the British colonial state.⁶⁵ Kenyatta himself was also given more extensive coverage than in the mainstream dailies, particularly around the time of his trial in April 1953. In the majority of the articles on the man who came to be known as "Burning Spear," Kenyatta was portrayed as an enlightened, educated leader whose direction of the Mau Maus he publicly disputed. Nevertheless, whether he was quoted as

⁶⁵ "British Parliament Hears of Mau Mau Society as African Natives Form Group to Fight White Domination," *Jackson Advocate*, October 25, 1952; "New Deal Promised African Natives as British Reinforce Troops to Protect Whites," *Jackson Advocate*, November 8, 1952.

claiming never to have incited the violence or not, the news articles and editorials about the uprising seemed to designate him as the most probable leader of the movement.⁶⁶

In his memoir, Charles Evers also noted that in addition to the local black papers, he and Medgar also read numerous articles about the Mau Maus and Kenyatta in larger, more nationally distributed African-American dailies, in which the conflict received the most positive coverage despite some politically conservative comments made by a few editorialists in their columns. Throughout the post-World War II period, the African-American press devoted ample attention to goings on throughout Africa, particularly as anti-colonial tensions mounted, driven by declarations of self-determination among the native populations of the continent. In direct opposition to much of what was written about the Kenyan uprising in the mainstream American newspapers, including the Mississippi dailies, national black papers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Atlanta Daily World* and the *Chicago Defender* made concerted efforts to provide detailed breakdowns of the complex cultural, economic, and political issues at the root of Kenya's colonial system, often zeroing in on land alienation as the primary catalyst that set the conflict in motion. In addition, each newspaper was highly critical of the British handling of the conflict, which included the actions taken by the British military (and loyal African regiments) and the treatment and conviction of Kenyatta. Yet while categorizing the rebellious Kikuyu as a racially oppressed group fighting for independence and self-determination, more than a few sensationalized accounts of Mau Mau rituals and violence

⁶⁶ "Kenyatta Will Appeal Verdict of Kenya Court," *Jackson Advocate*, April 18, 1953; "African Judge Disappears Following Conviction of Mau Mau Leader, Jomo Kenyatta Gets Seven Years," *Jackson Advocate*, April 25, 1953.

also found their way into these newspapers, particularly during the first few years of the conflict. Thus, while grievances of the Kikuyu and their willingness to engage in rebellion were afforded ample coverage, misconceptions about the nature of the Mau Maus as anti-white savages, who mercilessly murdered British colonists and their fellow tribesman, also remained.

In much the same manner as the *Jackson Advocate*, the *Pittsburgh Courier* contained pieces that provided information on the conditions of black Africans in Kenya, their grievances with the colonial government, and the quality of the Mau Mau rebel forces. In addition, the majority of the articles and editorials made explicit reference to the Kenya conflict as one of white racial persecution that had fostered rebellion.⁶⁷ Still others labeled the uprising as an all-out war, fought between the forces of Great Britain and the Mau Mau freedom fighters intent on gaining their independence. In one article, correspondent Cecil Gregory quoted a British official as having said that the Mau Mau fighters were much like the guerilla forces “of Greece and Ethiopia during World War II, who fought the British troops.” The Mau Mau forces, in Gregory’s estimation, were not “unorganized gangs.” Rather, they were adept fighters who carried out “systematically planned” assaults “with quite astonishing skill.”⁶⁸ In another piece, written by London correspondent George Padmore, Kenyatta was described as an African nationalist, whose

⁶⁷ Bankole Timothy, “African Scribe Blames Kenya’s War on Whites’ Race Persecution,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 6, 1953.

⁶⁸ Cecil Gregory, “21 Reported Slain in Pitched Battle,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 11, 1953.

desire to throw off the mantle of British colonialism and restore Kenya for the Africans was reminiscent of the philosophy of Marcus Garvey.⁶⁹

Perhaps the most extensive discussion of the Mau Mau uprising was found in the columns of two of the *Pittsburgh Courier's* editorialists, Horace Cayton and J.A. Rogers. In a series of columns, Cayton described the conflict as one in which the grounds for discontent were legitimate, based on the white settlers' primary goal of exploiting the Africans politically and economically. He also lambasted newspapers around the nation for printing pieces that argued the reasons for the uprising were psychological in nature. Cayton stated that the newspapers claimed that the uprising stemmed "from the frustrations of a savage people neither mentally nor economically able to adjust itself to the swift pace of civilization." The real reasons for the uprising, according to Cayton, were instead due to the structure of the British colonial system. "The Africans of Kenya," he explained "find that the English settlers have taken over their country, relegated them to bottom of the social, economic and political heap, have isolated them from the mainstream of the life of the area, dominated them politically and have made no real effort to introduce them into Western European life." Thus, the Mau Mau uprising was the result of a boiling over of frustrations into violence, which according to Cayton was both unfortunate but, given the situation, not completely unexpected.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Whether Kenyatta was converted to the philosophy of Garvey is not made clear in this article, though the author states that the Kenyan leader adopted the philosophy while living in England in the 1940s. There is no mention of Marcus Garvey or Garveyism in Kenyatta's autobiography, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1953), nor in Jeremy Murray-Brown, *Kenyatta*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972). The original statement is found in the article, George, "Kenyatta, 'The Burning Spear,' Is a Convert of Marcus Garvey," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 15, 1952.

⁷⁰ Horace Cayton, "Newspapers Ignoring Real Reasons Behind the Mau Mau Uprisings in East African Kenya," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 1, 1952; "Africans Seek Relief from White Oppressors as Settlers

J.A. Rogers, a *Courier* columnist and historian of African Affairs, produced a four-part series about the Mau Mau uprisings, called “Murder in Kenya!” that deconstructed the situation from a number of angles and allowed readers to draw similarities between the white supremacist system of the South and that of Kenya. In these pieces, he criticized the Kenyan system of white supremacy and ridiculed the white settlers, whom he described as “more voracious than the Boers of South Africa” and who “don’t give a damn about home government.” This was best illustrated by the white settlers’ threat to kidnap the Governor following the passage of a 1923 act that ruled that the collective interest of the native Africans was to be taken into greater account than the interests of the settlers themselves.⁷¹ The fourth and last article in Rogers’ series focused on Kenyatta, whom he had met personally. Described as the “reputed head” of the Mau Mau, Rogers noted that the man regarded as “public enemy [number one]” was “heavily built, and of a pleasing, but guarded manner.” He depicted Kenyatta as intelligent, nationalistic, and determined in his quest for change in Kenya. He also mentioned, though only briefly, that he found Kenyatta “deeply interested in the American Negro.”⁷²

Not all the *Pittsburgh Courier*’s columns on the uprising were as sympathetic to the Mau Maus, however. The newspaper’s associate editor, George Schuyler, a fervent anti-communist, labeled the “Mau Mau Society” as a “link in the chain of ‘subversive’ native nationalist organizations from Cairo to Cape Town.”⁷³ In addition, he was also one

and British Government Answer Challenge,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 15, 1952; “A Tale Hangs by the Slaying of Tom Mbgela in Nairobi, Kenya,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 6, 1952.

⁷¹ J.A. Rogers, “Murder in Kenya!, Second in a Series,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 6, 1953.

⁷² J.A. Rogers, “Murder in Kenya!, Fourth and Last in a Series,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 20, 1953.

⁷³ George Schuyler, “The World Today,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 1, 1952.

of the *Pittsburgh Courier's* most outspoken critics of the means in which the Mau Mau's perpetrated violence against Africans loyal to the British cause. It was this "Mau Mau willingness to kill Africans who collaborated with colonists [which] most affronted Schuyler," James Meriwether argues, adding that Schuyler's "sympathy for the alleged black collaborators grew at least in part out of his own sense of embattlement at home," in which he felt that open criticism of African-American leaders within the black community was detrimental to solving problems brought about by white on black oppression.⁷⁴ While Schuyler's conservatism often placed him at odds with African-American civil rights activists throughout the South, his concerns about the violence supposedly perpetrated by Mau Mau on their fellow Kikuyu tribesmen were shared by many other black readers and echoed throughout the pages of other major black dailies.

In the pages of the *Atlanta Daily World*, much of the initial coverage focused on breaking down the complex economic and social problems that lay at the root of the Mau Mau uprising. In addition, coverage of Kenyatta's role in the conflict not only focused on his conviction in a Kenyan court for supposedly leading the uprising, but also lambasted the way he was portrayed in the white press. In one such article, written in the wake of Kenyatta's arrest, the author, who was working as a U.N. correspondent, wrote in a piece special to the *Atlanta Daily World*, "with particular reference to Mr. Kenyatta, a Kenyan educator...the white news services pictured him as a spear-carrying African bent on the massacre of all the white Europeans. Little attempt," the author continued "was made in the news stories emanating from Nairobi, to give the Africans' side of the story." Despite

⁷⁴ Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 138.

not having determined how best to describe the Mau Mau, noting that “it was considered” to be a loosely organized group of local gangs angered over land alienation, the author continued that the European settlers “embarked on a campaign of misrepresentation by grossly exaggerating the extent of crime and subversive activities.”⁷⁵ At the same time, as the Mau Mau conflict escalated, the *Atlanta Daily World* also ran stories about the Mau Mau growing in strength and power, threatening the very lives of all 30,000 white residents of Kenya.⁷⁶ Over the remainder of the decade, aside from providing background information about issues that directly led to the conflict, the *Atlanta Daily World’s* coverage of the Mau Mau uprising focused on both the escalating violence perpetrated by the Mau Mau against loyalist Kikuyu, and the violence perpetrated against the Mau Mau by the British colonial government.⁷⁷

The articles printed about Kenya in the *Chicago Defender* also followed a similar course, providing ample coverage for editorials and features detailing the oppressive nature of colonial Kenya society. In addition, readers wrote in to express their displeasure at the ways in which the British sought to put down the uprising. In particular, the action of the British colonial government to further punish suspected members of the Mau Mau by seizing their cattle two months after the official State of Emergency was declared, was excoriated in a letter to the editor published in the December 6, 1952 edition. In it, the author stated that “power to levy punishment for whole native communities has been

⁷⁵ “Economic Social Problems Basis of Kenya Unrest,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 4, 1952.

⁷⁶ “30,000 Kenya Whites Fear All-Out Holiday Attack by Dreaded Mau Mau Terrorists,” *Atlanta Daily World*, December 27, 1952.

⁷⁷ “Mau Mau Terrorists Murder Ten Natives,” *Atlanta Daily World*, December 26, 1952; “Mau Maus Vow to Avenge Arrest of Kenyatta,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 5, 1953; “British take 800 Mau Mau in Drive,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 5, 1953; “2,500 Natives Arrested in Mau Mau Drive,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 25, 1953.

given to Kenya officials by the British. So help us, they'll be sorry."⁷⁸ However, as the uprising continued and the violence escalated, images of the Mau Mau as violent anti-white savages were spread across the pages of the *Chicago Defender*, particularly in features written by Pulitzer Prize-winning white journalist Malcolm Johnson, who claimed that the Mau Mau were anti-Christian and determined to "drive out whites or kill them to achieve black supremacy."⁷⁹ Following a particularly bloody incident in March 1953, which historians have come to term the Lari Massacre, in which over 100 Kikuyu loyal to the British colonial government were slaughtered by suspected Mau Mau, reports of Mau Mau savagery only increased.⁸⁰

The *Chicago Defender's* coverage of Kenyatta was not as sensationalized as that of the coverage of the Mau Maus in general. In articles written about his arrest and detention, readers were reminded that no clear connections could be made that directly determined Kenyatta had organized and led the Mau Maus before his arrest. In fact, one article noted that Kenyatta's "detention without trial was symbolic of the authorities' inability to gather any evidence against the supposed ringleaders of the Mau Mau." Furthermore, the article also described Kenyatta as a proud, dignified man who commanded respect. In reference to his walk from his jail cell to the courtroom in which he was being tried, a reporter noted that Kenyatta "marched with his head erect and his

⁷⁸ "Troubled Waters," *Chicago Defender*, December 6, 1952.

⁷⁹ Malcolm Johnson, "Turmoil in Africa," *Chicago Defender*, January 17, 1953. Johnson's features are also discussed in Meriwether's chapter on Mau Mau and revolutionary violence in Kenya in *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 136.

⁸⁰ The Lari Massacre was used by British colonial forces as reasoning to further crack down on the Mau Mau, and in the aftermath hundreds of suspected Mau Mau were rounded up and arrested after making extra-judicial statements that were counted as confessions of their guilt. For more on the Lari Massacre and its significance as a catalyst in the British crackdown on all suspected Mau Mau, see Anderson, *History of the Hanged*, chapter 4.

arms swinging, his little beard pointing forward. He wore his yellow corduroy jacket like a uniform,” adding that “he walked as though he was parading before an army of cheering Kikuyus.”⁸¹ In another article, the words of the prosecutor from Kenyatta’s trial were reported, in which he described Kenyatta as “an exceptionally traveled, widely educated African, who has had the advantage of contact with a great many people of standing both here and in Europe.”⁸² In addition to these descriptions of Kenyatta, in an article by Roi Ottley, who interviewed Kenyatta multiple times over the course of his incarceration, also noted, in much the same way that J.A. Rogers had in his features in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, that Kenyatta had an affinity for African-Americans on account of a love for his race.⁸³

In reading these accounts in the papers, Medgar Evers drew inspiration from the Mau Mau uprising and Kenyatta’s determination to push for racial equality despite his imprisonment. In Kenya, he saw an oppressive environment predicated on the control and exploitation of black bodies by a white supremacist colonial system that left the landless Kikuyu with little recourse but to resist. Within that conceptualization, the violence perpetrated by the Mau Mau was justifiable, though not necessarily celebrated. Evers was not a man obsessed with the need for sadistic revenge, but his experiences as a black man in Mississippi led him to recognize the importance of armed resistance as an instrument of change. In rising against the provincial government, the Mau Mau shone a much-needed spotlight on the horrors of British imperialism and forced the world to take notice.

⁸¹ “Move Kenyatta from Desert Detention Camp,” *Chicago Defender*, December 6, 1952.

⁸² “‘Flaming Spear’ of Africa Denies Guilt,” *Chicago Defender*, December 13, 1952.

⁸³ “Roi Ottley Says: Mau Mau Leader,” *Chicago Defender*, December 24, 1955.

Unlike the savages they were made out to be in the coverage of mainstream white newspapers, the efforts of black reporters and newspapers to produce nuanced examinations of the Mau Mau and Kenyatta and place them in proper historical context played a key role in his decision to form his own militant movement at home in Mississippi.

Charles explained that he and Medgar wondered, “why not cross the line?” Why not “create a Mau Mau in Mississippi? Each time whites killed a Negro, why not drive to another town, find a bad sheriff or cop, and kill him in a secret hit-and-run raid?” They believed that in doing so, they would “teach righteousness to whites.”⁸⁴ In her memoir, Myrlie Evers described her husband’s idea as a dream of “striking under cover of darkness, punishing the crimes of whites against Negroes, setting itself up as a sort of black vigilante army, writing a new law of an eye for an eye over the brooding flat land of the Delta...”⁸⁵ Yet the idea of the Mississippi Mau Maus was more than simply one of retaliatory violence for local race-related crimes. In planning to advance his own militant, anti-white movement, Medgar Evers tapped into traditions of resistance that crossed national boundaries and enveloped the notions of self-reliance and freedom from white oppression. The establishment of a guerilla war was intended to draw international attention to the plight of blacks at home. Just as the world could not look away from Kenya in the wake of Mau Mau, neither would it be able to continue ignoring the horrors of Mississippi. Myrlie Evers echoed this when she explained the fact that newspapers throughout the South “were reporting the deeds of [Kenyatta’s] Mau Mau army at all

⁸⁴ Evers, *Have No Fear*, 76.

⁸⁵ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, the Living*, 92.

could only be interpreted to mean that he was succeeding at least in calling the attention of the world to that oppression.” In creating his own Mississippi Mau Mau army, Medgar Evers hoped to do the same.⁸⁶

Yet despite his initial enthusiasm for the proposal, over time Medgar Evers backed away from his plans for a violent Mississippi Mau Mau rebellion. From a logistical standpoint, the odds of successfully engaging in a clandestine war against the full power of the state and armed white vigilante groups were low, just as they were in Kenya. Historian Charles Payne confirmed that deduction in his analysis of Evers. “He thought long and hard about the idea of Negroes engaging in guerilla warfare in the Delta,” Payne concluded, “not because he had any hope of winning, but because he thought such a campaign might focus the attention of the rest of the country on the injustice in Mississippi. Without that attention, he saw little possibility of change.”⁸⁷ From a personal standpoint, Myrlie also noted that while her husband was not a deeply religious man, he struggled with the idea of perpetrating the slaughter of whites from a moral standpoint. Nevertheless, Myrlie Evers maintained that in his analysis of the situation, Medgar Evers solidified himself “as a man of action, a man who saw the beginnings of solutions in taking a stand.”⁸⁸

In the years that followed, Evers’ work indicated he took the lessons he learned from his analysis of the Mau Mau and applied them in a different manner than he initially intended. Rather than raising an army to kill whites, he crafted strategies to organize the

⁸⁶ Ibid, 91.

⁸⁷ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 49.

⁸⁸ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, the Living*, 93.

black citizens of Mississippi into a Mau Mau force united by experience and solidarity and motivated to utilize mass participation to compel federal intervention. From the coverage of the Kenya uprising, Evers realized the significance of mass participation at the local level and the means through which it could positively motivate the movement participants in Mississippi. While he eventually came to abhor the violence perpetrated by the Mau Maus on their community leaders loyal to the British government, Evers found in Kenyatta an example of an educated, determined leader who sought to unite his people under a banner of racial pride and resolute objectives. In Mississippi Evers saw the need for a form of mass action in which class divisions within the black community were replaced by a sense of racial collectivity and determination to alter the oppressive system under which they lived at all costs.

At the same time, Evers realized the potential of mass participation on the local level in terms of publicity. Seemingly aware of the backlash that a massive publicity campaign surrounding a mass movement would imply for the South, particularly in a period of time when the NAACP was involved in publicizing the negative consequences the image of American racial oppression was having on the worldwide community, Evers collaborated with the National Office to select cases of discrimination in Mississippi that the organization broadcasted on the national and international stage. This strategy was tremendously significant, for while the Southern states were, in a collective sense, the undisputable location of the America's most repressive system of white supremacy, Mississippi was ground zero. Thus, in working to produce results on the local level, whether through voter registration drives, school desegregation campaigns, or the crusade

to end economic reprisal and violent white repression, Evers served as a crucial component in the NAACP's national campaign to focus domestic and international attention on the American South.

Over the course of his NAACP career, Evers continued to pay attention to the movements of Kenyatta, considering him a personal hero. His continued respect for the imprisoned Kenyan leader was also evidenced by his decision to name his first son Darrell Kenyatta Evers in 1953. While his work with the NAACP was just beginning, Evers' determination to bring about change, and his hope to facilitate the growth of a solidified African-American community in Mississippi, would have a profound impact on the fight to end white supremacy in the coming years.

CHAPTER 3:

A NEW DAY FOR THE NEGRO? MISSISSIPPI RESPONDS TO *BROWN*

The morning of May 17, 1954 started off as a relatively ordinary one in Jackson, accented by magnolia trees in full bloom and seasonably warm weather. But by late afternoon, any atmosphere of banality in the city – whether real or imagined – was shattered when wire services broke the news that the nine justices of the United States Supreme Court had ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that the doctrine of “separate but equal” in education was unconstitutional. Speaking for a unanimous Court, Chief Justice Earl Warren announced that separate educational facilities based on race were “inherently *unequal*” and deprived black students of “the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.”¹ Standing in the crowded chamber to hear the opinion read was Thurgood Marshall, Chief Counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund and a primary architect of the legal strategy to challenge the Jim Crow educational system. Overjoyed by the victory, he yelled “we hit the jackpot!” to fellow attorneys George Hayes and James Nabrit as they descended the steps of the Supreme Court building. At the bottom, they posed together for a celebratory photograph. Standing with their arms around one another and wearing resplendent smiles on their faces, Marshall would later recall he felt “so happy, I was numb.”²

The *Brown* decision made its way across the nation like a lightning bolt, illuminating even the darkest corners of the segregated South and instilling hope in

¹ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

² Charles L. Zelden, *Thurgood Marshall: Race, Rights, and the Struggle for a More Perfect Union* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 85.

millions of African-Americans that the back of Jim Crow had been broken. The suit, part of a large-scale, full-frontal attack by the NAACP on the separate-but-equal doctrine legitimized by the Supreme Court's 1896 ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, had been brought before federal judges in the summer of 1951. The named plaintiff, Oliver Brown of Topeka, Kansas, was the father of third grader Linda Brown, who despite living seven blocks from her neighborhood's all-white school, was forced to attend an all-black school over twenty blocks away. The federal judges ruled in favor of the Topeka school district, but in June of 1952 the Supreme Court agreed to hear the NAACP's appeal. Arguments began in December of that year and lasted through the spring of 1954. Before the Court, Marshall and his team of NAACP attorneys highlighted the ways racial segregation inflicted devastating psychological damage on black students and violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. It was an all-or-nothing legal strategy, and one that set the stage for the attacks on segregation in other facets of American life that would soon follow.³

In the aftermath of the victory, full texts of the Court's decision were made available to the public in the nation's largest mainstream and African-American dailies, and the suit was celebrated as a monumental victory for the NAACP. At the organization's New York City headquarters, board members and other officials gathered to cheer the ruling and speak with the press. Said to be "riding on a cloud" of happiness, Assistant NAACP Secretary Roy Wilkins chose to defer to the words of Marshall, noting

³ "Segregation and the Schools," Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 209, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Public Affairs Committee, 1954, pp. 1-28; Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 290-342.

“this is a day for the lawyers.” Marshall, who had immediately returned to New York City after the Court had adjourned, noted “as we understand it, there is no possibility of getting around the Constitution now.” Yet for all the celebration and commotion that followed the ruling, a judicial victory had not always been certain. Nor was the war against Jim Crow won. Marshall’s excitement over the result did not cloud his understanding of the battles that lay ahead. When asked how long it might take for the entire country to have “Jim Crow-free” schools, he predicted “around five years.” Marshall was right to be cautious. The journey to challenge segregated education in the hallowed halls of the Supreme Court had been lengthy and complicated. He expected no less with regards to the question of an appropriate remedy, which the Court scheduled for reargument in April of 1955.⁴

In Mississippi, reaction to *Brown* was swift, but mixed. Though few publicly celebrated the decision, initial responses from whites varied. Assorted states of confusion and calls for a wait-and-see approach eventually gave way to righteous anger. These reactions were no more visible than in the pages of the state’s mainstream newspapers. In the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, the Court’s decision was referred to as “a black day of tragedy for the South, and for both races.” The front page of the May 18th edition of the *Jackson Daily News* read “Blood on the Marble Steps” and warned its readers that violence would surely follow any attempts to desegregate Mississippi’s schools. Fred Sullens, editor of the *Jackson News*, referred to the *Brown* decision as “the worst thing that has happened to the South since carpetbaggers and scalawags took charge.” He

⁴C. Gerald Fraser, “May 17th! Great Day for NAACP,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 22, 1954.

believed race mixing in schools would lead to miscegenation and mixed marriages, which would ultimately result in “the mongrelization of the human race.” Others argued that the decision might take years to enforce across Mississippi, if it was ever enforced at all. In a May 21, 1954 editorial in the *Hattiesburg American*, Andrew Harmon encouraged the people of Mississippi to stand together to retain segregation in schools, adding “no power on earth can compel more than a million people to do something that is against the law of God and nature.”⁵

Reactions to the ruling by the state’s leading politicians ran hand in hand with the various appraisals in the press. In an initial effort to downplay the significance of *Brown*, Governor Hugh L. White declared he was saddened by the ruling, but hopeful legal maneuvers might be used by the state to block or circumvent orders for desegregation. Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland was less equivocal in his reaction. In a Senate speech ten days after the Court’s decision was announced, he argued that the justices had been “indoctrinated and brainwashed by Left-wing pressure groups,” that the Court had no power to “control or direct” the actions of state governors, and that the South would retain segregation. Mississippi’s other senator, John Stennis, chose to adopt a more balanced approach that emphasized the Court’s systematic inability to force implementation of its rulings, arguing that “plenty of time” existed for state officials to “seek a solution” to the issue.⁶

⁵ Editorials reprinted in Susan M. Weill, “Mississippi’s Daily Press in Three Crises” in David R. Davies, ed., *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), 23-27; “Blood on the Marble Steps,” *Jackson Daily News*, May 8, 1954.

⁶ Susan Weill, *In a Madhouse’s Din: Civil Rights Coverage by Mississippi’s Daily Press, 1948-1968* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 57; William S. Whites, “Eastland Scores Supreme Court: Asserts Tribunal Has Been ‘Indoctrinated, Brainwashed by Left-Wing Groups,’” *New York Times*, May 28, 1954; Dittmer, *Local People*, 37.

Among Mississippi's African-American population, reactions were predictably positive, though given the continuous, overarching air of fear facilitated by the white supremacist system, they tempered their public reactions accordingly. Nevertheless, a sense of excitement permeated black communities across the state, and like so many others, Medgar Evers was caught up in that atmosphere. According to his wife Myrlie, he "listened with intense concentration" to radio news reports about *Brown* and "talked about what he thought it might mean." Specifically, Evers saw in the end of segregated education "a new day for the Negro." In his estimation, education – specifically, a grasp of history and news of the world around them – would open the eyes of black Mississippians to the reality that "no people were ever given their freedom without a struggle...and a struggle means sacrifices." The *Brown* decision seemed to cement in his mind that the winds of change were finally stripping down the walls of Jim Crow, and the first prominent role he would play in their destruction would be via the NAACP's fight for integrated education across the state. The "man searching for a weapon" had finally found what he was seeking.⁷

The need for a weapon to battle Mississippi's racially segregated school system was an apt metaphor, because the state's white supremacist structure refused to go down without a fight on the issue. Armed with an arsenal of legislative obstruction, fear-mongering, and violence, whites from the halls of the Jackson statehouse to the furthest corners of the state organized a campaign of "massive resistance" that spilled over into every aspect of political, economic, and cultural life. To that end, *Brown* signaled the

⁷ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, the Living*, 106-107; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 49.

beginning of an era of upheaval that arose out of Mississippi's violent past, threatened to turn the state on its head, and pushed it front and center onto a world stage beset by Cold War pressures. In such an unstable environment, the stakes could not have been higher as Evers, with the lessons of the Mau Mau firmly embedded in his consciousness, worked to enact change in Mississippi from within the NAACP's organizational constructs. In the process, he emerged as the primary leader of the Mississippi movement for black equality. At the same time, he found himself facing a level of reactionary oppression in the aftermath of *Brown* that, when analyzed within the transnational framework he had formulated, reflected the efforts of the British to maintain white rule in Kenya. At risk was the very foundation of Mississippi society – white supremacy – and for most of the state's white citizenry, contemplating a world where blacks had equal rights was unfathomable.

Despite any surprise they registered publicly, leading officials of Mississippi's white power structure were not blindsided by the *Brown* decision. They had followed the suit closely since the Court announced it would hear the case in June of 1952. In the early months of 1953, lawmakers in the Jackson statehouse set to work crafting legislation to cut the NAACP off at the knees and sway the Court to uphold the doctrine of separate-but-equal set forth in *Plessy*. In an effort to undercut the argument that racially segregated education was inherently unequal and thus, unconstitutional, the Mississippi state legislature proposed a program to provide equalization of school and transportation facilities for black students and equal salaries for white and black schoolteachers.⁸ At a

⁸ Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-1964*, (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 16.

dedication service for a newly constructed Negro consolidated high school in May 1953, Governor White praised the state's proposed education equalization program, noting that "the people in Mississippi will work out their own problems regardless of the U.S. Supreme Court decision on segregation in schools." In addition, he ensured the crowd that Mississippi's white citizens were extremely willing to work to improve educational standards for both races, but also asserted "Negroes of this state must accept a share of the responsibility for educating their own children."⁹

The irony of Governor White's statements was not lost on local and national NAACP leaders, particularly given the legislative and administrative roadblocks that had been put in place over the years to prevent black Mississippians from obtaining levels of education on par with the state's white population. Two months before White's speech to the crowd at the consolidated high school, a special legislative committee on education appointed by the governor to study the conditions of Mississippi's schools reported a "shocking" contrast in the expenditures, facilities, and services allotted to white and black students. In Jackson and Meridian, the state's two largest cities, the average amount of money spent on white students was double and triple that spent on the cities' black children, respectively. In Mississippi's rural areas, the difference in expenditures was even greater. In Madison County, located north of Jackson, the committee reported an average of \$300 spent for every white student, while black students were given just \$46. In addition to their findings, the committee also issued a dire prediction for the school system if it continued to follow the status quo, stating that within two years "all existing

⁹ We'll Solve Problems, Miss. Governor Vows," *Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, May 9, 1953.

facilities for Negro schools now afforded would be exhausted and immediate expansion would have to follow if the state is to maintain a dual system of education.”¹⁰

None of this surprised NAACP leaders in Mississippi, whom had first initiated a battle against the state’s segregated public education system five years earlier. In 1948, a black teacher named Gladys Noel Bates worked with the Association to file suit in a U.S. District Court demanding equal pay for herself as well as all other black teachers and administrators in Jackson. A science teacher, Bates was a graduate of Tougaloo College and a member of the Mississippi Voters League. Her father, A.J. Noel, served as a local NAACP leader and was also active in the Voters League and the Mississippi Teachers Association, the latter of which invited Thurgood Marshall to speak at a secret meeting held in Jackson in 1947. At the meeting, members of the Teachers Association, hoping to challenge the local school board’s discriminatory policies toward black teachers, asked Marshall for advice on how to proceed. In his reply, Marshall was clear. Not only would a potential suit need a plaintiff willing to risk his or her employment and livelihood, but the endeavor would also require a significant amount of money. Given the stifling racial climate in Mississippi, neither prospect was assured. However, in the months that followed, the Association worked to collect over five thousand dollars for the suit by raising teachers’ dues by one dollar, and Gladys Bates agreed to serve as plaintiff.

Almost immediately after the suit was filed, Bates and her husband John, also a teacher, were fired from their positions by the Jackson school board. The couple received numerous threats of physical harm, lost their home when it was burned to the ground, and

¹⁰ James Rundles, “Schools Unequal in Mississippi, Survey Shows,” *Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, March 28, 1953.

were placed on a blacklist. When John finally found work with the black YMCA in Jackson, the job was rescinded after the white YMCA threatened to cut off funding. Subsequent job opportunities in the states of Tennessee and Kentucky also fell through once potential employers received damaging letters of recommendation from the Jackson school board. Eventually, John Bates managed to find work at a box factory, while Gladys found employment as assistant to the executive secretary of the Mississippi Teachers Association. For the next three years, the case made its way through the local courts, with the NAACP providing legal counsel by Association attorneys Constance Baker Motley and Robert Carter. When the suit was first filed, the Jackson school board declared that Bates had no standing to challenge their pay system since she was no longer an employee. In response, Robert Jess Brown, another local Jackson teacher, joined the case as an additional plaintiff and was also fired. Eventually, Bates and Brown lost the case after a Mississippi District Court Judge ruled that they had not utilized the proper administrative chain of command at the local and state levels to seek redress for their complaints.¹¹

Though the NAACP's suit had not been successful, Mississippi's leading politicians realized that if real attempts to address financial inequalities were not met by the state, the segregated school system was vulnerable to collapse. Mississippi's legislature quickly responded with a directive to allocate funds for teacher salary equalization. When Governor White took office in 1952, he took things one large step further. Based on a formula created by South Carolina Governor James Byrnes, White

¹¹ Gladys Noel Bates, interviewed by Catherine Jannik, Dec. 23, 1996, in the Mississippi Oral History Program, University of Southern Mississippi Archives; Dittmer, *Local People*, 35-36.

proposed an education equalization program to attack the underfunding issues head on. Predictably, the NAACP denounced the proposal as a discriminatory, unachievable pipe dream. Walter White, who visited Jackson in April of 1953 to show support for the NAACP's programs in Mississippi, criticized the equalization program as financially unfeasible, arguing the burden on taxpayers would prove overwhelming. More importantly, he declared that even if the program passed and was implemented, the NAACP would continue to bring lawsuits and fight against the system of white supremacy in Mississippi until the educational system was fully integrated.¹²

Yet while White was firm in his remarks, the reality was that Mississippi's black population did not hold homogenous views on the issue of opposing segregation in schools. Though small, a group of black educators, many of whom worked as administrators in all-black schools, believed they were better served by the segregated educational system. In his assessment of the situation, John Dittmer explained "the segregated environment had provided them both with a livelihood and with status in the community." Moreover, the Mississippi legislature's move to raise the salary of black teachers, and the incentive of working in new school buildings constructed as part of the proposed education equalization plan, was enough to convince them that remaining within the segregated system was preferable to upsetting the status quo. As Evers would come to learn over the course of his activist career with the NAACP, these kinds of internal squabbles – often driven by the exacerbation of class distinctions – could be just as damaging to the success of the movement as the white supremacist forces hell bent on

¹² "NAACP Leader Expects Tribunal To Rule Out Segregation of Races," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, April 4, 1953.

destroying it from the outside. While they enjoyed slightly higher degrees of financial independence than average black Mississippians, members of the black middle class were subject to various forms of harassment designed to pressure them into silence.¹³

This was not distinct to Mississippi, or even the Jim Crow South. The Mau Mau offered important lessons about the significance of class distinction in a racially oppressive system and its threat to black unity. In Kenya, colonial policies and customs constructed the concept of social classes where none had existed and exploited them as a means of dividing the population against itself. Ultimately, those divisions turned bloody when the Mau Mau took up arms against the colonial-appointed loyalist chiefs and other loyalists to the government as well white settlers. But in defying that system, the Mau Mau challenged its false conceptions of value and replaced them with a unifying message of collective action and cultural solidarity that resonated with blacks around the world.¹⁴ In Mississippi, officials utilized a similar carrot-and-stick approach with its separate-but-equal doctrine, dividing black society between the larger segment of rural poor and a smaller, mostly urban middle class of professionals and entrepreneurs. As Evers' experiences in the RCNL and NAACP indicated, finding ways to encourage middle class participation in the movement would be paramount to its success.

This need on cultivating relationships between people of all economic backgrounds as the foundation for solidarity and collective action was especially evident in the work Evers did his first year as an NAACP volunteer. While still employed full-time with the Magnolia Mutual Life Insurance Company, he organized membership drives in the Delta

¹³ Dittmer, *Local People*, 36-37.

¹⁴ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 18-29.

that resulted in the revival of defunct NAACP chapters (including one in Mound Bayou) as well as the birth of new ones. According to Myrlie, one of the first chapters created due to her husband's efforts was in Shelby, Mississippi. Located in the far western portion of the Delta, Shelby resided in Bolivar County, where at least fifteen reported lynchings had occurred over the span of fifty years. Another chapter Evers worked to open in this period was in the Bolivar County town of Cleveland. There, he worked side-by-side with Amzie Moore, who hailed from nearby Grenada County. Together, they increased membership in Cleveland to 439 people, making it the second largest NAACP chapter in the state of Mississippi. In addition to his work with the NAACP, Evers' participation with the RCNL also continued. As program director, he worked alongside RCNL secretary and fellow NAACP member Aaron Henry to encourage black voter registration. In Henry's estimation, the RCNL's voter registration drives were most successful in the areas of the state with the most complacent white communities, but these were few and far between. While Evers' work with both organizations brought him into the activist fold as a significant foot soldier in the battle against white supremacy, victories were piecemeal at best.¹⁵

Inspired by his successes in enlisting Delta blacks to join the NAACP, yet plagued by a desire to force change on a broader scale, Evers set his sights on attending law school at the University of Mississippi. While he had contemplated the idea of becoming a lawyer prior to that point in time, his wife Myrlie explained that it was at a

¹⁵ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, the Living*, 99; Hillegas, *New Mississippi Inc.*, "Preliminary List of Mississippi Lynchings," MDAH; Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 63; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 58-59.

late 1953 meeting of the NAACP in Mound Bayou where her husband was struck by the inspiration to immediately strike at the heart of white supremacy and better position himself to continue that fight statewide. At the meeting, Columbus branch President E.J. Stringer “spoke of the importance of an attempt to desegregate the University of Mississippi.” Though she noted that when Medgar first told her of his plan she thought he had lost his mind, she also explained that given “the pattern of school desegregation suits was by then quite clear, and almost without exception initial breakthroughs in each state had been made at state universities, usually at the graduate school level,” her husband’s decision to apply at Ole Miss “was really a conservative start.”¹⁶

Indeed, by the 1950s, the NAACP had spearheaded a crusade against segregated education for two decades. From its inception, the organization had fought against segregation and racial violence in all of its forms, but a comprehensive campaign against school segregation began developing in 1933 when Charles Hamilton Houston joined the NAACP’s legal committee as special counsel. As former Dean of the Howard University School of Law, Houston had a reputation as a hardworking, brilliant lawyer who had turned the school on its head and crafted it into a world-class legal institution. Under his instruction, the NAACP modified its litigation efforts by placing heavy emphasis on education. In a 1935 speech to the National Bar Association convention, Houston argued that inferior education deprived young black men and women from acquiring the tools needed to fight for defense of their rights. With the goal of destroying the racist limitations placed on black students across the nation, Houston and the organization’s

¹⁶ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, the Living*, 98-99.

team of lawyers crafted a three-tiered strategy against segregated education. The first step emphasized suits seeking the desegregation of professional and graduate schools. Next were suits aimed at forcing the equalization of salaries for black and white teachers. The third step included filing suits against elementary and secondary schools on account of inequalities in their physical facilities. Marshall, a former student of Houston's and first in his Howard law class, joined the legal committee in 1936.¹⁷

The first of the NAACP's suits against segregation in professional and graduate schools to reach the federal appellate court was brought on behalf of Lloyd L. Gaines, a black man who had been denied entrance to the University of Missouri law school. Though Missouri's segregation statutes were not applicable to colleges, the University of Missouri had no specific admissions criteria that dealt with the issue of race, and the university board had received a letter from the dean of the law school arguing that denying an application on the basis of race was unconstitutional, the board rejected the application. Instead, they offered to pay Gaines' tuition if he agreed to attend law school out of state. Gaines rejected the offer, and the NAACP filed suit against the university registrar. The Missouri Supreme Court ruled against Gaines, and after working its way through an appeal process, *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada* came before the United States Supreme Court in 1938. Writing for Court, Chief Justice Charles E. Hughes held that Missouri could not deny blacks the opportunity to gain in-state legal educations, but cited *Plessy* in holding that states could operate segregated institutions as long as they

¹⁷ Richard Kluger, "The Legal Scholar Who Plotted the Road to Integrated Education," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 4 (Summer, 1994): 66-69; Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy against Segregated Education*, 34.

were equal facilities. Missouri then established a black law school at Lincoln University in Jefferson City.¹⁸

While the *Gaines* decision did nothing to end the doctrine of separate but equal, it placed pressure on the states to provide equal educational facilities for its black population. Houston and the NAACP legal team, armed with knowledge of the vast disparity in educational funding across the South, set out to use that as a central argument in its legal campaign against segregation. A case update published by the NAACP's official magazine, *The Crisis*, declared the decision "reaffirms and re-emphasizes the previous opinions of the Supreme Court that separation is legal only when it provides equality between the two races," and that it was "regarded by the NAACP and other observers as opening the way for legal action to compel equalization of school funds, teachers salaries, equipment, and high school and elementary training." However, suits against universities and professional schools dragged on slowly over the next decade, often on account of overworked staff unable to properly conduct all the litigation required and problems securing willing plaintiffs. In the early 1940s, the organization had more luck filing actions for salary equalization, the most important of which took place in Little Rock, Arkansas. In February of 1942, a group of black teachers brought suit against the board of directors and Superintendent of the Little Rock Special School District alleging its salary scale was disproportionate according to race. Initially, a federal judge ruled in favor of the school district, finding that the teachers were paid according to a merit scale, but the NAACP appealed on the basis that the school district had not

¹⁸ *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada*, 305 U.S. 337 (1938); Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 148-149.

provided evidence the merit scale was not discriminatory. In June of 1945, the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, and teacher salaries in Little Rock were equalized the following year.¹⁹

Glacially-paced as the campaign against segregated education seemed at that time, the NAACP's outlook was given a considerable boost when the United States emerged victorious from World War II. As the Iron Curtain descended across Eastern Europe and the world's two superpowers vied to establish and maintain spheres of influence, the issue of American race relations took on a greater degree of international importance than ever before. While throughout its organizational existence the NAACP had implored the United States to live up to its egalitarian ideals and sought international support for its antidiscrimination campaigns, the emergence of the Cold War resulted in the development of a new sociopolitical mentality that linked the eradication of racial discrimination at home to the success of American foreign policy overseas. In her analysis of race relations in the Cold War era, Mary L. Dudziak explained that "efforts to promote civil rights within the United States were consistent with and important to the more central U.S. mission of fighting world communism," adding that "the need to address international criticism gave the federal government an incentive to promote social change at home."

An emphasis on racial egalitarianism as a foreign policy directive was of particular significance to the presidential administration of Harry Truman. Though the

¹⁹ "University of Missouri Case Won," *The Crisis*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (January 1939): 10; Morris V. Williams, 149 F. 2D 703 (8TH CIR. 1945); Tushnet, *The NAACP Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education*, 88, 91-92.

president's personal opinions on the issue of racial equality were somewhat murky, his record on matters of civil rights policy was less obscure. In 1945, he had worked to keep the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) alive. Created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941, it originated under Executive Order 8802, which banned racial discrimination in the national defense industry. The move by Roosevelt was in direct response to pressures from civil rights activists such as Asa Philip Randolph, president of the black labor union the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and leaders of the NAACP, including Walter White, who threatened to sponsor and carry out a 50,000 strong march on Washington by African Americans unless the defense industry and United States armed forces were desegregated. The FEPC had been intended to serve as a watchdog over government agencies and defense contractors, but lack of congressional support hindered its chances of remaining in existence in the final years of the war.²⁰

In the emerging Cold War environment, the issue of civil rights and foreign policy became further intertwined in the lead up to the 1948 presidential election. His presidential advisors warned Truman that the election could not be secured without African-American support, and potential opponents, including former Vice-President Henry Wallace, advocated a brand of racial liberalism that could wrest away a large segment of the black vote. Aware that an opportunity to play a significant role in shaping the president's policy platform had presented itself, NAACP leadership utilized its own

²⁰ In private settings, Truman, who hailed from Missouri, was known to use racist language, and according to Alabama Governor Chauncey Sparks in comments made during the 1944 presidential election, "in the matter of race relations... Truman told me he is the son of an unreconstructed rebel mother." Truman replied to Sparks' assertion by pointing to his congressional record on civil rights, which including support for the NAACP-sponsored antilynching bill, and denied charges he was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. "Truman Attacks Klan; Denies Hearst Charge," *Chicago Defender*, November 1, 1944; Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Right*, 12, 24-25.

analysis of black voting power to exert pressure on Truman to push for an end to racial discrimination in federal agencies as well as throw his support behind anti-lynching, anti-poll tax, and desegregation measures. Hoping to secure the organization's support, and paying close attention to how his decisions on civil rights were playing internationally, Truman addressed the NAACP on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on June 28, 1947. In an editorial published by the *New York Amsterdam News* two weeks beforehand, the NAACP rally was deemed "the single greatest effort of the Association in its 38 years of existence," and highlighted the occasion as an opportunity to not only grow membership rolls, but for the President to place himself on the international stage as an advocate for black equality. "In his fight for democracy in far-off Greece, Hungary, Turkey, Italy, France, Korea, China, and elsewhere" it read, "Mr. Truman certainly cannot afford to ignore the crimes against democracy and humanity being committed against the nation's 13,000,000 Negro citizens, and the limitation which has been placed upon the freedom, liberty, and self-respect of the American Negro by the immoral laws, customs and practices of the states of the American Union."²¹

In his speech on the day of the rally, Truman focused on the importance of action on matters of civil rights policy and called attention to human rights all members of a democratic society should possess, including the right to a decent home, a worthwhile job, an education, adequate medical care, and unrestricted access to the ballot. He also praised the work of international organizations such as the newly established United Nations, whose Commission on Human Rights was in the process of drafting an

²¹ Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*, 113-116; "Await U.S. Policy on Racial Tensions," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 14, 1947.

International Bill of Rights, of which the NAACP was actively hoping to influence, and of a Presidential Advisory Committee on Civil Rights, which he had appointed the previous year and had been “surveying our civil rights difficulties and needs for several months.”²² In October, the Advisory Committee released its official report, *To Secure These Rights*, which laid out thirty-four recommendations for civil rights reforms, including the passage of federal antilynching legislation, the elimination of the poll tax and other voting prerequisites, the creation of a permanent FEPC, and the dismantling of the separate but equal doctrine in public life. This included the issue of opportunity in education, of which the Commission concluded that efforts to maintain “separate, but truly equal, school systems” was both impossible and “in serious conflict with patterns of democratic life.”²³

In response to the report, Truman presented a package of civil rights legislation to Congress in February of 1948, which included antilynching and anti-poll tax directives as well as the permanent establishment of the FEPC. In a speech he gave promoting the package, the President declared “if we wish to inspire the peoples of the world whose freedom is in jeopardy, if we wish to restore hope to those who have already lost their civil liberties, if we wish to fulfill the promise that is ours, we must correct the remaining imperfections in our practice of democracy,” adding to the argument that, while “our democracy is not perfect...it offers a fuller, freer, happier life to our people than any totalitarian nation has ever offered.” The response of Southern Democrats to the speech

²² “President Truman’s Speech to the NAACP on Human Rights,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1947.

²³ *To Secure These Rights: The Report of Harry S. Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights*, The Bedford Series in History and Culture edition (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2004), 97-99, 158-195.

and civil rights legislation was one of predictable, collective outrage. In the election that followed, Southern conservatives split from the Democratic Party to form the States' Rights Democratic Party and nominated Senator Strom Thurmond as their candidate. Despite the fracture of the party, Truman carried both the popular and electoral vote in the November election.²⁴

The presidential term that followed directly intersected with the rise of McCarthyism and the hysteria generated by the rooting out of suspected communists from all walks of life, including the federal government. The pressure to cleanse itself of suspected "reds" in its ranks also plagued the NAACP. Its leadership, including Du Bois, White, and Wilkins, became embroiled in a bitter battle with one another over the direction of the organization, with Wilkins leading the fight to purge it of suspected communists and Du Bois struggling to redirect the Association to focus on forcing the Truman administration to enact its pledge to uphold human rights for all citizens at home. Ultimately, White and Wilkins emerged victorious in the conflict when Du Bois resigned his position as Director of Special Research in disgust. His frustrations seemed warranted. Despite its moves to introduce civil rights legislation to Congress during the election, in the years that followed, the President's administration failed to ensure enough support for the package. While the FEPC was maintained, it was done so through executive order, and any attempts to pass antilynching and anti-poll tax measures broke down.²⁵ Frustration within the halls of the NAACP was mounting despite public efforts to rally its members to action, including a call for "Negro citizens...to stop wishing and

²⁴ "The Text of President Truman's Message on Civil Rights," *New York Times*, February 3, 1948.

²⁵ Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*, 166-209.

hoping and start doing the necessary hard work on the grass roots level,” in a February, 1949 *Crisis* article written by the Association’s Director of Public Relations, Henry Lee Moon.²⁶

A renewed call for its members to work harder to establish new branches and fill membership rolls was of utmost importance. Though his reelection had cooled his efforts to push for continuous action on civil rights, persistent criticism of the United States’ record of race relations remained a foreign policy concern for Truman. Thus, his administration began to actively involve itself in the NAACP’s efforts to eliminate inequality in education through the court system, bypassing Congress in the process. The cultural environment it fostered had profound influences on the mindset of the Justices of the Supreme Court and the decision of the NAACP to push for a direct attack on segregation.

This change to the cultural environment was no better illustrated than in 1950, when the NAACP scored important victories in two graduate school suits brought before the Supreme Court. Both cases intended to directly challenge the ability of a state to provide equalized educational facilities for its black and white students. The first suit was brought on behalf of Heman Marion Sweatt, a black postal worker who was denied entrance to the University of Texas Law School on racial grounds. After the NAACP filed suit, Texas judges requested that the university provide Sweatt with a legal education in a facility of equal quality. When the facility turned out to be four rooms in the bottom of an Austin office building, Thurgood Marshall filed an appeal. The second

²⁶ Henry Lee Moon, “What Chance for Civil Rights?” *The Crisis*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (February 1949): 42.

suit concerned the graduate school at the University of Oklahoma. There, George McLaurin, a black public school teacher with a master's degree, applied to a doctoral program. Unlike the Texas case, McLaurin was admitted to the university. However, he was barred from sitting in classrooms with other white students, and was instead forced to listen to lectures from the hallway and study at a separate "colored" desk in the library. In each suit, NAACP lawyers argued that regardless of funding, separating students based on race resulted in an unequal learning environment detrimental to black students.

Hoping that intervention might lead to the dismantling of separate but equal as was originally set out in *Plessy*, the Justice Department filed amicus curiae briefs in both cases, urging the Court to consider the repercussions a ruling in favor of maintaining segregation would have on American foreign policy. Bluntly put, it warned "if the imprimatur of constitutionality should be put on such a denial of equality, one would expect the foes of democracy to exploit such an action for their own purposes." At the same time, according to Michael J. Klarman, the influences on the Supreme Court Justices were as cultural as they were political. By 1950, the military was in the process of being desegregated via executive order, the Court contained its first black law clerk, "who had authored a memo to [Justice] Frankfurter urging that *Plessy* be overruled," and even major league baseball had been desegregated for three years by that point. In short, the Justices' analysis of its civil rights cases was, in some way, shape, or form, consistently shaped by the overarching Cold War imperative.²⁷

²⁷ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 95; Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 209-212.

On June 5, 1950, the Court handed down decisions in both cases. Writing for the unanimous Court, Chief Justice Fred Vinson held in *Sweatt v. Painter* that the decision by the Texas Court of Civil Appeals be reversed given that the separate law school was not “substantially equal” to that of the University of Texas, which under the protections afforded Sweatt by the Fourteenth Amendment, was required to admit him.²⁸ In *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents*, Vinson again wrote for a unanimous majority. Siding with NAACP assistant counsel Robert L. Carter, who argued the case alongside other members of the organization’s legal defense team, the Court held that “the restrictions imposed upon appellant impair and inhibit his ability to study, to engage in discussions and exchange views with other students, and, in general, to learn his profession.”²⁹ Though both cases were clear victories for the NAACP, the Justices did not go so far as to overturn *Plessy*. As Thurgood Marshall clearly understood, making the leap from desegregating higher education, which concerned adult students of whom small percentages were black, to grade school education, which involved children and cut across class lines, would surely elicit fiercer opposition.³⁰

Nonetheless, the victories in the *Sweatt* and *McLaurin* suits were clear indicators that the once rigid walls of segregation in education were weakening. Houston’s legal strategy, expertly crafted and put into practice by Marshall and the NAACP’s legal defense team, was paying dividends, albeit slowly. Though he was aware of the limitations of the Court’s decisions, Marshall felt the time was finally right to begin a

²⁸ *Sweatt v. Painter*, 339 U.S. 629 (1950)

²⁹ *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents*, 339 U.S. 637 (1950)

³⁰ Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 212.

direct attack on segregation. This was both due to its acquisition of legal victories through the Courts, and the NAACP's growth throughout the post-World War II period. Over the course of the 1930s and 1940s, the NAACP increased its membership rolls to over 450,000 members, resulting in an upsurge of financial donations and an expanded budget. As victories mounted and its membership increased, so too did the pressure by those individuals on the organization to push for a full-scale attack on Jim Crow throughout the South. Of this development, Tushnet explained "it thus made sense to design the litigation program to satisfy the NAACP membership as well as liberal supporters of the NAACP's general goals." To aim lower than the all-out destruction of segregation in primary and secondary education was out of the question. Thus, in August of 1951, the NAACP filed suit against the Board of Education in Topeka, Kansas.³¹

When Medgar Evers joined the organization the following year, the *Brown* suit was in the process of making its way on appeal to the Supreme Court. Given his decision to try and integrate the University of Mississippi Law School in the aftermath of *Sweatt* and *McLaurin*, Myrlie's description of her husband's effort as a "conservative start," in the context of the Association's recent victories, was accurate. However, in Mississippi there was nothing conservative about a black man trying to integrate its most prestigious and lily-white institution of higher education. Rather, the decision seemed to jolt the entire state when it was announced in January of 1954. The news made headlines in *The Jackson Advocate*, *the Jackson Daily News*, and in the Ole Miss campus newspaper, *the Mississippian*. Based on the tone of the articles and reactions from Ole Miss students, the

³¹ Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education*, 135-136.

move by Evers was considered unsurprising given the recent change in the cultural climate regarding segregation in education across the South. Though they were not necessarily excited about the prospect of attending law school with a black man, many of the students reacted with resignation to the notion such a situation would eventually come to pass. Evers' bravery and decision to work toward the cause of desegregation via the NAACP also caught the attention of his friends and acquaintances outside of Mississippi, many of who wrote him to offer their support. In one letter, written ten days after he had submitted his application to Ole Miss, B.J. George, a black attorney from Shreveport, Louisiana, wrote Evers to let him know he admired his spunk, and reminded him that "all the Negroes in the South are pulling for you – the NAACP shall fight this case to the end...hold your head up, please sir."³²

Ole Miss officials were not so easily swayed, especially when they learned Evers would be represented by Thurgood Marshall in any legal matters pertaining to his application. What followed was almost a full year of efforts by the university's board to move slowly, obfuscate, and circumvent Evers attempt to enroll in almost every way possible, sans outright violence. In what can best be described as an obsessive preoccupation with rooting out NAACP activity, Evers was called before the State Board of Trustees of the Institutions of Higher Learning in August 1954 and asked if he had been prompted by the civil rights organization to submit his application. Aware that this line of questioning was inevitable, and in an effort to cut off the State Board and university administrators at the pass should they try to trip him up in the application

³² Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 75; B.J. George to Medgar W. Evers, January 23, 1954, Subgroup 2, Series 17, Box 3, Folder 43, Medgar Evers and Family Papers, Medgar and Myrlie Evers Collection, MDAH.

process, Evers assured them that the decision to apply had been his alone, and also lined up the required recommendation letters by two local white citizens who had known him for at least ten years and could vouch for his good moral character. In response, the educational officials, terrified of the precedent it would set if Evers was accepted, set forth on a campaign to completely alter the admissions process, not only of Ole Miss, but of all state-supported institutions of higher education. University officials rejected the two recommendation letters on an invented technicality. According to them, the two white men who had written the letters had not lived in the same county as Evers for the two years prior to his application submission, thus invalidating their effectiveness. This was followed by an alteration to the recommendation process entirely. From then on, applicants were required to provide five letters vouching for their moral standing by alumni of the institutions to which they were applying.³³

Of the decision, Myrlie Evers asserted “no one in the state of Mississippi, black or white, misunderstood the sophistry of the board’s explanation. It was precisely the sort of explanation Mississippians, black and white, had been trained to expect.”³⁴ Nevertheless, it greatly angered Medgar Evers, especially because he had acquired the recommendations of two prominent white men. At the same time, Evers continued his work with the NAACP, participating in an effort to drive across the Delta and photograph the decrepit conditions of the region’s black schools. It was during one of those investigatory journeys that, according to his fellow Association member Thomas H. Moore, Evers experienced his first encounter with one of Mississippi’s white officials.

³³ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 76-77.

³⁴ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, the Living*, 119.

Walter Sillers, Jr. was the speaker of the Mississippi House of Representatives, the owner of a large Delta plantation, and a Dixiecrat. In a meeting with Evers and Moore regarding the equalization of the school system, Sillers promised the construction of new school buildings. He kept his back to the men the entire time, never once making eye contact. The entire episode humiliated Evers and intensified his resolve to dismantle the white power structure despite his ongoing failed attempts to integrate the University of Mississippi.³⁵

When the Supreme Court overturned the doctrine of separate-but-equal in *Brown*, the NAACP planned to utilize it as the catalyst for campaigns to desegregate primary and secondary schools across the South. In order to facilitate those campaigns at the state level, Thurgood Marshall and other Association leaders, including Director of Branches, Gloster Current, argued the time was ripe for the creation of paid staff positions in several southern states including Florida, North Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, and Texas. On Mississippi in particular, NAACP regional secretary Ruby Hurley submitted a report to the Association board of directors in May of 1953 highlighting the work of the local branches, the continued plight of the black population, and the need for more concerted action throughout the state. In several communities, she professed “we found...that the minds of Negroes are almost completely enslaved” and that “they move the way they think the white man wants them to move.” Of Governor White’s education equalization program, she explained that it had received backing from the Mississippi State Teachers Association, that it resulted in widespread misunderstandings regarding the Bates case,

³⁵ Adam Nossiter, *Of Long Memory: Mississippi and the Murder of Medgar Evers* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994), 41.

and that efforts by whites to label the NAACP as communist had also taken a severe toll on the ability of the organization to make more headway in the state. “The NAACP has a terrific education job to do in the state of Mississippi,” she concluded, both to offset the problems she had listed, and “to show the worth of the NAACP,” a national organization with more power and greater resources than local organizations such as the RCNL.³⁶

Given his mental fortitude, bravery in his fight to desegregate the University of Mississippi, Association recruiting efforts, amiable nature, and ability to connect with the poorest segments of Mississippi’s black population, Evers was considered the ideal candidate for the position of Mississippi’s field secretary by local branch officials. Of his keen ability to understand people and understand struggle, Aaron Henry explained “it’s empathy and understanding of plights of people and also understanding that the janitor is just as important as the president of the bank. That kind of mellow transition a lot of people can’t make, but I think Medgar understood.” In a state where the majority of its black population lived below the poverty line, often tied to the land by substantial debt in addition to the thousands of other humiliations and discriminatory offenses they suffered, finding a leader who could communicate with and drive the entirety of the black community to action was crucial. In addition to his activist colleagues in Mississippi, Evers was also the first choice of NAACP regional secretary Ruby Hurley and Director of Branches Gloster Current. In a memo to Roy Wilkins regarding the position written on November 19, 1954, Current recommended Evers and declared him to be the most

³⁶ Ruby Hurley, Report of the Secretary, June 8, 1953, NAACP Papers, Supplement to Part 1, 1951-1955, Reel 2.

qualified and impressive candidate. Five days later, Evers was confirmed as the NAACP Assistant Field Secretary for Mississippi.³⁷

A myriad of public announcements followed, including official press releases sent out over the wires. His appointment was covered in major black newspapers including the *Chicago Defender* and the *Atlanta Daily World*, as well as in the pages of the *Crisis*. Along with Evers, Edwin C. Washington, Jr., a post office worker and graduate of Prairie View A&M in Texas, was also appointed assistant field secretary for the Southwest region. The NAACP described the two field secretary positions as direct outgrowths of the new campaigns by local branches to secure compliance with the Court's decision in *Brown*. When speaking about the creation of the new positions, Gloster Current explained the appointments were made to aid the NAACP in carrying out "a greatly expanded program of community action to implement the Supreme Court's decision on the local level."³⁸

With the full support of the Association behind him and its resources at his disposal, Evers was eager to get to work. The first step involved a move to Jackson, which Medgar and Myrlie embarked upon after he flew to New York City to complete a ten-day orientation. There was little time to settle into their new home, however, as leadership expected Evers to have the Mississippi state office up and running by January 23rd. Despite the short period of time available to him, Evers managed to open the office

³⁷ Aaron Henry, interviewed by John Jones and John Dittmer, April 22, 1981, Oral Histories, MDAH; Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 82.

³⁸ "Along the NAACP Battlefield," *The Crisis*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (January 1955): 38-39; "NAACP Appoints Two to Help with Southern School Compliance," *Atlanta Daily World*, December 11, 1954; "NAACP To Spend Million a Year For Desegregation," *Chicago Defender*, December 18, 1954.

and put everything in place for an opening ceremony celebrating the NAACP's availability to the public. Press releases were sent out advertising the ceremony, and high-ranking Mississippi political officials, including Governor White and Jackson mayor Allen Thompson, were invited. Gloster Current traveled down from the National Office to commemorate the occasion. Given the recent victory handed down in *Brown*, it was no surprise that Current's remarks highlighted the Association's continued determination to protect black voting rights and its newest efforts to eradicate segregation in all areas of public life. In particular, he zeroed in on the governor's school equalization program and other threats to circumvent the Court's ruling, noting that both the black and "thinking white citizens" of the state "will not sit idly by while misguided politicians destroy the state."³⁹

Yet while Current was confident in his delivery, rhetoric alone could not bring down Mississippi's deeply entrenched system of white supremacy. Consistent and comprehensive action was required of the NAACP to break through the state's racially oppressive barriers, and as Evers prepared to implement school desegregation and bolster voter registration campaigns on the ground, Mississippi's white officials and many of its white citizens moved to obstruct any progress through the use of violence, financial pressure, and efforts to divide the black community down class lines. As pro-segregation, anti-NAACP hysteria advanced across the state, Evers also took on a central role in reporting acts of white on black violence and economic reprisal to the National Office in order to publicize the horrors of Mississippi racism on both the national and international

³⁹ NAACP Press Release, January 23, 1955, Subgroup 1, Series 12, Box 3, Folder 2, NAACP Field Secretary Papers, Medgar Evers Collection, MDAH; Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 87.

stage. The danger in doing so was great, and Evers armed himself with weapons should the need to use them in self-defense ever arise. While he chose not to openly advocate violence as per NAACP policy, neither did he shy away from the idea of protecting his family or friends if the opportunity presented itself.

As a freedom fighter in a hostile environment, Evers could not afford to be ill-prepared for any potentially violent situation that might arise. Ingrained in his psyche since childhood, the tradition of armed resistance and his desire for militant action, coupled with the new internationalist outlook cultivated during his time in the military and reinforced by his study of the situation in Kenya, resulted in the development of an activist style that according to Charles Payne, was “more aggressive than was customary for the NAACP.”⁴⁰ Ruby Hurley, who frequently traveled with Evers on investigatory treks across the Delta disguised as sharecroppers, referred to him as “anything but nonviolent,” adding “he always wanted to go at it in Mau Mau fashion.” Over the course of his career as field secretary, Evers struggled to balance this more aggressive style with the Association’s directives, though he came to firmly believe that nonviolence was the most effective means of securing the NAACP’s long term goals. Nonetheless, the intensification of white-on-black repression that followed in the wake of *Brown* placed Evers in both a precarious and fortuitous position that would require him to grow into a militant Mississippi Mau Mau: able to think on his feet, arouse the masses, and devise new ground strategies to fit changing circumstances.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 51.

⁴¹ Ruby Hurley, interviewed by John Britton, January 26, 1968, 86, Howard Civil Rights Documentation Project, Howard University, quoted in Dittmer, *Local People*, 50.

For its part, Mississippi's white power structure took Evers' field secretary appointment seriously, at least insofar as it indicated the NAACP was making a full-fledged effort to push for racial equality throughout the state. In light of his ongoing attempt to desegregate the Ole Miss School of Law, and feeling compelled to act in response to the Court's decision in *Brown*, a small group of concerned white citizens met in the town of Indianola, Mississippi in July of 1954 and formed the Indianola Citizens' Council. Led by Robert "Tut" Patterson, the manager of a cotton compress and a former army paratrooper, the group consisted of the town's mayor, city attorney, and other prominent businessmen and professionals. Indianola, which sat on the banks of the Indian Bayou in Sunflower County, was situated in the heart of the Delta and dotted with large cotton plantations. There, blacks made up almost two-thirds of the population but accounted for only .03 percent of registered voters. According to Neil R. McMillen, who studied the birth and growth of the Indianola Citizen's Council, the town was "in most respects a natural birthplace for a white supremacy movement."⁴²

Patterson had been moved to call the Indianola meeting after reading the transcript of a speech given by Mississippi Circuit Judge Thomas Pickens Brady titled "Black Monday." The speech, which had been originally addressed to the Greenwood chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution, was a rancorous jeremiad against the Supreme Court, filled with racialized language excoriating the lack of judicial precedent in the *Brown* decision, blaming societal upheaval on the intrusion of the NAACP and other "communist organizations," and reaffirming the sovereignty of states. Black

⁴² McMillen, *The Citizens' Council*, 19.

Monday, he asserted, “could be our Gettysburg also,” if Mississippians did not take a stand against the “sociological Supreme Court” and those pushing to implement desegregation in public life. His proposed solutions to the crisis included calling for the popular election of Supreme Court Justices, a youth program intended to educate about the evils of communism and its infiltration into American society, and, of last resort – a complete shutdown of the public school system. Above all, he called for Mississippi citizens to form local citizens organizations intended to serve as the first line of defense against the forces seeking to destroy white supremacy.⁴³

In response to Brady’s call for organized resistance, Patterson had answered. The first issue on the docket at the Indianola meeting concerned the identity of the council itself. Upon careful deliberation, it was decided the organization would exist as a grassroots group, comprised of all the white citizens of the town, intended to stimulate community action from within to counteract the NAACP and other civil rights organizations at work in Mississippi. Formally labeled “the Indianola Plan,” news of the council’s framework spread to other communities, who in turn created their own councils. However, unlike violent organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, who generated negative publicity for the state, the councils were firmly dedicated to seeking a more “respectable means of defending white supremacy.” In describing the nature of the Councils, Charles Payne stated that they “[pursued] the agenda of the Klan with the demeanor of the Rotary.” Their methods of resistance were primarily economic in nature,

⁴³ Tom P. Brady, “Review of Black Monday,” October 28, 1954, Box 3, Folder 21, William D. McCain Pamphlet Collection, Special Collections, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi; McMillen, *The Citizens’ Council*, 17-18.

intended to financially squeeze black Mississippians involved or suspected of involvement with the NAACP and place them in dire fiscal straights.⁴⁴

As a means of exacting support for their existence, the councils capitalized on the Southern anti-communist hysteria laid out in Brady's diatribe and denounced the NAACP as a subversive organization intent on destroying the Southern way of life.⁴⁵ Council literature, passed around each city and town as part of each council's membership drives, was particularly inflammatory. In a pamphlet titled "The Eight Ifs...and Your Answer!" passed out by the Jackson Citizens' Council, white citizens were asked to consider eight questions. These included whether the reader believed there could be no compromise on the matter of segregation, if integration would lead to miscegenation and the eventual destruction of the white race, if they realized that "either Communistic influences or economic pressure groups stand behind every effort to invade States' Rights and force integration and miscegenation on the people of the South," if they believed in states' rights, and if they realized that "*indifference, apathy, and the inclination of some to accept desegregation was 'inevitable'...are our greatest enemies.*" If they could answer yes to any or all of those questions, the Jackson Citizens' Council was for them.⁴⁶

In the halls of the Mississippi statehouse, legislators set to work devising new strategies to offset the NAACP's desegregation and voter registration campaigns as they waited, alongside everyone else in the nation, on the Supreme Court's decision on

⁴⁴ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 35.

⁴⁵ Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 2-11. In addition to Woods, see Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1977), 299-302, 313-314.

⁴⁶ "The Eight Ifs...and Your Answer!", Folder 1, Citizens' Council Mississippi Collection, MDAH.

implementing *Brown*. Several new amendments to the Mississippi Constitution were introduced including one that provided registrars with unlimited discretion in determining whether potential black registrants had successfully interpreted any section of the state constitution and a “statement of the duties and obligations of citizenship.” In early January of 1955, the legislature called a special session in order to insert an additional amendment directly intended to offset school desegregation efforts by giving the legislature power to abolish the public school system outright. At the same time, it also proposed a new “surtax” plan, which consisted of a sales tax increase intended to fund the school equalization program. The Legal Education Advisory Committee, created by Governor White as part of his initial equalization proposal, had returned cost estimates for the program in the 1955-1956 school year. In total, the cost stood at \$38,200.00, which is the equivalent, in 2013, of nearly one-third of a billion dollars.⁴⁷

In response to the legislature’s actions, the NAACP’s Mississippi State Board of Directors, with Evers’ full support, adopted two policies that were then sent out via news release. The first policy was a pledged “all-out attack on the vicious piece of undemocratic legislation” of which the board declared it would not rest “until it is stricken from the books.” The second condemned “the policies of various newspapers to continuously attack Negro citizens in a derogatory manner,” to which the board requested “Negroes and other citizens...seek subscriptions from newspapers that are fairer to all citizens.” The Association’s protests did nothing to curtail the passage of the legislation, as it passed in a special election in November of 1954. But by keeping up a steady stream

⁴⁷ “Mississippi to Arm with Broad Power,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, January 9, 1955.

of publicity and pressure, the NAACP sent a strong message it would not back down in its fight for equality.⁴⁸

The NAACP's efforts to battle against the legislature's attempts to further disfranchise black voters and advocate for school desegregation placed its leaders in an even more prominent spotlight, as the newly formed citizens' councils took aim at the Association. Not even one month after officially becoming field secretary and opening up the state office in Jackson, Evers was inundated with news and complaints of threats and economic pressure on local NAACP members. This included Gus Courts, president of the Belzoni branch and a prominent grocer, who was denied credit by the local bank unless he agreed to step down as president of his chapter.⁴⁹ According to Linda and David Beito, Belzoni, located in Humphreys County on the Yazoo River, was considered a "hotbed of intimidation by the Citizens' Councils," and that "white merchants had circulated a blacklist of ninety-four registered black voters." While white discontent with black progress had always been present in Belzoni, moderate successes by the RCNL and NAACP to register black voters, particularly in the aftermath of *Brown*, resulted in additional crackdowns.⁵⁰

Amzie Moore was another prominent target. Always deemed a problematic rabble rouser and civil rights "agitator," Moore began facing financial difficulties in early 1954 he took out a bank loan to build his filling station and restaurant complex in Cleveland, Mississippi. However, when local whites asked him to place a "colored only" sign over

⁴⁸ NAACP News Release, February 2, 1955, Subgroup 1, Series 12, Box 3, Folder 2, Field Secretary Papers, Medgar Evers Collection, MDAH; Beito and Beito, *Black Maverick*, 98.

⁴⁹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 48.

⁵⁰ Beito and Beito, *Black Maverick*, 98-99.

the store, he refused. They then accused him of organizing a boycott of local businesses, and denied him further bank loans as well as called in the mortgage on his home. At the same time Moore was struggling to pay his debts, several black farmers in the counties of Holmes and Bolivar petitioned the NAACP state office for aid. In a series of sworn affidavits given in December of 1954, the farmers complained that in the aftermath of a severe drought that had struck the area they were unable to procure emergency funds and loans from the Farmers Home Administration, a federal agency under the management of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.⁵¹ Evers, along with each of the complainants, suspected that the refusal of disaster funds and loans was the result of an economic squeeze, directed by the local citizens' council, on those who were believed to hold memberships in the NAACP. Evers, along with Rev. E.J. Johnson of Yazoo City, who both desired to get the National Office involved in the situation, forwarded the affidavits to New York and contacted Roy Wilkins about the matter.⁵²

Wilkins, who had high hopes for Evers, conferred with him on the matter and agreed that a solution was needed to aid the individuals being squeezed by the councils. What emerged out of the discussion was the establishment of a loan program through the Tri-State Bank of Memphis, a black-owned bank. Working with both the National Office and with T.R.M. Howard, who served as a board member of the Tri-State Bank, Evers

⁵¹ Affidavit of Dan Smith of Holmes County, Mississippi, notarized by Preston Holmes, December 28, 1954; Affidavit of Rev. James Hargrove of Holmes County, Mississippi, notarized by Preston Holmes; December 28, 1954; Affidavit of Mrs. Annie Ward of Holmes County, Mississippi, notarized by C.V. Thurmond, December 29, 1954; Affidavit of Amzie Moore of Bolivar County, Mississippi, notarized by Preston Holmes, December 29, 1954; Affidavit of Cato Sample of Holmes County, notarized by C.V. Thurmond, date unknown, all located in Subgroup 1, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 8, NAACP Field Secretary Files, Medgar and Myrlie Evers Collection, MDAH.

⁵² Roy Wilkins to Rev. E.J. Johnson, January 19, 1955, Subgroup 1, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 8, NAACP Field Secretary Files, Medgar and Myrlie Evers Collection, MDAH.

was able to facilitate an opportunity for economic relief. In the meantime, the NAACP set about sending dozens of press releases in which it requested that black businesses, professional organizations, and organized labor associations place their funds into the bank. Within a few months, the fund had grown to over \$250,000.⁵³ Organizations that participated included branches of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, United Automobile Workers, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, as well as countless numbers of insurance companies, fraternal societies, and professional organizations.⁵⁴

At the same time, Gloster B. Current, the NAACP Director of Branches, requested that Evers produce further documentation of economic reprisals in order to serve as the basis for an investigation into the citizens' councils and their possible connections to the Farmers Home Administration. The NAACP then released another press release in January 1955, announcing that Roy Wilkins had submitted the affidavits and Current's report on the situation to the White House with an urgent request for "prompt action."⁵⁵ Over the next several months, Evers worked with Clarence Mitchell and others in the NAACP Washington Bureau to secure information for use by the NAACP's Legal Defense Division. In the pages of the February 1955 edition of the *Crisis*, the success of the project was celebrated. Dr. John E. Walker, president of the Tri-State Bank, assured readers that the funds put in the bank were given to victims of economic reprisal in Mississippi and that he promised to "give special attention to the

⁵³ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 46.

⁵⁴ NAACP Press Release, January 27, 1955, Subgroup 1, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 8, NAACP Field Secretary Files, Medgar and Myrlie Evers Collection, MDAH.

⁵⁵ NAACP National Press Release, January 20, 1955, Subgroup 1, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 8, NAACP Field Secretary Files, Medgar and Myrlie Evers Collection, MDAH.

applications from Negro homeowners, farmers, business, and professional men who have been denied credit because of their views.”⁵⁶

Evers was pleased with the success of the Association’s efforts, particularly given how voraciously the citizens’ councils had attacked their targets. Yet in the process of working hand in hand with Wilkins, their professional relationship suffered occasional communication problems that stemmed from their vast differences in leadership style. Wilkins was driven, staid, conservative, avidly anti-communist, and fiercely devoted to running the NAACP in a top-down manner. Evers was level-headed but also steeped in a growing internationalist worldview and dedicated to militant action on the ground in an area of the country so oppressive to black folk, it may as well have been as far away from New York City as Kenya was, given how much the environments both men lived within differed. Perhaps no situation served as a better example of the two men’s opposite natures and experiences than the Tri-State Bank campaign.

While it was picking up steam, Wilkins began to grow concerned over the situation from a public relations perspective. As the national black press picked up on the news and spread the story around, Wilkins began to worry that some individuals in Mississippi saw the bank as the solution to all of their problems. More specifically, he corresponded with Evers to warn him that because the National Office had decided to publicize the situation, it was paramount that Evers and the Mississippi branch presidents relay to those in need of loans that the money was only available to those who could meet the requirements of the bank. In a letter to T.R.M. Howard, Wilkins wrote that he felt

⁵⁶ “Along the NAACP Battlefield,” *The Crisis*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (February 1955): 101.

“the publicity had the effect of creating in the minds of many Mississippians the idea that a huge amount of money was available for them and all they had to do was step up to the window and ask for it on the claim that they were being persecuted.” Confirmation of this, Wilkins felt, was to be found in the actions of Amzie Moore, who had been turned down for a loan by the Tri-State Bank because he was deemed too large a credit risk.⁵⁷

Moore was, in spite of his many amiable qualities, a bad businessman. But he continued to look to the NAACP for help in the situation. Evers, who did his best to aid Moore while adhering to Wilkins’ demands, found himself stuck in the middle. In January of 1956, Moore applied for a loan of \$7,000 under the Tri-State Bank program. Wilkins, as well as bank officials, were wary of the application given Moore’s past financial troubles, which were both due to economic reprisals by the citizens’ council as well as his seeming inability to handle money well. Under Wilkins’ direction, the Tri-State Bank turned down the loan application, arguing Moore possessed “insufficient collateral.” Moore then looked to Howard for aid, who provided him with emergency funds and pitched his story to other financial backers who agreed to help him. However, when some of the money did not come through as promised, Moore wrote Wilkins to complain about the issue, imploring he understand how dire the situation was in Mississippi, and that he desperately wanted to ensure his debts to white creditors were paid off in case he was arrested for civil rights agitation and his wife was forced to take on his financial liability. Wilkins, while apologetic, was also direct with Moore in his reply, asserting that the matter was none of the Association’s business, and to take up the

⁵⁷ Roy Wilkins to Dr. T.R.M. Howard, February 11, 1955, Subgroup 1, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 8, NAACP Field Secretary Files, Medgar and Myrlie Evers Collection, MDAH.

problem with Howard. Evers, who understood why Wilkins had washed his hands of the issue, also knew firsthand how unfairly Moore had been treated by the white citizens of Cleveland, Mississippi.⁵⁸

Eventually, Moore procured funds through other means, but Wilkins' concern with maintaining good relationships with Washington officials to curry favor for its desegregation and voter registration efforts directed attention away from the systemic inequality at the root of black farmers' struggles. What is more, Evers' work on the Tri-State Bank campaign took up considerable amounts of his time, and according to Myrlie Evers, he struggled to pass along all the requests, apologize for delays, and soothe those who were turned down for the loans. Only a few months into his new job, Evers was, in some respects, up to his neck in the turmoil that plagued Mississippi blacks. While that turmoil was not unfamiliar to him, he had become the leading face of the NAACP in the state, and the pressures to succeed within an ever-worsening racial climate were enormous.⁵⁹

Perhaps no incident demonstrated the apparent degeneration of the situation in Mississippi than the murder of Reverend George. Vice-President of the RCNL and a leader in the Belzoni chapter of the NAACP, he had long been a prominent businessman, civic leader, and advocate for civil rights in the Delta. In April of 1955, he participated in the RCNL's annual meeting in Mound Bayou, during which he and Gus Courts spoke to the crowd. At age 51, Lee was considered an amiable, down-home man with a gift for

⁵⁸ Amzie Moore to Roy Wilkins, January 30, 1956, Box 1, Folder 2; Roy Wilkins to Amzie Moore, February 7, 1956, Box 1, Folder 2, Amzie Moore Papers, 1941-1970, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter, WHS).

⁵⁹ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 99-100.

oratory, who along with Courts had managed to register one hundred black voters throughout the state. That evening, he gave a speech in which he told the crowd, “pray not for your mom and pop, they’ve gone to heaven. Pray you can make it through this hell.” Shortly before midnight on May 7th, a car pulled up alongside his on the road, fired two shots into the driver’s side, and sped off. Lee died of his wounds shortly afterward. While local whites initially tried to downplay the event, it was well known to Lee’s colleagues that he had endured threats and economic pressure for refusing to take his name off the voter roll.

Unsurprisingly, the local sheriff argued Lee’s death had been the result of a traffic accident despite the fact that Lee’s jaw had been practically blown off and was embedded with what appeared to be buckshot. In response, Evers mobilized an investigation while T.R.M. Howard contacted the African American congressman from Michigan, Charles Diggs, to press the FBI to conduct its own investigation. Two days after the assassination, it sent agents from its civil rights division. Evers, NAACP State President A.H. McCoy, and others also pressed on Governor White to investigate, but he refused. In the meantime, Lee’s wife planned a public, open casket funeral for Lee in Belzoni, which drew a crowd over one thousand people and attention in all the nation’s black papers. Eventually, after it concluded its investigation, the FBI announced it had been unable to find witnesses willing to talk or track down the assassin. Yet while the outcome of Lee’s murder investigation only resulted in more heartache for his friends and family, the event had a significant impact on Evers. According to Linda and Roy Beito, Evers “cut his teeth” on the Lee case. While local officials tried to hinder the investigation and

downplay the situation, Evers continually fed information to the press to keep the story in the news. And just as he had come to understand from following the plight of Mau Mau in Kenya, publicity could make all the difference in the world in Mississippi.⁶⁰

If the Lee murder was not enough to shift Evers' world on its axis, what followed only a few weeks later certainly jolted Mississippi anew. On May 31, 1955, the Supreme Court handed down its implementation decision in *Brown II*. Writing for the Court, Chief Justice Warren stipulated that federal district courts were to oversee the implementation of desegregation in schools and that such actions should occur "at all deliberate speed."⁶¹ Responses to the Court's decision were mixed. Both proponents and opponents of the *Brown* decision were quick to hone in on the "all deliberate speed" phrase, which white southerners took to interpreting far differently than their black counterparts. Aware that compliance with the ruling was left to individual district judges, Mississippi's white power structure concentrated on erecting further barriers to desegregation at both the local and official state levels.

The NAACP, on the other hand, sought to press forward with its desegregation campaigns immediately. In the June-July edition of the *Crisis*, Roy Wilkins and Thurgood Marshall co-authored an interpretive analysis of the Supreme Court's decision. In it, they reaffirmed the Association's crusade to end segregation in education, called on all state and federal officials to act with good faith, and asserted that the push to transition school systems to operate in accordance with the Court's ruling must start promptly. "Armed with the powers embodied in the language of the Court's opinion," they

⁶⁰ Beito and Beito, *Black Maverick*, 110-111.

⁶¹ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955).

explained, “we look confidently toward the future.” Of those who sought to obstruct change, they reminded readers that “we now have the weapons to make them accept the highest court’s affirmation of true American principles.”⁶² Gloster Current then stepped forward to make an announcement that the Association would concentrate its summer work on prepping local chapters for participation in desegregation efforts, which included the supplying of technical aid and briefing the field secretaries on the next steps in the process.⁶³

In Mississippi, Evers began the process of overseeing and publicizing the filing of petitions for desegregation of the public schools in Natchez, Vicksburg, Jackson, Yazoo City, and Clarksdale. Aware that the publication of the petitions was a tactical move that had the potential to help the movement yet hinder its participants, Evers and the local NAACP branch presidents remained in close contact with one another. Aaron Henry, whose chapter filed the petition in Clarksdale, began the process at a public meeting. The petition, which had been carefully prepared and that called upon the local schoolboard to implement the Supreme Court’s decision immediately, was posted in churches and businesses around Clarksdale. Within a month, the petitions had garnered four hundred signatures, and when they had all been collected, the chapter sent them to the schoolboard in September of 1955. Henry was fully aware of what would follow the submission of the petition, and in a letter to him written in July, reminded Evers “As you direct each person who signs the petition must know the probable and extreme consequences. Yet, the

⁶² Thurgood Marshall and Roy Wilkins, “Interpretation of Supreme Court Decision & the NAACP Program,” *The Crisis*, Vol. 62, No. 6, (June-July 1955).

⁶³ “NAACP Summer Work to Focus on Southern School Program,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 5, 1955.

program cannot be sold on a defeatist mood by playing up all the bad points. To do it that way will scare or frighten every one away from us in this move.”⁶⁴

Henry was right to remind Evers of the risks. In Clarksdale, economic reprisals and a campaign of misinformation sponsored by the Citizens’ Council were set in motion as soon as the NAACP announced its intentions to push for the desegregation of the town’s schools. In response, Evers and Henry clarified the situation through a small publicity campaign of their own. In the July 26, 1956 edition of the *Jackson Daily News*, an article ran claiming the black population of Clarksdale had agreed to a policy of voluntary school segregation.⁶⁵ With the struggles that both men faced in attempting to convince the local black population of the futility of such a plan, any publicity stating otherwise was extremely detrimental to the campaign. In an angry letter fired off to the editors of the *Daily News* the following day, Henry quickly cleared up the issue.⁶⁶ However, the misinformation campaign paled in comparison to the citizens’ council’s next step, which was printing the names and addresses of all the petition signers in the local newspaper. Economic reprisals quickly followed, and Henry later admitted that he and Evers “realized we had made a serious mistake by using so many names of people who were not prepared to handle the intimidation.” Of the signers, he added “some...were forced to flee the state, others could not even buy basic staples, and

⁶⁴ Henry and Curry, *The Fire Ever Burning*, 92; Aaron Henry to Medgar Evers, July 15, 1956, Subgroup 1, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 7, NAACP Field Secretary Files, Medgar and Myrlie Evers Collection, MDAH.

⁶⁵ H. L. Stevenson, “Clarksdale Segregation Plan in National Focus,” *Jackson Daily News*, July 26, 1956.

⁶⁶ Aaron Henry to Frederick Sullens, July 27, 1956, Subgroup 1, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 7, NAACP Field Secretary Files, Medgar and Myrlie Evers Collection, MDAH.

carpenters and plumbers in the building trades were no longer hired by whites.” If your name was on the petition, he concluded “you caught hell.”⁶⁷

Similar situations occurred in the other towns where petitions had been filed. In the August 18, 1955 edition of the *Yazoo City Herald*, the names and home addresses of 53 local petitioners were published on the front page. Over the course of the next month, the paper continued to print an updated list of those petitioners who chose to remove their names, as well as those whose signatures still remained on the document, on their front page until all but two signers were left.⁶⁸ Such tactics were favorites of the citizens’ councils, and while the NAACP did its best to convince its members and supporters that participation in the desegregation campaigns were paramount to the success of breaking down white supremacy, turning verbal acquiescence into action was easier said than done. What is more, though he understood why so many of the signers decided to remove their names from the document, Evers was left considerably frustrated with some of them. Namely, the small number of middle class teachers in Mississippi’s black communities who failed to cooperate with the NAACP’s campaign. Charles Payne noted “schoolteachers who had profited from the NAACP’s push to equalize school expenditures particularly irked him.” Despite the increase in salaries and opportunities that the NAACP had helped them obtain, Evers maintained that many of the schoolteachers only went out of their way to help the organization “in isolated cases.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Henry and Curry, *Fire Ever Burning*, 92-93.

⁶⁸ “Non-Discriminatory Basis’ NAACP Asks School Board,” *Yazoo City Herald*, August 18, 1955; “33 Withdraw Names; Plead Misrepresentation,” *Yazoo City Herald*, August 25, 1955; “Only Six Names Left on List, More Signers Ask for Names Off,” *Yazoo City Herald*, September 1, 1955; “Three More Negroes Ask School Board To Disregard Names,” *Yazoo City Herald*, September 8, 1955; “Another Signer Asks School Board To Disregard Name,” *Yazoo City Herald*, September 22, 1955.

⁶⁹ Evers quoted from a 1958 interview in Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 53.

At the same time, however, Evers was fully aware of the level of repression that the school desegregation campaign participants were under. Thus, in certain periods when concerns over the lack of participation in the campaigns were raised by some of the members of the local branches and individuals in the National Office, Evers tried to express his disappointment while also reminding those such as Wilkins of just how difficult it was for black Mississippians to live day to day in Mississippi. In reference to the situation in Yazoo City, Evers wrote the executive secretary in September 1956 and expressed his sorrow and frustration with both the black population of Yazoo City and the oppressive system that resulted in their decisions to withdraw their names from the school petitions. “Honestly, Mr. Wilkins,” Evers wrote, “for Yazoo City there doesn’t seem to be very much hope. The Negroes will not come together, and our former president has not cooperated at all.” The root of the problem, in Evers’ estimation, was fear, and in light of the pressures the black community was placed under, it was not surprising. “I would say it is worse than being behind the Iron Curtain,” he stated. “You can’t possibly imagine how cruel the white element is to the local Negro citizens.” Lastly, he noted that “Yazoo City...is half delta and hill town with a predominant plantation atmosphere, which makes the problem even greater. I thought you should know a few things about Yazoo City so that you would be able to understand the condition under which Negroes, especially NAACP members, live.”⁷⁰

The problem of fear was a central one, and as Evers continued to delve deeper into investigating Mississippi’s white power structure and facilitating the Association’s

⁷⁰ Medgar Evers to Roy Wilkins, September 12, 1956, Subgroup 1, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 9, NAACP Field Secretary Files, Medgar and Myrlie Evers Collection, MDAH.

campaigns, another catastrophic event occurred that was as seemingly common as it was horrifying – yet another reminder of the reality of black life in Mississippi. While Evers, Henry, and other NAACP leaders were hard at work stirring up support for the desegregation push, recruiting new members, and encouraging black Mississippians to register to vote, fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was murdered in cold blood while visiting his relatives in Mississippi. Originally from Chicago, Till's mother, who had grown up in Mississippi, reluctantly allowed her son to visit his uncle and cousins, who lived outside the small hamlet of Money, Mississippi. While on a trip to the local grocery store, Till walked to the counter to purchase some candy from the white wife of the store's owner, Roy Bryant. What happened next remains the subject of great debate. Carolyn Bryant, the woman working the cash register that day, claimed young Till made sexual advances toward her. His cousins, as well as some of the other children standing outside the door, claimed Till might have wolf-whistled at Bryant, or whistled to himself on account of a stutter he suffered.

Regardless of Till's exact actions, what was made clear was that when Roy Bryant returned home and learned of the situation, he and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, drove to the house of Till's uncle, demanded he turn over the young teenager to them, then drove Till out to an abandoned barn, beat him, shot him in the head, and then weighed his body down with a cotton gin fan and tossed it into the Tallahatchie River. Three days after his disappearance, Till's body was found by a fisherman. The investigation and murder case that followed knocked the state of Mississippi on its heels, and in the process, placed Evers and the state NAACP on the national stage in a way he

had not yet experienced. It also reinforced his militancy, desire to remain officially nonviolent but increase protections for himself and his family, and understanding of the importance of utilizing publicity to garner attention on both the national and international stages.⁷¹

Evers immediately set out to conduct an investigation on behalf of the NAACP alongside Ruby Hurley and other field representatives, but not before, according to Myrlie Evers, he broke down and cried at the injustice of the situation. In and around Money, Evers and the others combed the area, looking for witnesses, taking statements when they felt safe to do so, and keeping abreast of the attempts by local white officials to downplay the incident. Indeed, both local law enforcement and the coroner initially tried to cover up the murder by quickly burying the body. However, Till's mother demanded a more thorough investigation and that the body, after it had been identified by a relative, be sent back to Chicago. There, she insisted her son be given an open casket funeral, which was attended by thousands of mourners. The photographs of Till's mutilated corpse were spread far and wide via the pages of *Jet Magazine*, and quickly ushered the story onto the front pages of newspapers across the nation. Because of the negative publicity surrounding the case, Mississippi officials were pressured to bring Bryant and Milam to trial for Till's murder.

⁷¹ Till's body was found twelve miles north of Money, only around fifteen minutes away from the birthplace of his mother, Mamie Till-Bradley. Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (New York and London, The Free Press, 1988), 22. For more on the details of the Till murder, investigation, and murder trial, including his mother's account, see Christopher Metress, ed., *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative* (Charlottesville and London, 2002); and Mamie Till-Bradley and Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America* (New York: One World Books, 2003).

Along with Hurley and another Mississippi native named Howard Spence, Evers worked to give the National Office consistent updates on the situation, many of which were repurposed into press releases condemning the murder and calling for racial justice. Once, after returning to Jackson from an investigatory trip to Money, Spence entered the state office to find Evers in conversation with a Detroit reporter. Spence recalled that the reporter told Evers “never before has a case of this kind been able to escape the borders of Mississippi,” but assured him that on account of Evers’ report, the report would be in the *Detroit Free Press* the following day. What is more, according to Minnie White Watson, a resident of Jackson and friend of Evers, he had played an instrumental role in convincing Mamie Till- Bradley to have an open-casket funeral for her son, arguing that photographs could impact the public in a way mere words could not.⁷² At the same time, Wilkins also spoke directly about Till’s death, referring to it as a lynching, and declared that “it would appear that the State of Mississippi has decided to maintain white supremacy by murdering children.” In the pages of *The Crisis*, an editorial lambasted Mississippi and highlighted how such a brutal act played on the international stage. “Mississippi whines that she is misunderstood, that she is slandered, traduced, and maligned, that there are good people in the State who condemn the lynching-crime of Money. But where are they?” it asked. “The United States,” it continued, “shouts its democracy to the world and pleads with tear-filled eyes for world peace, but crimes like this imperil the position of the United States as the leader of the Free World.”⁷³

⁷² Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 126.

⁷³“Muddy River Gives up Body of Brutally Slain Negro Boy,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 1, 1955; “Mississippi Barbarism,” *The Crisis*, Vol. 62, No. 8 (October 1955).

The trial of Bryant and Milam, while precedent-setting in that it placed two white men on trial for the murder of black child in Mississippi, was also a mere formality. The verdicts of not guilty had been decided far in advance and were delivered by a jury consisting of mostly white country farmers. In response, NAACP officials, including Evers, exploded in anger. Wilkins and Marshall asked the Department of Justice for “prompt and effective action” against the “reign of terror” in Mississippi. The National Office was deluged with phone calls and letters offering financial assistance and moral support, and protest meetings were held at the headquarters of various branches across the nation. On September 25th, Evers traveled to Detroit to attend a public protest meeting. Alongside Charles Diggs, Evers spoke of the need for continued support of the Mississippi movement, adding that pressures on the state’s black population had reached an unbearable level, but that they would not retreat in the demands for racial equality. In response, the crowd of 15,000-strong, who stopped traffic within an eight-block radius around the Methodist church where the meeting was held, donated \$14,000 to the Association.⁷⁴

In the meantime, Mississippi’s white power structure was at work trying to retain its hold over voting power through the use of expanded economic pressure campaigns. As Neil R. McMillen explained, effective resistance to *Brown* not only encompassed efforts to curb the NAACP’s desegregation campaigns, but also “required the minimization of the Negro’s role in state and local elections.”⁷⁵ In light of the legislation proposed and

⁷⁴ “Lynch Case Verdict Stirs Whole Nation,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 8, 1955; “100,000 Across Nation Protest Lynching,” *Chicago Defender*, October 8, 1955.

⁷⁵ McMillen, *The Citizens’ Council*, 217.

passed in special legislative sessions called into existence after the Court's initial decision, it came as no surprise to Evers that black Mississippians were prevented from registering to vote in extensive campaigns to eliminate black access to polling places. Following elections, Evers often traveled around the state to accrue sworn affidavits by individuals who had been prevented from voting on the basis of racial discrimination. Several individuals noted that after arriving at the polls and filling out a ballot, the clerks in charge refused to place the ballot in the ballot box. Instead, the ballots were placed in envelopes on which the name of the voter was placed, and then set aside.⁷⁶ Others who tried to register were not allowed based on the results of their literacy tests or their failures to pay poll taxes. Perhaps the most exasperating affidavit was that of a young man named Clyde Kennard, who attempted to register in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Luther M. Cox, the county circuit clerk, refused Kennard's request. When Kennard asked Cox why he had been refused, Cox simply replied "no reason."⁷⁷

One of the most vicious crackdowns on voter registration occurred in Belzoni. In 1955, of the 16,000 blacks who resided in Humphreys County, only 126 of them were registered. Following the passage of the state constitutional amendments further disfranchising blacks, a "systematic program of economic pressure" followed. Potential voters or those already on the rolls were denied credit, fired from their jobs, or harassed in other ways that eventually resulted in the total number of registrants declining to 95.

⁷⁶ Affidavit of William L. Edwards of Lowndes County, Mississippi on August 25, 1955. Ida V. Dixon notary public, Subgroup 1, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 22, NAACP Field Secretary Files, Medgar and Myrlie Evers Collection, MDAH.

⁷⁷ Affidavit of Clyde Kennard, of Forrest County, Mississippi, date unknown, Subgroup 1, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 22, NAACP Field Secretary Files, Medgar and Myrlie Evers Collection, MDAH.

Evers referred to the pressure campaign in Belzoni as particularly hard core, adding “they’d come and tell them ‘you’ve lived in this community for a long time and if you want to stay here in peace, you’d better get your name off this list.’” The crackdowns were particularly devastating to the Delta region, where black participation in NAACP campaigns was already difficult to come by.⁷⁸

The Belzoni campaign seemed to come to a head in November of 1955 when Gus Courts, friend of the late Reverend George Lee and co-founder of the Belzoni branch of the NAACP, was shot in the arm and abdomen by unknown white assailants in front of the grocery store he owned. His crime had been the efforts he had made to try and register black voters. A few days prior to the shooting, he had received a warning from members of the local citizens’ council. A white businessman who entered his store to talk with Courts told him “they’re planning to get rid of you. I don’t know how and I don’t want to know how.” Blessedly, Courts survived the shooting, and in the aftermath, Evers investigated the incident, remarking that if Courts had not been immediately transferred to a hospital in Mound Bayou, he likely would have died from his wounds. Due to the potential for more negative publicity, Governor White promised an investigation and sent Sheriff Ike Shelton to Belzoni to solve the case. Shelton declined to interview Courts, claiming the hospital in Mound Bayou was out of his jurisdiction. The resultant conclusion of his investigation was typical of the kind demanded by the Governor. Shelton claimed he did not believe white men were involved in the crime at all, instead

⁷⁸ McMillen, *The Citizens’ Council*, 216.

stating “I honestly think some d--- n----- just drove their [sic] and shot him. But I could be wrong. I don’t think the (citizens) council has got a thing to do with this.”⁷⁹

By the end of Evers’ first full year on the job as field secretary, he had investigated numerous murders, attempted murders, and systematic efforts to disfranchise, circumvent, and stonewall black Mississippians throughout the state. His learning curve had been steep. In the aftermath of *Brown*, full-scale efforts to destroy the NAACP had emerged out of hysterical calls for an all-encompassing campaign of white mass resistance. As Evers’ delved deeper into Association work, he emerged as the face of the NAACP in Mississippi. Thus, as his career trajectory trended upward, so too did the potential for greater amounts of violence and harassment aimed at black Mississippians in general and his family and him in particular. Yet there had been victories too, albeit small ones when compared to the set-backs. Mississippi’s racial problem was longer the dark, hidden secret of those who lived within its oppressive walls. Thanks to Evers’ efforts to publicize every attempt by the state’s whites to humiliate, threaten, and carry out open acts of violence against black citizens, Mississippi’s antidemocratic, white supremacist system was on display across the nation and around the world.

However, the fight to break down the walls of segregation was far from over. In some respects, it was just beginning. On March 29, 1956, the Mississippi legislature passed a bill establishing the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission. Conceived as an organization intended to serve as a kind of “state-level FBI” with investigatory capabilities and a prominent public relations arm, the Sovereignty Commission quickly emerged as the

⁷⁹ “Gus Courts Ready to Tell FBI Names of Assailants: Said Friends Have Obtained New Information on Case,” *Atlanta Daily World*, December 7, 1955.

greatest, and most powerful, enemy of the NAACP in Mississippi.⁸⁰ In order to fight its seemingly endless reaches, Evers would spend the next seven years of his career risking life and limb to continue publicizing information about racial oppression in Mississippi, reformulating tactical approaches for use on the ground, and struggling to maintain organizational control amidst a changing activist landscape. They would be the most rewarding and devastating years of his life.

⁸⁰ Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2007), 26.

CHAPTER 4:

“ALL THE WORLD’S A STAGE:” SPOTLIGHTING MISSISSIPPI

In his prizewinning study of the civil rights era in Mississippi, former Tougaloo College professor John Dittmer noted “in the wake of *Brown* white Mississippians had developed a siege mentality so pervasive it encompassed virtually every citizen and institution. ‘Keeping the Negro in his place’ was no longer sufficient, for the real enemy lay outside the state’s borders – in the New York offices of the NAACP, in the chambers of the Supreme Court, inside the Kremlin walls.”¹ In a world beset by escalating Cold War pressures, white Mississippians sought to anchor their segregationist values to legitimate American values, true to the patriotic vision of the nation’s founders, and under attack by outside communist forces intent on destroying the Southern way of life from within. This was a particularly significant phenomenon given that by the mid-1950s, the Red Scare that had swept across the United States, driven by heightened fears of communist subversion and the histrionics of opportunist politicians, had somewhat lessened in intensity. Nonetheless, given the NAACP’s claim of victory in *Brown*, its announced intentions to push for the desegregation of schools across the South, and its support of an ever-expanding number of independence movements threatening to destroy traditional colonial boundaries in parts of the Americas, Africa, and Asia, the struggle to maintain white supremacy in Mississippi had become international in scope.

In Kenya, fighting between Mau Mau rebels and British colonial forces had shifted away from the cities and farmlands of the European highlands to the forests at the

¹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 60.

base of Mount Kenya and the Aberdares Hills. The flight to the forests by gangs of Mau Mau indicated the tide of the conflict had turned against the rebels. Unable to match the British in firepower and especially vulnerable to damage wrought by informers working with colonial authorities to destroy the insurgency from within, those still willing to take up arms against white rule sought out the protection of the forests as a last resort and a strategic means to force British soldiers into fighting on treacherous terrain. The resultant death toll was grim. By January of 1956, at least 10,000 Mau Mau or suspected Mau Mau were dead. In addition to military efforts, the colonial government instituted a policy of villagization, intended to serve as a means of rooting out remaining Mau Mau sympathizers throughout the Central Province. Upward of 100,000 Kikuyu were forced into government-funded concentration camps or enclosed villages.²

While British and loyalist forces inched closer to snuffing out the threat of an organized Mau Mau fighting force, their actions were the source of great international debate and criticism. Throughout 1955, an escalating food crisis induced by the villagization policy, together with the widespread usage of forced labor and torture in the camps, led to a torrent of additional Kikuyu deaths throughout the battered Central Province. International relief organizations, including the Red Cross, distributed food to the region, but were placed under the control of Governor Baring and directed to focus their efforts on areas populated by loyalists to the British colonial cause. Anger and dismay at such indisputable efforts to block the distribution of aid to a large number of enclosed villages bubbled over in the colony's own Medical Department, which issued

² Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 203-204, 235-288.

official statements condemning Baring's actions and criticizing the colonial government's failure to prevent the food shortages. Colonial authorities, who two years prior had issued official "Security of Information" directives to stem the flow of leaks out of the colony, declared the reports of starvation alarmist and pointed to the well-fed loyalists as proof. Nonetheless, the regime could not prevent accusations of wrongdoing and brutality from spreading near and far.³

In May of 1956, a former camp rehabilitation officer named Eileen Fletcher, a Quaker from Middlesex, England, expressed her disillusion with the treatment of the Kikuyu in the camps into a three-part written series published in the Quaker periodical *Peace News* titled "Kenya's Concentration Camps – An Eyewitness Account." It was a damning exposé. Historian Caroline Elkins, who undertook an extensive analysis of Fletcher's editorials, noted they "emphasized the capricious justice of the screening camps, the relentless labor routines in the work camps, the sexual abuse of female detainees, the unsanitary conditions of most of the camps, and the undernourishment and general poor health of the detainees." In the months that followed, former British officers stepped forward to corroborate Fletcher's report and provide their own eyewitness accounts of camp horrors. Despite Baring's assurances that the British operations against the Mau Mau had reached "the mopping-up stage," his comments did nothing to assuage concerns about the accusations of torture, neglect, and intentional starvation. Unable to ignore the rising level of interest in the situation but wanting to avoid a political

³ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 259-262.

showdown over the issue in the House of Commons, the British government looked to the head of the Colonial Office, Alan Lennox-Boyd, to sort out the problem.⁴

The allegations against the Kenyan colonial government were no small matter. At stake was Britain's imperial image and rationale for empire. As the world emerged from World War II, the western powers understood that endorsement of universal human rights – personhood, equal protection under the law, mobility, and safeguards from inhumane treatment – was essential to the preservation of western territorial claims and political philosophies in the developing ideological battle with the Soviet Union. This notion of human rights as a weapon against the forces of tyranny was conceptualized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948 and the Council of Europe's European Convention on Human Rights in 1953, both of which Britain was a principle signatory. Within the new western framework, the Colonial Office endeavored to uphold a general protection of fundamental rights in the colonies while maintaining dedication to its civilizing mission. In Kenya, Governor Baring's handling of the Mau Mau crisis upset that precarious balance, and the international outcry over the mistreatment of captured labor camp detainees could not be ignored for fear of negative geopolitical implications. More so than ever before, the justifications for colonial trusteeship were being placed under suspicion or outright attack.⁵

⁴ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 259-262, 284-308; "British 'Mopping up' Kenya," *New York Times*, May 8, 1956.

⁵ It is somewhat unsurprising that destruction of the balance between respecting human rights as agreed upon in the European Convention's treaty and the suppression of insurrection occurred in the Kenya. Though the emergency there coincided with other insurrections in the colonial world, in the estimation of the Colonial Office, the Mau Mau uprising represented a return to primitive barbarism rather than a move toward independence, and had to be crushed. A.W.B. Simpson, *Human Rights and the End of Empire: Britain and the Genesis of the European Convention*, (Oxford University Press, 2001), 321-322, 824-837.

When speaking on the Kenya situation in the House of Lords on February 10, 1955, Arthur Richards, 1st Baron Milverton and former governor of Gambia, Jamaica, and Nigeria, expressed his concerns regarding the international attention paid to the Kenyan colonial government's actions toward the Mau Mau. "We pay a lot of attention nowadays to world opinion and it seems to me not unreasonable to pay at least some attention to public opinion in the country where the trouble has occurred." The government policies regarding land, villagization, and the "absence of a clear lead" in organizing a home guard, Lord Milverton argued, "suggest... a lack of grip and understanding." In his assessment, Kenya resembled "a ship at sea in a storm, with no one on the bridge." The key to the preservation of the colony lay in political reform, the development of African leadership, and the improvement of the educational system reinforcing the merits of a "multi-racial community" defined by the "maintenance of law and order and the observance of law and justice." Doing so would not only secure the future of British trusteeship in Kenya, but eliminate the possibility of communist infiltration and exploitation. Lord William Jowitt, in response to Milverton, agreed that emphasis on the creation of a multi-racial community was paramount, as was the need for better police work and screening in the labor camps.⁶

Their criticism was too much for Lennox-Boyd and his imperialist sensibilities. He repeatedly denied the accusations against him and conducted a masterful disinformation campaign to confound his critics. Within this high imperialist framework,

⁶ The Situation in Kenya (Lord Milverton), 10 February 1955, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Lords, vol. 190, cols. 1128-1135.; The Situation in Kenya (Earl Jowitt), 10 February 1955, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Lords, vol. 190, cols. 1136-1143.; "Concern at Kenya: Lords' Debate," *Glasgow Herald*, February 11, 1955.

he asserted the mistreatment of African detainees and violence were merely isolated incidents rather than signs of widespread mismanagement. He also worked tirelessly to cover-up or obstruct investigations into the colonial government's misdeeds. Barbara Castle, a Labour Party MP who called for an independent investigation after the sudden resignation of Colonel Arthur Young as Kenya's Commissioner of Police, found herself targeted by Lennox-Boyd. During her visit to Kenya in late 1955, she struggled to obtain any information from individuals close to the Colonial Secretary. She also endured episodes of intimidation and attacks on her character. So too did Eileen Fletcher, who was alleged to be "hysterical in temper" and possessing of "a catty manner."⁷ In the short term, Lennox-Boyd's efforts paid off, as his and Baring's efforts to spin or outright fabricate stories in Kenya allowed them to retain power and move forward with their policies.

In the United States, mainstream newspaper coverage of the situation in Kenya noticeably declined in the aftermath of Jomo Kenyatta's trial and imprisonment. Only the nation's black newspapers maintained a steady stream of coverage, particularly in light of the leaked reports about the labor camps. In August of 1956, this was buoyed by a visit to the United States by Tom Mboya, the General Secretary of the Kenya Federation of Labor. A member of the Luo tribe, the second largest ethnic group in Kenya behind the Kikuyu, Mboya attended a Catholic mission school, won a scholarship to study at Oxford, and founded the Kenya Local Government Workers Union. After Kenyatta's arrest and imprisonment, Mboya was elected treasurer of the KAU. Though he was not

⁷ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 138, 275-292.

Kikuyu, he expressed solidarity with their plight. Wunyabari O. Maloba explained that Mboya and the trade union movement in Kenya “continually harangued the colonial authorities on matters related to the emergency as well as on traditional labor matters.” In regard to his relationship with the Mau Mau, Maloba noted “although the trade unions never supported Mau Mau, they continually pointed out the economic basis of the revolt and the need for African political parties through which Africans could channel their fears, frustrations, and hopes.”⁸

Mboya’s visit to the United States was sponsored by the American Committee on Africa (ACOA) and designed to encourage the support of American trade unions and the creation of scholarship programs for Kenyan youths to study in American universities. The ACOA, which emerged out of solidarity with the Defiance Campaign against South Africa’s apartheid system, was backed in part by the NAACP. Desiring to continue playing a guiding role in ending colonialism but stretched thin by its efforts to contend with Southern white backlash to *Brown* while it recovered from the sudden death of Walter White in March of 1955, the Association threw its support behind the creation of an organization focused on anticolonial issues in Africa. This was especially significant given the dust-up that had followed the exit of W.E.B. Du Bois from the NAACP in 1948 over the former Director of Special Research’s assessment that the Association allowed its fear of red-baiting to stand in the way of any meaningful work on Africa. For Roy Wilkins, the future of the NAACP’s intersection with African colonial movements lay in its promotion of strong, democratic rule across the continent, and Mboya fit perfectly into

⁸ Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya*, 149.

that framework in promoting a vision of liberation for Kenya and black Americans absent Mau Mau-type atrocities.⁹

Included in Mboya's national tour was an appearance on NBC's interview program 'Meet the Press' and visits with several American political leaders including Vice President Richard Nixon, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Adlai Stevenson, Secretary of Labor James P. Mitchell, United States Senator John F. Kennedy, and meetings with members of the United Auto Workers and United Steelworkers unions. He also spoke to students on numerous college campuses and wrote pieces in the *Pittsburgh Courier* about the evils of colonialism, the right of self-determination, and "the importance of a better understanding of Africa" in a world where peoples of all races were no longer isolated from one another.¹⁰ Though he did not express support for "atrocities" committed by the Mau Mau, he provided readers with a contextualized assessment of why the rebels felt compelled to utilize violence against their colonial oppressors. "Atrocities have been committed by Africans" he explained, "but there is no need for dramatizing or generalizing over these incidents. To conclude from these dramatizations that Africans are a primitive people seeking to revert into barbarism is erroneous since it is impossible to explain the conduct of some British troops and administrative officers who have committed serious crimes during the emergency despite

⁹ In a sense, the founding of the ACOA was directly related to Du Bois' exit from the NAACP, in that the new organization labeled itself a noncommunist alternative to the Council on African Affairs (CAA), the anti-colonialist organization chaired by singer, actor, and activist Paul Robeson that Du Bois joined after his exit from the NAACP. As the Cold War heated up, the CAA found it increasingly difficult to survive attacks on its existence and eventually fell apart. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 146-147; Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals*, 297-303. For more on the rise and fall of the CAA, see Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*, 261-270, Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*, 141-144, and Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 191-192.

¹⁰ Gerald Horne, *Mau Mau in Harlem?*, 173; "Evils of Colonialism Hit by African Visitor," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 5, 1956.

their claim to be the upholders of democracy, civilized standards and Christian way of life.”¹¹

By crafting his comments within an anticommunist framework that emphasized colonialism as untenable in a world divided between communist states and free democracies, Mboya connected the destruction of American racial apartheid with the democratization of Africa. In this manner, he appealed to moderates concerned with the negative impact race relations had on America’s image abroad while also advocating for African self-rule. Racial unrest and desegregation battles throughout the South, he argued, damaged the international reputation of the United States and increased the possibility of “Soviet penetration” into Africa and the Middle East. In a speech at Howard University, Mboya asserted “the struggle of the American Negro for civil rights is the same struggle of the African to end colonialism,” and added “the only reason America is morally ineffective is because she has a domestic disease.” Unless that disease was eradicated, American efforts to end colonial-style oppression would be seen and highlighted by her enemies as nothing but hypocritical, empty rhetoric. Why, Mboya’s asked, should the United States “ask the prime minister of South Africa to stop apartheid?” The prime minister, Mboya claimed, would answer with “go back home and deal with Mississippi.”¹²

¹¹ Tom Mboya, “The Truth and Untruth about the Mau Mau: The Mau Mau Emergency,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 1, 1956; “The Truth and Untruth about the Mau Mau, Part II,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 8, 1956; “The Truth and Untruth about the Mau Mau, Part III: Social and Economic Problems in Kenya,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 15, 1956.

¹² Horne, *Mau Mau in Harlem?* 173-174.

Mboya's placement of Mississippi as the epicenter of American racial hypocrisy was apt. As he journeyed through the United States, Mississippi's campaign of massive resistance was in full swing, riding high on the tidal wave of post-*Brown* hysteria. In a May, 1955 *Jackson Daily News* editorial that ran after the announcement of the Supreme Court's school desegregation implementation decision titled "Yes We Defy the Law," the tenor of the piece was clear. "If the Supreme Court decision is the law of the land" it read, "then we intend to defy the law."¹³ In addition, the development of the citizens' councils had not only successfully erected barriers against the NAACP's voter registration and school desegregation campaigns, but also sought to shroud the Association's civil rights work in the red flag of communism. "While we slept," a cartoon in an Association of Citizens' Council newsletter illustrated, the red termites had infiltrated the homes of white Mississippians and threatened to eat away the very foundations of Southern society. "Many of us are now awake," the accompanying commentary declared. "But need to awake millions more. It is going to take hundreds of thousands of dollars to get the message across. Let's go!"¹⁴ In his estimation of this period in the Mississippi movement's history, Aaron Henry held that an "air of fanaticism prevailed, and it almost seemed as if the whites had gone insane."¹⁵ In Mississippi, that insanity was becoming increasingly well organized, far-reaching, and deadly.

Among the state's black population, an overwhelming sense of defeat grew prevalent throughout 1956. As citizens' councils financially choked black citizens who

¹³ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, the Living*, 162.

¹⁴"Your Help is Needed," *The Citizens Council*, Dec 1956, Folder 1, Citizens Council Mississippi Collection, MDAH.

¹⁵ Henry, *The Fire Ever Burning*, 93.

participated in the desegregation or voting rights campaigns, fears of further violence escalated. Several notable black leaders and NAACP members left the state, including Dr. Clinton Battle, the founder of the Indianola branch of the NAACP and Dr. Maurice Mackel, a key figure in the school desegregation drive. Even Dr. T.R.M. Howard, the most prevalent black leader in Mississippi whose confidence and dedication to black financial uplift had placed him at the forefront of RCNL campaigns for voting rights and equal education, finally had enough. Increasingly vicious threats on the life of his family and him drove Howard to flee the state in frustration and reestablish his medical practice on the South Side of Chicago. Still others, who comprised the small black middle class that profited from the segregated economic system and feared the escalation of violence and intimidation, seemed only too willing to, in the words of Henry, embrace the “old submissiveness.”¹⁶

Just as the Mau Mau movement faced the prospect of total annihilation at the hands of organized resistance from the colonial government in Kenya, the growth of organized white resistance, directed from the Jackson statehouse, had successfully wiped out a significant portion of the Mississippi NAACP’s ground gains in the wake of *Brown*. Defeats in the Association’s school desegregation and voting rights campaigns prompted a large portion of the state’s black population back into a position of frightened acquiescence. Faced with a myriad of setbacks to its civil rights goals, Medgar Evers was depressingly aware the Association’s back was against the wall. However, his awareness of the significance of America’s image abroad in relation to the success of its foreign

¹⁶ Dittmer, *Local People*, 70-72; Henry, *The Fire Ever Burning*, 98.

policy goals to defeat the spread of communism, and refusal to abandon the needs of fellow black Mississippians or cower to white reprisals drove Evers' desire to press forward on the ground. Though he issued no call for the black community to retreat to the forests of Mississippi, Evers' actions, which included working harder than ever to publicize the state's oppressive system of race relations in the press and directly challenge its white supremacist power structure, mirrored the Mau Mau-style tactic of enticing Mississippi's most virulent racists into the open to fight on increasingly treacherous terrain – the international stage.

In November of 1955, the National Office published a pamphlet titled "M is for Mississippi and Murder." Comprised of details provided by Evers regarding the rash of murders and shootings that had occurred the year before, including those of George Lee, Lamar Smith, and Emmett Till, the pamphlet also highlighted the establishment of the citizens' councils. In its final section subtitled "This is Mississippi," it argued "it is the people who make a state. It is their sense of decency and humanity, their delineation between right and wrong, their relative kinship to the Almighty and their stewardship of that kinship which determine the society of the state." In a similar manner to Mboya's statements about colonial Kenya, the pamphlet lambasted the notion that a defense of white supremacy was acceptable in "a state within the United States of America... 164 years after the ratification of the Bill of Rights... 85 years after the adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution... 2000 years after the birth of Jesus Christ..."

This was Mississippi for its black population: oppressive, deadly, un-American, and un-Christian.¹⁷

The racially motivated murders continued. In early February of 1956, Evers submitted an official report on the death of Edward Duckworth of Smith County, Mississippi. Duckworth, believed to have been around thirty years of age, was shot five times through the heart by a white store owner claiming the drunken black man had made advances on his wife. Though his brother attempted to save his life by moving him to the nearest hospital that would treat blacks, Duckworth died en route. Unsurprisingly, the shooting was deemed self-defense by local law enforcement, and potential witnesses were threatened into silence. When Evers arrived on the scene with a photographer, several members of the local black community were able to help him piece together what had occurred, but no one at the scene of the incident would speak with him.¹⁸ Hanging over these grim events was the emergence of James “J.P.” Coleman as the state’s 51st governor. Coleman, who originated from the small town of Ackerman in Choctaw County, on the eastern edge of the Delta region, ran in the election as a moderate candidate. He had previously served as a district attorney and Mississippi Supreme Court Justice before he was named the state’s Attorney General under the administration of Governor Hugh L. White from 1950 to 1956. During the Democratic gubernatorial primary held in the summer of 1955, all five candidates hoping to secure their party

¹⁷ “M is for Mississippi and Murder” National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, November, 1955, p.7, Box 54, Folder 16, Will D. Campbell Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi (*hereafter*, *USM*).

¹⁸ Report: Death of Edward Duckworth from Medgar Evers, February 1, 1956, Papers of the NAACP Part 20, White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965, Reel 1.

nomination spoke at a Madison County Citizen's Council rally. Essentially, each candidate was asked to describe his racial views and affirm the doctrine of segregation. Though he maintained the same pro-segregation stance as the other candidates and claimed he work to preserve it if elected governor, Coleman's support of organized resistance as practiced by the citizens' councils was cool at best.

Nevertheless, his relationship with many of the state's largest powerbrokers and his assurance he would not enforce desegregation directives was enough to procure a victory in the November election. Once in office, he established himself as a career politician hoping to advance beyond state politics. He opposed any extremist measures to root out and destroy all civil rights activity in the state, including the introduction of bills to outlaw the NAACP or bar the FBI from investigating incidents of racial violence. This was particularly significant, for despite Mississippi's oppressive levels of racism, the NAACP was allowed to remain in place while it was banned by injunction in other states, including neighboring Alabama. Coleman was not averse to using race-baiting rhetoric if an expedient opportunity arose, but his methods for maintaining segregation were deceptively understated. It had been Coleman who had interviewed Evers and worked to make sure his application to the law school at the University of Mississippi was rejected. In his study of the formation and growth of the citizens' councils, Neil R. McMillen argued "at that troubled juncture in the state's history, [Coleman] was probably about as moderate as a governor with further political aspirations could afford to be. At any rate, time would prove (despite his defeat in the gubernatorial primary of 1963 by Paul B. Johnson) that he was not only a shrewder politician but a far shrewder segregationist than

his successor.” Perhaps no better example of that assessment exists than Coleman’s approval of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, created under his watch.¹⁹

On March 29, 1956, the Mississippi Legislature voted to establish a new state agency designed to protect the sovereignty of the state of Mississippi from unlawful intrusion by the federal government. Funded by citizen tax dollars, the Sovereignty Commission officially entwined the machinery of the Mississippi government with the fight to maintain white supremacy. Its creation was an unprecedented maneuver, even for a state considered one of the most racially oppressive in the South. Given the increasing level of paranoia regarding the infiltration of the state by “outside forces,” which in the minds of white Mississippians included the federal government, the Sovereignty Commission’s founding was part of a massive effort to “save” white Mississippians from their ultimate destruction should segregation ever be dismantled. Because of Coleman’s position of “moderation” on issues of race, the Sovereignty Commission was fashioned to work largely in an investigative capacity and serve as a “watchdog of segregation.” Its staffers included former FBI investigators and researchers and largely relied on extracting information on individuals and organizations via paid and unpaid informants. The agency also waged a propaganda war of its own to carry the “accurate, official” Mississippi story to the world. If the Supreme Court and the NAACP had thrown down the gauntlet, the state of Mississippi intended to answer with all of the force and power it could muster.²⁰

The propaganda war between the state of Mississippi and the NAACP was particularly significant in the aftermath of the Till case, which had wrought massive

¹⁹ McMillen, *The Citizens’ Council*, 321-326.

²⁰ James W. Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), 8n.

amounts of criticism on from both national and international actors. Thanks to the work of Evers and other NAACP members and volunteer investigators, details of Till's murder, subsequent investigation, and trial had become worldwide news. French newspapers, including *l'Humanite* and *Liberation* published condemnations of the event.²¹ To counter the onslaught of bad press, the Sovereignty Commission encouraged northern reporters to tour and witness the "real" Mississippi, while the citizens' councils worked in concert with members of the state's power structure to further taint the NAACP as a communist front organization. In August of 1956, a citizens' council booklet titled "The Red Menace" began circulating across the South. It included a mimeographed speech supposedly given at a Jackson, Mississippi NAACP meeting by a Howard University Professor and NAACP staff member named Roosevelt Williams. In the speech, Williams demanded "that the War and Navy Department eliminate Jim Crow" and "the abolition of all state laws which forbid intermarriage of the different races...", adding "the whole world knows that the white man prefers the Negro woman" and that "it is well known that the white woman is dissatisfied with the white man, and they along with us demand the right to win and love the Negro men of their choice." Williams was also quoted referring to Soviet General Gregori Zhukov as "our good friend" who had reported to Stalin that "he could never understand why the American Negro fought for America," as "...the Negro is the white man's superior."²²

²¹ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 151.

²² Fred DeArmond to Professor Roosevelt Williams, August 15, 1956, Papers of the NAACP Part 20, White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965, Reel 8.

The speech was everything white Mississippians feared and assumed would come to pass should school desegregation be carried out: a communist front organization stood at the forefront of an effort to destroy the South from within – through the mixing of the races. The booklet made its way across Mississippi and elsewhere in the South like wildfire. Its message was further buttressed by the circulation of other citizens' council promotional materials railing against miscegenation. One of the most inflammatory was a speech titled "Mixed Schools and Mixed Blood," an article written by South Carolina author Herbert Ravenel Sass for the *Atlantic Monthly* and reprinted by the Greenwood, Mississippi Citizens' Council. It argued that "the Negroes of the U.S.A. are today by far the most fortunate members of their race to be found anywhere on earth" and that "what America, including the South, has done for the Negro is the truth which should be trumpeted abroad in rebuttal of the Communist propaganda." He went on to explain that race-mixing was not only a "crime against both religion and civilization," but that it was bolstered by "a fantastic perversion of scientific authority." The Supreme Court, he argued, had "usurped" its Constitutional power, and that in conjunction with power-hungry leaders of the NAACP, intended to force Southern whites and blacks to destroy the identity of both races."²³

Letters questioning the tenor of the Roosevelt Williams speech poured into the NAACP, especially given the tendency of Southern whites to grasp onto the race-mixing issue and set it at the heart of their growing hysterical reactions to *Brown*. In an effort to stem the tide of criticism and get to the bottom of the situation, the Association called for

²³ Herbert Ravenel Sass, "Mixed Schools and Mixed Blood," 1956, Box 3, Folder 42, William D. McCain Pamphlet Collection, McCain Library and Archives, USM.

an investigation into the matter. Who was Roosevelt Williams? Why had he given such an inflammatory speech at an NAACP meeting, and how had a copy of it fallen into the hands of the citizens' councils? Medgar Evers had never heard of him, nor had anyone else in Mississippi. An investigation by a Columbus, Georgia daily paper *The Ledger-Enquirer* soon revealed Howard University employed no one by that name. Roosevelt Williams did not exist. Additional investigation by the *Ledger-Enquirer*, as well as the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and the *Atlanta Journal*, also revealed that when asked about the matter, Robert P. Patterson, Executive Director of the Mississippi Citizens' Council, asserted "we never claimed it (the speech) to be authentic." In response, the NAACP fired off a press release condemning the actions of the Citizens' Council as evidence it was out to destroy the Association and all civil rights gains across Mississippi.²⁴

In his study of the Southern campaign of massive resistance to *Brown*, George Lewis interpreted the Roosevelt Williams deception as "significant in aiding attempts to unravel the mind of the segregationist South in the post-Brown 1950s, or at the very least the mind of that coterie of segregationists that was drawn into the Citizens' Councils." That the document written by Williams was a forgery increased its overall impact. "Here was a document created entirely in the minds of segregationists," Lewis argued, "who, with no obvious template to follow, set about creating a document bristling with the issues and language they believed was most likely to raise the ire of their fellow resisters." These

²⁴ Roy Wilkins to Professor James J. Lenoir, September 20, 1956; Press Release: A Fraud Unmasked: The Strange Fate of Roosevelt Williams, 1956, Papers of the NAACP Part 20, White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965, Reel 8.

types of propaganda efforts helped forge a blueprint for “fake news” long before its emergence in the modern era, and proved Mississippians were all too willing to make the directives issued by the white power structure their own. Evers and the Association refused to back down. In publicizing the story, they spun it as evidence the white power structure was on its heels and losing its grip on reality.²⁵

The Roosevelt Williams’ unmasking coincided with the National Office’s work to lobby the Department of Justice and Congress to take action against the Southern campaigns to paralyze the NAACP through unprincipled attacks. In an effort to expand its influence, the Association courted allies to join its fight to publicize the threat of the citizens’ councils and the Sovereignty Commission. On October 21, 1956, the American Jewish Congress passed a resolution characterizing the Southern campaign against the NAACP as “a concerted attack on the fundamental guarantees of the First Amendment.” Furthermore, it asserted “the newest method of defending the institution of jimcrow (sic) is a greater menace to constitutional liberties than mob violence. In the guise of legality and with the stamp of governmental authority, these states are attempting to stop lawful organized protest against segregation and to deprive the Negro community of its chosen instrument for obtaining equality and the full rights of citizenship.” The resolution specifically highlighted Mississippi’s creation of the State Sovereignty Commission, “with a large appropriation and subpoena powers, to fight all elements antagonistic to the state’s ‘way of life,’” as a prime example.²⁶

²⁵ George Lewis, *Massive Resistance: The White Response to the Civil Rights Movement*, (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), 98-99.

²⁶ Resolution adopted by the Administrative Committee of the American Jewish Congress, October 21, 1956, pp. 1-2, Papers of the NAACP Part 20, White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965, Reel 8.

The arguments set forth in the Jewish Congress's resolution were further strengthened by the release of a special report in November by the Southern Regional Council. Comprised of religious and civic leaders, it had formed in the 1940s to promote racial equality throughout the South. Its November report was a summary of a three-month field survey of "the pro-segregation 'resistance' organizations" in the Southern States. In particular, it focused on the development and work of the citizens' councils. In Mississippi, the state movement of councils was referred to as "the strongest in the South" and predicted to have "considerable influence for years to come." It also claimed "this state is the major fountainhead of the region-wide WCC movement" and "this movement has the support of, or is feared by, the majority of the people of Mississippi." The estimated membership totals of the councils by 1956 were reported to be around 80,000 with an estimated budget of \$400,000, the highest in the South.²⁷

This publicization campaign reinforced the NAACP's determination not to cower to pressure tactics or unlawful maneuvers to prevent blacks from exercising their full rights as American citizens. Rather, it intended to use those pressure tactics to its tactical advantage, highlighting their tone of paranoid desperation and absurdist nature to the detriment of their segregationist adherents. In a December 31, 1956 letter sent out to all of its members in states that had successfully secured injunctions including branches in Louisiana, Alabama, and Texas. "Far from being discouraged" Wilkins explained, "our people are working harder than ever before" and reminded readers "the NAACP is still in existence and very much in the fight. It grows stronger as our opponents resort to more

²⁷ A Special Report from the Southern Regional Council: Pro-Segregation Groups in the South, November 19, 1956, pp. 7-8, Papers of the NAACP Part 20, White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965, Reel 8.

and more desperate measures, including violence.” The comparisons to British efforts to put down insurrectionist efforts in Kenya and elsewhere, though not explicitly made in Wilkins’ letter, could not have been lost on Evers or anyone else following the ongoing narrative of the emerging anticolonial movement worldwide.

“When they use trickery,” Wilkins argued, “when they use the power of the state to suppress freedom, and when they use violence, we know that they have no argument left that can be upheld morally.” He finished by noting “we enter 1957 with the firm determination that there shall be no let-up in the campaign.”²⁸

Indeed, as the new year dawned, Evers continued to push the Association’s voting rights and school desegregation campaigns forward as the barriers set against progress grew higher and thicker than ever before. The most notorious enemy of the NAACP, given its levels of secrecy and wide reach, was the Sovereignty Commission.

Investigation into its workings – at least what little could be determined – revealed both black and white informers were paid to spy on NAACP meetings and report information back to the Commission. Membership lists and license plate numbers were among the bits of information passed on to investigators, all of which was compiled into a massive index of files. Though initially, the Sovereignty Commission did not directly fund the citizens’ councils, information about black civil rights workers was freely shared between the high-ranking officials of both organizations. Predictably, Evers was a central target of the Sovereignty Commission’s investigations, as was his family. Files existed not only on

²⁸ Roy Wilkins to NAACP Members, December 31, 1956, Papers of the NAACP Part 20, White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965, Reel 8.

him and Myrlie Evers, but also on their children, including birth certificate records and documents pertaining to their school enrollment.

Evers did not cower from the Sovereignty Commission's threatening tactics. Instead, he continued his efforts to publicize them by releasing reports of the Commission's activities and operational methods.²⁹ Such actions were important for two reasons. The first concerned the underlying intent of the Sovereignty Commission itself, which was to investigate civil rights workers and uncover information to use against them in some fashion, preferably as a means of shutting down NAACP operations altogether. Evers and the Association made it clear they were aware of the Commission's intent and would not be cowed by threats, whether made publicly or in a more underground fashion. The second reason was related to Evers' and the NAACP's continued campaign to publicize everything Mississippi's white power structure was doing to suppress NAACP activity. Publicly discussing the Commission and its methods served to gradually lift the veil on its inner workings and place it front and center in the Mississippi narrative the NAACP was spreading. What is more, while the Mississippi movement continued to struggle, civil rights activity began to heat up in other areas of the South and quickly grabbed national and international headlines. Myrlie Evers noted her husband paid close attention to, and was inspired by, the results of those campaigns to push further.³⁰

One of the campaigns he followed closely was the boycott of the segregated public transportation system by the black population of Montgomery, Alabama. It began in December of 1955 when NAACP member Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give

²⁹ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 145-146.

³⁰ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, The Living*, 202-203.

up her seat on a crowded bus to a white passenger. At the time of her arrest, Parks was forty-two years old and a longtime veteran of the civil rights movement in Alabama. In particular, she had worked to shed light on issues of white-on-black sexual violence beginning with efforts to raise money for the Scottsboro Boys, the nine young black men falsely accused of raping two white women while riding the rails across Alabama in 1931. In 1944, she banded together with other black advocates against sexual violence to form the Committee for Equal Justice in the aftermath of the brutal gang rape of Alabama native Recy Taylor by six white men. Five months prior to her arrest, Parks had also attended desegregation workshops at the noted Highlander Folk School, an educational facility dedicated to the training of labor and civil rights activists located in Grundy County, Tennessee.³¹

After she was taken into custody, Parks requested the assistance of E.D. Nixon, the president of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP and the city branch of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union. Together with Parks and other local activists, Nixon coordinated a boycott of the bus company that lasted over a year. Unlike the voting rights or school desegregation campaigns of the NAACP, the Montgomery boycott was the type of nonviolent direct action protest that had emerged out of the labor movement as well as smaller-scale efforts such as the RCNL's "DON'T BUY GAS WHERE WE CAN'T USE THE WASHROOM" campaign and an eight day boycott

³¹ Until recently, the longtime activist career of Rosa Parks has been largely ignored by historical accounts of the civil rights movement. Instead, she is generally portrayed as an apolitical individual who refused to give up her seat to a white man because her feet were tired and she had reached a breaking point in her willingness to endure the mistreatment of the black population by Montgomery whites. For more about the historical presentation of Parks and a detailed breakdown of her activist career and impact on the civil rights movement, see McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street* and Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 124-128.

against the segregated bus system by blacks in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1953. In Montgomery, the boycott was a full-scale effort by the black community coordinated by an organization founded to lead the protest, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). Because individuals refused to ride the buses, other means of transportation were facilitated by the MIA, including both small and large carpool systems. In an effort to squelch the boycott, Montgomery's White Citizens' Council called for economic sanctions against the black community. At the same time, the city government declared the boycott illegal under a 1921 ordinance which prohibited boycotts against businesses without "just cause" and arrested the movement leaders.³²

One of those leaders was Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., a young, recently arrived minister who emerged as the voice of the protestors. Among the ministers who served as leaders in the MIA, King was considered the most eloquent and dynamic speaker and elevated to the position of primary spokesman for the movement. His speeches, together with active efforts by the MIA to publicize the boycott, gained the attention of the press and resulted in the growth of his popularity. Along with MIA leaders Nixon and a white Lutheran minister named Robert Graetz, King endured the bombing of his home by suspected members of the Ku Klux Klan. Yet arrests and violence did not halt the boycott, which continued throughout 1956 while a claim filed by the MIA to end segregation on public transportation made its way through the federal court system. Finally, on June 4, 1956 a federal district court ruled segregation in Alabama's public transportation systems was unconstitutional. After the Supreme Court

³² "Boycott Arrests Illegal: Taylor," *Chicago Defender*, February 23, 1956.

upheld the ruling, the Montgomery boycott ended in December of 1956, having lasted a total of 382 days.³³

Medgar Evers was particularly impressed with the work of the MIA and the subsequent success of the boycott, and in the aftermath met with King and other leaders of the Alabama movement interested in facilitating nonviolent direct action protests against segregation ordinances throughout the South. On February 14, 1957, Evers traveled to New Orleans to attend a meeting of the Atlanta transportation conference group, the temporary name given to the association of ministers and other activists interested in forming their own civil rights organization committed to further dismantling Jim Crow. Eventually, out of the meeting arose an organization called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), of which King was elected its first president. Evers agreed to accept the position of assistant secretary. Other officers included Montgomery minister and close associate of King, Ralph Abernathy, who was elected treasurer, and Fred Jemison, who was elected third vice-president. It was Jemison who had facilitated the eight day bus boycott in Baton Rouge four years before.³⁴

³³ David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 82.

³⁴ Ibid, 90. For more on the Montgomery Bus Boycott, see Garrow, *The Walking City: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1989); Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987); Robert S. Graetz, *A White Preacher's Memoir: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Montgomery, Alabama: Black Belt Press, 1999); Willy S. Leventhal, Frank Sikora, J. Mills III Thornton, and Randall Williams, eds., *The Children Coming On: A Retrospective of the Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Montgomery, Alabama: Black Belt Press, 1998); Lewis V. Baldwin, and Aprille V. Woodson, *Freedom is Never Free: A Biographical Portrait of Edgar Daniel Nixon, Sr.* (Nashville, Tennessee: Office of Minority Affairs, 1992); Branch, *Parting the Waters*; Stuart Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper Books, 1958).

As Evers soaked up as much of the positive energy surrounding the Montgomery victory as he could, so too did the NAACP's national leadership, who hoped it would translate to more support for its voting rights and desegregation campaigns. As the call for massive white resistance to *Brown* translated to increased levels of organized opposition and racial violence, the Association stepped up its call for the passage of federal legislation to protect the voting rights of black men and women across the nation. Evers, who continued to provide the National Office with information regarding the citizens' councils and Sovereignty Commission's efforts to disfranchise black voters throughout Mississippi, played a crucial role in bringing attention to the need for federal voter protection. In particular, he focused on the inability of black Mississippians to register to vote as the central barrier keeping blacks from the ballot and persisted in accumulating and passing on to the National Office affidavits detailing the illegal actions of local registrars preventing blacks from registering to vote.³⁵ In a letter to President Dwight Eisenhower on the issue, Roy Wilkins specifically cited the suppression of black voter registration in Mississippi and other parts of the South as a primary reason the federal government "must set the tone, not necessarily by waving a big stick, but by emphasis upon the obligation of every citizen to uphold the courts and the law, and upon the determination of the government that law shall prevail."³⁶

Wilkins' emphasis on the need for federal intervention not only stemmed from the Association's beliefs that Southern obstructionism could only be dismantled by federal

³⁵ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 150-151.

³⁶ "NAACP Asks Ike to Endorse Rights' Bills: Wants Plug In Annual Report," *Chicago Defender*, January 5, 1957.

power, but was also a reaction to Eisenhower's coolness toward civil rights issues. A Texan by birth, he spent his childhood in Kansas before embarking on his illustrious military career, culminating in his ascension to Supreme Allied Commander during World War II. His military background bled directly into his political career, where he preferred a leadership style based on caution, measured responses and delegation to various experts and aides. It was no surprise then - but no less frustrating - to Wilkins and Walter White that upon meeting Eisenhower shortly before his election to the presidency, he was observably tense, relied mostly on his aides for answers to the questions asked of him, and seemed only marginally interested in the topic of civil rights at all, choosing mostly to define it as a "political football" that distracted from other important national matters (a statement so myopic it resulted in a rare instance of Wilkins rendered speechless). When pressed to propose solutions to the problems of Southern race relations, Eisenhower consistently favored local, state solutions and slow, measured progress over direct federal intervention, holding firm to conservative federalist principles.³⁷

As president, however, Eisenhower was unable to avoid wading into the swirling waters of civil rights debate, nor was he entirely unwilling to do so in an area where local government laws restricting segregation in public facilities were not enforced: Washington D.C. Calling on the leaders to implement an effective desegregation program, Eisenhower's first move on race relations was a small, albeit important, first

³⁷ Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*, 211.

step on the issue.³⁸ Yet the *Brown* decision, which followed soon after, quickly overshadowed Eisenhower's early successes and placed him in a position he had hoped to avoid – one in which he had to publicly support or criticize the groundbreaking Supreme Court decision. He chose a lukewarm response, publicly accepting the Supreme Court's decision but withholding any statements of approval or disapproval, preferring instead to privately sympathize with white Southerners struggling to accept the dismantling of their cultural traditions. Much to the dismay of NAACP and other movement leaders, when asked if he would ever consider sending federal troops into the South to enforce a federal court decision, Eisenhower noted he could not imagine any circumstances that would induce him to do so.³⁹

Nevertheless, the uncertainty and tension surrounding the Supreme Court's directive that desegregation occur at "all deliberate speed," in addition to continued calls by the NAACP, SCLC, and other civil rights advocates for strong federal enforcement of voting rights laws throughout the South, prompted Attorney General Herbert Brownell and other advisors to encourage the President propose a new civil rights bill. In his state of union message to Congress in January of 1957, Eisenhower called for the creation of legislation authorizing a bi-partisan commission to investigate civil rights violations, a permanent civil rights division in the Justice Department, and the right to empower the Attorney General to sue the states and local officials who endorsed voting restrictions or

³⁸ Herbert Brownell, "Eisenhower's Civil Rights Program: A Personal Assessment," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Measures of the Presidents: Hoover to Bush (Spring, 1991): 235.

³⁹ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 129-131.

refused to carry out desegregation directives.⁴⁰ Predictably, though the proposals were relatively moderate in scope, Southern leadership in the Senate reacted with disdain and threatened to defeat the passage of the bill with the filibuster. The showdown over the legislation officially began in July, comprised of floor fights riddled with threats of filibusters and a statement by Georgia Democratic Senator Richard Russell in which he asserted the South “was being made a whipping boy” and “treated like a badgered animal.” North Carolina Senator Sam Ervin concurred, describing the bill as “utterly repugnant to the American constitutional and legal system.”⁴¹

Debate raged on through August, culminating in a 24-hour filibuster by South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond and resulting in a successful, if not excessively labored, effort by Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Baines Johnson to rally support for passage of a weaker version of the bill. The final iteration, which became known as the Civil Rights Act of 1957, passed by a 52-38 margin. It included the creation of the Civil Rights Commission and the establishment of the Justice Department division, but removed Part III, which effectively weakened the power of the federal courts to issue federal injunctions to enforce integration. Injunctions could be brought against anyone interfering with the rights of others to vote, but instead of being tried by a federal judge, those charged would be tried before a jury. In essence, the Civil Rights Act of 1957 was a limited victory that did little to nothing to dismantle the system of white supremacy throughout the South, given that white juries would never convict individuals charged

⁴⁰ “President Pushes Civil Rights Plan at G.O.P. Parley: Calls Again for a Moderate Anti-Bias Package as Part of Legislative Program,” *New York Times*, January 1, 1957.

⁴¹ Ethel L. Payne, “Showdown on Rights Underway: Southern Solons Open Floor Fight,” *Chicago Defender*, July 9, 1957.

with violating the voting rights of black men and women. Roy Wilkins tried to remain positive, declaring the law to be a step in the right direction.⁴² But it was a small step, at best, and in the aftermath of the Montgomery success, was not the vehicle pushing the nation toward racial equality many had hoped it would become.

Instead, some in the movement began to favor the addition of direct action protest strategies to the NAACP's platform emphasizing change through the national legal and legislative processes. As a result, eight days after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, nine black teenagers from the local NAACP youth council attempted to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The integration attempt was the brainchild of Daisy Bates, president of the Little Rock chapter of the NAACP and her husband L.C., a prominent activist in the black community. After the United States Supreme Court handed down its implementation ruling in *Brown II*, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus argued that school integration needed to happen at a slow and deliberate pace. According to the official plan laid out by the city school board, integration efforts were to be delayed for two years, followed by the implementation of a three-phase effort to integrate the schools beginning at the senior high level, followed by the junior highs, and finally, the elementary schools. Aware that the plan was purposefully limited and meant to drag out the integration process slowly, the state chairman of the NAACP Legal Defense Committee filed suit in federal court for the immediate integration of all grade levels. On appeal after a lower court ruled in favor of the Little Rock School Board, a court of appeals ordered the schools integrate for the new school year, beginning in September of

⁴² Roy Wilkins, "Race Relations Review," *Chicago Defender*, January 11, 1958.

1957. After the decision was finalized, Bates selected nine black students with impeccable public and educational records who agreed to voluntarily desegregate Central High School.⁴³

Local citizens' councils and other anti-integrationist whites threatened to prevent the students from entering the school building, and on the day they arrived to enroll, Governor Faubus, generally considered a "moderate" on issues of race relations, ordered the Arkansas National Guard to refuse them entrance. His reasoning for doing so was, in his words, "to preserve the peace," though some critics of his administration asserted his move was part of a larger effort to maintain the support of white segregationist voters.⁴⁴ Whatever the underlying reasoning behind his decision to call in the National Guard, there was no question the situation that unfolded in front of the high school was on its way to becoming a national crisis as members of the local and national press picked up the story. Photographs and video footage of the nine black students being turned away at the school doors by National Guardsman and harassed by mobs of white citizens

⁴³ Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and Thurmon Garner, "Daisy Bates and the Little Rock School Crisis: Forging the Way," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 5, Special Issue: The Voices of African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement (May, 1996): 620-625.

⁴⁴ Neil McMillen argued the pressure exerted on Faubus by the state's white citizens' councils, and his desire not to be labeled a racial moderate for fear of its negative political ramifications across the South, played an important role in his decision to block desegregation efforts in Little Rock. Integration of public education in Arkansas began in Lawrence County, located in the northeastern area of the state, in the summer of 1955. Because the white population greatly outnumbered black inhabitants, integration of the local schools proceeded smoothly. It was not until *Life* magazine ran a piece on the successful desegregation efforts that white citizens' councils from other areas of Arkansas began to increase in number and campaign en masse against desegregation in the state. Part and parcel of the resistance campaign was the dissemination of the Roosevelt Williams literature - used to inflame white citizens' fears regarding race-mixing in the schools - and efforts to paint Faubus as a racial moderate more concerned with appeasing the desires of communist-inspired integrationists than protecting the citizens of Arkansas from possible violence and a descend into miscegenation. See Neil R. McMillen, "The White Citizens' Council and Resistance to School Desegregation in Arkansas," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 2, The 1957 Little Rock Crisis: A Fiftieth Anniversary Retrospective (Summer 2007): 125-144.

screaming racial epithets were carried in newspapers and on evening news programs nationwide, appearing as the headline or on the front pages of 67 percent of newspapers across the North and 68 percent in the South almost overnight.⁴⁵ It then spread beyond American borders, as newspapers worldwide began printing daily stories of the continuing standoff. So extensive was the international coverage that according to Mary L. Dudziak, the amount of press pieces covering Little Rock amazed U.S. news writers, who not only covered the event itself in their newspapers, but also kept readers abreast of how much the event was being reported overseas.⁴⁶

As the world looked on, the Eisenhower administration found itself in the middle of a political and public relations nightmare. In the wake of his comments on federal intervention, Eisenhower was reluctant to intercede in Little Rock.⁴⁷ However, as racial tensions spilled into the streets in such a public fashion, the President found himself in a position in which he could not ignore the picture being painted of the situation internationally. In the pages of Sweden's *Svenska Dagbladet*, editorials argued that if Eisenhower did not did not assert federal authority in the crisis, it could prove irreparably damaging to the international prestige of the United States. Soviet papers also lambasted

⁴⁵ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 163.

⁴⁶Mary L. Dudziak, "The Little Rock Crisis and Foreign Affairs: Race, Resistance, and the Image of American Democracy," *Southern California Law Review*, Vol. 70, No. 6, (September 1997): 1665.

⁴⁷After speaking with several Southern governors, including South Carolina governor James. F Byrnes, Eisenhower was particularly worried that the Southern states would react to the *Brown* ruling by doing away with public education altogether or rerouting state funding toward the creation of private, whites-only schools, a fear that seemed well-founded. Michael S. Mayer, "With Much Deliberation and Some Speed: Eisenhower and the Brown Decision," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 52, No. 1, (February 1986): 49-51, 59-61. For more on Eisenhower's reluctance to publicly support the *Brown* decision, see Robert Frederick Burk, *The Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).

an impotent federal response to the situation. Several major publications, including *Komosomolskaya, Pravda,* and *Izvestia* ran stories about the crisis that focused on the hypocrisy of American democracy, particularly as the individuals involved in the desegregation efforts were children. As the criticism expanded, Eisenhower lamented that “overseas the mouthpieces of Soviet propaganda in Russia and Europe were blaring out that ‘anti-Negro violence’ in Little Rock was being ‘committed with the clear connivance of the United States government.’”⁴⁸

As the standoff continued, the State Department informed Eisenhower the situation was not only deteriorating at home, but becoming increasingly problematic abroad. Eisenhower made the decision, albeit reluctantly, to move. On September 24th, two weeks after the crisis began, the President issued an executive order federalizing the Arkansas National Guard and sent in the 101st Airborne Division to ensure the black students, dubbed “the Little Rock Nine,” be allowed to enroll in the high school.⁴⁹ Speaking to the nation about his decision via a radio-television address the following evening, Eisenhower defended his decision by maintaining the United States to be “a nation in which laws, not men, are supreme.” Taking a page from the segregationist’s playbook and flipping it on its head, he labeled the instigators in Little Rock “misguided persons,” many of whom he claimed were imported into the city by “agitators.” These individuals were, therefore, not representative of the majority of Americans. His emphasis on the adherence to law and order as it concerned desegregation directives was

⁴⁸ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-1961*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 162, 168 reprinted in Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 119, 121.

⁴⁹ Executive Order 10730, September 23, 1957 (Little Rock Crisis); General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives.

paramount to restoring the image of America on the international stage as a bastion of democracy. “Our enemies are gloating over this incident,” he declared, “and using it everywhere to misrepresent our whole nation.” The true spirit of the nation corresponded with a faith in the fundamental human rights “which the peoples of the world united to proclaim in the Charter of the United Nations.”⁵⁰

For the NAACP, Eisenhower’s decision was not only a victory for its desegregation campaign, but represented a clarion call for the restoration of Part III to the Civil Rights Act of 1957. In letters addressed to all US Senators from non-Southern states, Roy Wilkins declared Little Rock proof that the federal legislation empowering the U.S. Attorney General to act in cases where desegregation efforts were being violated was crucial to the success of the integration movement.⁵¹ Clarence Mitchell, head of the Washington Bureau, echoed Wilkins’ assertion at a luncheon sponsored by the national chapter of the American Jewish Congress, adding that “Senators and Governors who opposed the President are worse than the mobs which milled outside the school in Little Rock. Congress at its next session should extend civil rights law to include all civil rights.”⁵²

Blacks in Mississippi rejoiced in the outcome. Lillie Jones, a civil rights activist in the state, hoped it would give the black population hope that similar desegregation successes could occur at home. With each new civil rights victory, no matter how small, the South inched closer to desegregation and, perhaps even more importantly, invited

⁵⁰“Eisenhower Address on Little Rock Crisis: Inescapable Duty Events Are...”, *New York Times*, September 25, 1957.

⁵¹ “Wilkins Urges Senate to Restore ‘Rights’ Part III,” *Atlanta Daily World*, September 18, 1957.

⁵² “NAACP Aide Lauds Ike Troop Action,” *Chicago Defender*, October 5, 1957.

more international attention to its racial problems. Evers overwhelmingly shared in and reinforced that hope with his publicization efforts. Unfortunately, the National Office appeared to be moving in the opposite direction of where he hoped the Association's work would go in the aftermath of Little Rock. While he firmly believed in the efficacy of the desegregation and voter registration campaigns, Evers was not averse to looking at the use of other strategies – including the incorporation of direct action protests to draw media attention to the high levels of white backlash – for use in the state NAACP's program. However, while Wilkins and other Association leaders praised the Little Rock victory, they maintained dedicated to moving their campaigns through the courts and Congress.⁵³

Though reports differ as to why, Little Rock was the source of ever-expanding tensions between Evers and the National Office. According to John R. Salter and Reverend Ed King, both close friends of Evers and fellow leaders in the Mississippi movement, Evers suspected the national NAACP and the Eisenhower administration had plotted to pursue a “purely legalistic course of action in Mississippi” as a means of cooling tensions in the wake of Little Rock.⁵⁴ How Evers came to this conclusion is unknown, but but when asked about it by historian Adam Nossiter in 1993, Gloster Current denied any such gentleman's agreement ever existed, remarking “the employment of Medgar Evers,” he asserted, “attests to the intention of NAACP [sic] in

⁵³ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 154.

⁵⁴ John Jones interview with John R. Salter, Jr. and Ed King, January 6, 1981, pp. 36-3; Ed King interview with Anne Romaine, “Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party,” 29 August (no year provided), 5-6, MDAH, reprinted in Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 154.

Mississippi to press for desegregation.”⁵⁵ Evers’ suspicions may have intensified when Roy Wilkins’ demanded he resign his position with the SCLC. In a letter dated April 2, 1957, Wilkins wrote “Staff members of the NAACP do not ordinarily accept posts to function with other groups, especially those operating in the same field as the Association. That does not mean you will not cooperate with the ministers on such projects as the NAACP may decide, it means only that you cannot assume duties. The NAACP does wish to cooperate with the ministers group and we wish to be certain that nothing arises to suggest that we are at odds with them.” Though disappointed in Wilkins’ directive, Evers dutifully resigned his position in August of 1957.⁵⁶

That Evers perceived of the existence of a back-door gentleman’s agreement between Wilkins and Eisenhower, despite the fact that both men greatly disliked one another, indicated the struggle was taking a mental and well as physical toll on Evers. While he respected the organizational integrity of the NAACP, the SCLC were riding a wave of momentum that could not be denied. As 1958 dawned, Evers was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Luring Mississippi’s most virulent racists into the open to publicize racial horrors required surviving the fight in treacherous terrain, not succumbing to annihilation. As the situation worsened, Evers came to believe that without direct federal intervention, the destruction of the white supremacist system would be next to impossible, and the most effective means to compel the federal government to intervene was to illuminate its facilitation of Southern apartheid for the world to see. The

⁵⁵ Nossiter, *Of Long Memory*, 262, n. 64.

⁵⁶ Roy Wilkins to Medgar Evers, April 2, 1957, Folder 2, Series 2, Box 24, The Medgar and Myrlie-Evers Papers, MDAH.

United States government had to answer for its hypocrisy just as British officials had to answer for their acceptance of the colonial government's abhorrent actions in Kenya, and any approach that prohibited direct action in Mississippi slowed down the march toward racial justice. As crackdowns continued, it was difficult not to become discouraged. Myrlie Evers noted that a glance through his files revealed "an hour, a day, a week of Medgar's life in a surrealist version of hell."⁵⁷

Yet he pushed on in Mau Mau fashion, translating his frustration and anger into solutions that adhered to the spirit of the Association's official policies but could be strategically altered on the ground. Though he had no intention of deliberately causing problems for the Association, Evers was also unwilling to turn away from opportunities to involve Mississippi's black youth in integration and voting rights efforts. In particular, he grew increasingly impressed with the protest efforts of students at Alcorn College, who initiated a boycott against the school in March of 1957. Their protest was in relation to a series of editorials about the NAACP published in the *Jackson State Times* by Clennon King, a professor of history at the college. In his commentary, King employed a common tactic used by white supremacists and their collaborators: publishing crime statistics lacking proper context and blaming the NAACP for sowing racial discord. In his editorial "NAACP Said Closing Doors of Opportunity to Negroes," King argued the NAACP did "nothing in the South to ease racial tension," was "utterly quiet about the disquieting rate of Negro crime (except excuses)," and was "was much a tool for conniving whites as for anyone else." In another he connected to the NAACP to a

⁵⁷ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, The Living*, 205.

socialist front, and argued that “real” Uncle Toms were college-bred blacks from the North, eager to ape the actions of white society.⁵⁸

Furious, over 500 Alcorn students refused to attend classes until the all-black Mississippi State College Board dismissed King from his position for insubordination.⁵⁹ It was a counterpunch borne of a growing sense of militancy gradually inching its way across the campuses of black colleges across the South. The efforts of the Little Rock Nine had proven determined students could institute change, and Alcorn’s were prepared to take the first step in holding faculty accountable for damaging, misleading statements. Evers watched this militant philosophy evolve up close and viewed it as a benefit to the Mississippi movement, but the NAACP National Office took a middle ground approach on the issue. While it applauded the students for standing their ground against segregationist rhetoric, it also defended King’s right to speak his mind. Henry Moon, NAACP Public Relations Director, sent a wire to the Alcorn Student Council that asserted “we deplore any pressure which denies him free speech on integration. We believe King is mistaken, but under our system of government, any person has a constitutional right to express his opinion on any issue.”⁶⁰

Despite the National Offices’ castigation, the students held strong and refused to end their protest. As a result, the all-white State College Board, hoping to nip the

⁵⁸ “NAACP Said Closing Doors of Opportunity to Negroes,” *Jackson State Times*, March 3, 1957; “Real ‘Uncle Toms’ May Come from North, Be College-Bred,” *Jackson State Times*, March 6, 1957, reprinted in Clennon King, *The Clennon King Story: The Shocking Story of Another Incident In Which A Negro, Who Dared to Speak Out Against the NAACP, Was Intimidated And Threatened With Death*, (Jackson: The Jackson State Times, 1958).

⁵⁹ “Negro Student Boycott: 585 at Alcorn Seek Ouster of Teacher Who Hit N.A.A.C.P.,” *New York Times*, March 7, 1957; “Seek Job of Teacher Who Hit NAACP in White Council Paper,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 8, 1957.

⁶⁰ “Praise, Rebuke Alcorn Students,” *Chicago Defender (City Edition)*, March 12, 1957.

escalating crisis in the bud before it garnered too much public attention, fired Alcorn President J.R. Otis. No official reason was given for his dismissal. Otis was replaced by J.D. Boyd, who reopened the college, expelled the student protesters, and stipulated they could not enroll at another Mississippi state institution.⁶¹ Supportive of the student's efforts but publicly accepting of the Association's policies in regards to Clennon King's right to free speech, Evers correspondence with the National Office focused on how to best remedy the situation. Because the expelled students could not attend other colleges in the state of Mississippi, the NAACP made arrangements to transfer the students to other institutions outside the state as well as provide financial assistance for travel.⁶²

In a letter to Roy Wilkins, Evers praised the National Office for "making it possible for seven young Americans to continue their education without too much interruption. As a staff member I knew how great our organization was, but the recent incidents involving the transfer of these students, at the expense of the NAACP, helped me to realize even more fully the great magnitude of our organization." His concern for the safety and well-being of the students, however, prompted Evers not to release any public announcements relative to the situation until the school board had successfully transferred the students' credits to their new institutions of learning. In the same letter he alerted Wilkins to a recent meeting between himself and Septima Clark of the Highlander Folk School, during which he had discussed the NAACP's actions relative to the Alcorn students. Located in the hills of Monteagle, Tennessee, Highlander was founded by Miles

⁶¹ "Negro Student Revolt Stuns Lily-Whites in Mississippi!: President is Fired After Student Body Criticizes Professor," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 16, 1957; "Integration Feud Rocks Alcorn: Students Strike; President Fired," *Chicago Defender (National edition)*, March 16, 1957.

⁶² Helps Five Alcorn Students to Continue Education," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 4, 1957.

Horton, a student of renowned pacifist theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Its educational approach centered on teaching communities how to build societies that embodied the ideals of democracy, justice, and brotherhood. Evers was particularly inspired by Highlander's creation of citizenship education schools to assist and train black Southerners in the voter registration process. However, Highlander's association with civil rights work and labor unions brought it under the attack of segregationists, who labeled it communist in the hopes of discrediting the school's efforts and minimizing its impact.⁶³

Evers was acutely aware of the National Office's desire to remain apart from any organizations deemed communist or communist-inspired. In his reply on the matter, Wilkins urged Evers to maintain a distance from Highlander. "We have friendly relations with Highlander Folk School," he explained, "but not too close. They are going in our direction, but not hand in hand."⁶⁴ Evers treaded lightly, maintaining a distance from Highlander but working to incorporate their strategies into programs in Mississippi. When he unveiled the NAACP's program for voter registration for the coming year in September of 1957, it included the incorporation of committees on registration and voting in seven Mississippi cities made up of ministers and community volunteers. Each was to run a citizenship school to educate black citizens on the process of voting and create additional committees in Mississippi as the registration campaigns grew. According to

⁶³ Medgar Evers to Roy Wilkins, April 10, 1957, Box 2, Series 2, Folder 24, The Medgar and Myrlie-Evers Papers, MDAH; John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School*, 2nd Ed., (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 9-26, 207-248.

⁶⁴Roy Wilkins to Medgar Evers, April 23, 1957, Box 2, Series 2, Folder 24, The Medgar and Myrlie-Evers Papers, MDAH.

Michael Vinson Williams, this move indicated Evers was working to create “a sound political foundation in Mississippi that involved more direct-action strategies” other civil rights groups would build on in the coming years. It also highlighted Evers’ Mau Mau-inspired intent to propagate mass participation at the local level. Each successful registration attempt functioned as its own kind of metaphorical blood oath, strengthening the bonds of community and solidarity in the face of massive resistance to racial justice.⁶⁵

Evers also looked for ways to position himself front and center in his efforts to publicize the struggle for civil rights in Mississippi, highlighting his love for his home state, desire to see it free of racial animus, and his reasoning for fighting for equality with the NAACP in a February, 1958 *Ebony* Magazine interview titled “Why I Live in Mississippi.” It served to boost his image as the state movement’s central face, a move that encouraged a growth of support for the cause but also instigated more direct attacks against him by the state’s white power structure. In the interview, Evers spoke of his experiences growing up in a racially oppressive environment and the horrors that entailed, but also proclaimed his love for the land and his determination to force the state power structure to live up to the democratic ideals it purported to protect. “This is home” Evers explained. “Mississippi is part of the United States whether the whites like it or not, I don’t plan to live here as a parasite. The things that I don’t like I will try to change.” Moreover, he maintained black Mississippians not only deserved the equal rights they were guaranteed under the United States Constitution, but also undercut the argument that segregation was the foundation of a tranquil, democratic society. Without

⁶⁵ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 155.

equality, Evers argued, Mississippi's blacks could not live productive lives or make positive contributions to the South as a whole.⁶⁶

In the interview Evers also discussed his fascination with Jomo Kenyatta, the Mau Mau, and how he had once dreamed of arming his "own army of blackshirts" and "extracting an 'eye for an eye' from whites who mistreated" Mississippi's black population. Though he explained he later renounced thoughts of violence, he maintained that he had greatly admired Kenyatta's character, intelligence, and refusal to compromise. His mention of the Mau Mau and support for Kenyatta's cause was a significant maneuver on Evers' part, as he was well aware of the ways in which Southern whites utilized distorted information about the violence and brutality of the Kenya movement to rationalize the need to maintain white supremacy. However, in also highlighting that it was through the NAACP that he discovered the proper vehicle through which to utilize his own talents and determination to fight for freedom and equality, Evers' comments did not outright condemn the Mau Mau. Instead, they served to clarify how the history of Kikuyu oppression was similar to Mississippi's. "You know" he argued, "any man with an ounce of pride who works in the delta soon wants to do something. You discover that the education the Negro gets is designed to keep him subservient. The poor black man is exploited by whites and by educated Negroes too."⁶⁷ By maintaining the engine of change lay in proactive, nonviolent campaigns to knock down the walls of segregation, Evers was actively reforming the lessons he learned from the Mau Mau and utilizing

⁶⁶ "Why I Live in Mississippi," *Ebony*, vol. 14, no 1, (November 1958): 65-68.

⁶⁷Ibid.

them to dismantle the barriers of institutionalized white supremacy in a non-violent fashion.

Reaction to the interview was predictably mixed. NAACP officials were happy with the tenor and message of the article, but some members of Mississippi's middle class black community resented Evers' incessant push for integration. When Medgar and Myrlie purchased a home in a new all-black subdivision in Jackson, others in the neighborhood objected to the arrival of their new neighbors. The majority of homeowners in the subdivision were black teachers, many of whom believed the NAACP's desegregation campaigns threatened their lives and livelihoods. What is more, in the *Ebony* article, Evers had directly criticized black teachers for accepting the fruits of NAACP campaigns to raise their salaries, yet remaining on the sidelines or refusing to participate in other NAACP programs. According to Myrlie Evers, "we had no sooner put our money down and begun to count the days until our house would be completed that we began hearing rumors of a petition to keep us out." She maintained there was "nothing personal about it," but on account of her husband's work, "there was talk the wrong house might be burned down by mistake," and that "to have us in their midst would be dangerous for the whole community." Whether or not the reasoning behind the petition was "personal," however, Evers had been plagued with problems related to the support of the black middle class in Mississippi for some time. The situation did not appear to be improving.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Dittmer, *Local People*, 73; Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, the Living*, 228.

Unsurprisingly, white Mississippians focused on Evers' mention of Kenyatta and the Mau Mau in his statements, equating the NAACP's work in the state with a desire to destroy civilized society through terrorist tactics. As the white power structure pushed to put the school equalization program in place to work around the *Brown* ruling, Evers coordinated a public protest the construction of an all-black, \$500,000 public school in Madison County. In response to the protest, a Madison County grand jury exchanged barbs with Evers. In a public statement, the grand jury equated Evers to a hound baying at the moon who "in public print likened himself and his organization to the Mau Mau terrorists of the Kenya Colony" and cautioned the people of Madison County to "think twice" before supporting an organization "that is nothing more than a leech on the body politic." Evers' countered that the grand jury, "which approved of second class citizenship for Madison Negroes" failed to point out that Madison County's schools were overcrowded and that if not for the NAACP, black schools and teacher salaries would never have improved in the first place. Furthermore, he maintained "any attack on the NAACP is an attack on the entire Negro community whose only hope for first class citizenship in this state lies in the continued work of this great organization."⁶⁹

Yet for all of his hard work and positive rhetoric, in the words of Myrlie Evers, the majority of action leading to meaningful change was "happening somewhere else. Mississippi stood still." Evers, who spent much of his time on the road either investigating incidents of racial violence or economic strangulation or speaking at NAACP functions elsewhere in the country, also experienced an additional set-back

⁶⁹"Legal Action," *Southern School News*, vol. 5, no. 8, (February 1959): 11.

when he was physically attacked by a white man on a bus from Meridian to Jackson in March of 1958. He was returning from a regional NAACP meeting in North Carolina. On the bus, he refused to move to the rear when the driver demanded he do so, and for his insolence Evers was taken to police headquarters and questioned. After he was released, he reentered the bus and took the same seat. Three blocks from the Jackson bus terminal, a white cab driver motioned for the bus to stop, boarded, and punched Evers in the face. The bus driver then ordered the cab driver immediately exit the bus, and Evers remained seated in the front of the bus all the way back to the terminal.⁷⁰

The attack on Evers was both indicative of continued crackdowns on the black population of Mississippi as well as a harbinger of more dark events to come. One such incident occurred in June of 1957, when Evers learned of the rape of a seventeen-year-old black high school student by Bernard Gautier, the city attorney of Pascagoula. The young girl, who was working for Gautier's family as a babysitter, was leaving his home when he forcibly took her to a wooded area and attacked her. Evers immediately contacted the presidents of the Moss-Point Pascagoula and Gulfport branches of the NAACP and asked them to conduct an investigation. They assured him they would so, but never followed through. Evers then drove to Pascagoula himself – over two-hundred miles from Jackson – to investigate the incident. There, he discovered it had occurred a month prior and had been covered up by law enforcement officers, city officials, and, perhaps most distressingly, the girl's own family who were fearful of repercussions. Because it was almost impossible for the victim's father, William L. Norvel, to procure an attorney,

⁷⁰ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, the Living*, 224; Dittmer, *Local People*, 79.

Evers set him up with Mississippi's leading black attorney R. Jess Brown. In a letter detailing the case to Roy Wilkins, Evers noted "we have assured Mr. W.L. Norvel that we in the NAACP will be happy to cooperate with him in whatever legitimate way possible to see that justice is meted out in this case."⁷¹

No justice occurred. While publicity of the case resulted in the arrest and indictment of Gautier for the crime of statutory rape, he was given a five-year suspended sentence. The Jackson Country Circuit Court jury deliberated for less than two hours before they returned their verdict.⁷² In response, Evers fired off a scathing press release that read: "one of the most glaring spectacles of justice, in Mississippi courts, is to be found in the recent suspended sentence given Bernard Gautier, white attorney of Pascagoula, Mississippi, for the convicted rape of his seventeen-year-old Negro baby sitter. It is not an assumption but a matter of fact" it continued, "that the degree of law that is applied when a Negro man is accused and convicted of raping a white woman does not apply when a white man is accused and convicted of the same crime against a Negro woman. It is no wonder that Mississippi has the reputation that it has with its one-sided law enforcement and biased court decisions."⁷³

That reputation was again on display in April of 1959 in the most horrific case of racial violence to occur in Mississippi since the murders of George Lee and Emmett Till. It also provided another test for the federal government regarding the protection of civil

⁷¹ Medgar Evers to Roy Wilkins, June 14, 1957, Crime: Mississippi, 1956-1965, Papers of the NAACP Part 20, White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965, Reel 1.

⁷² "Convicted of Raping Negro," *Jackson, Mississippi State Times*, November 29, 1957.

⁷³ NAACP News Release, November 29, 1957, Crime: Mississippi, 1956-1965, Papers of the NAACP Part 20, White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965, Reel 1.

liberties in the South. The case concerned the lynching of Mack Charles Parker, a 23-year-old black man from Poplarville. On February 23, 1959, Parker and three of his friends were on their way home when they came across a car on the side of the road between Poplarville and the neighboring town of Lumberton. Inside the car were June Walters and her four-year-old daughter, Debbie. June's husband, Jimmy Carol, had undertaken a long walk to Lumberton to request assistance with his car, which had broken down. As the four men passed the stalled car, they stopped to glance inside and then proceeded on toward Poplarville. According to one of the men inside the car, Parker made crude statements about having sex with the woman in the car, but the group of men assumed he was only speaking in jest. Later that night, June Walters claimed Parker returned to her car and abducted and raped her. Afterward, she and her daughter walked back down the highway where they were spotted by a trucker and picked up. "I've been raped by a nigger," June told him.⁷⁴

The following day, Parker was arrested by Pearl River County Sheriff W. Osborne Moody. Though Walters was unable to positively identify him in a line-up, Parker was thrown into jail regardless. However, he was quickly moved to the Hinds County jail in Jackson for fear he would be lynched if he continued to be held in Pearl River County. Parker remained in the Jackson jail until April when he was indicted by a grand jury for kidnapping and rape. Parker's attorney was R. Jess Brown, whose history of civil rights work in the state annoyed officials. He further incensed them when he immediately filed three motions. They highlighted the grand jury that had indicted Parker contained no

⁷⁴ Howard Smead, *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 9.

blacks, none would be allowed to serve on a jury because they were barred from voting in Pearl River County, and that local whites were so hell-bent on convicting Parker a fair trial could not be held unless it was moved to another venue. In his examination of this case, historian Philip Dray explained that the motions regarding the lack of black jurors and voting rights were explosive, especially given that a month earlier, a federal appeals court had overturned the murder conviction of black man in Carroll County because no blacks were allowed on his jury. “Contrary to popular impression,” Dray explained, the convicted murderer “had not been released from prison because of the court’s action, but the precedent fed the perennial anxiety that black rapists and murders would evade punishment through courtroom manipulations and sentimental federal rulings.” What is more, the thought that a black attorney would be allowed to publicly question a white woman on the stand was unconscionable to many Mississippi whites.⁷⁵

To avoid the miscarriage of Southern justice many believed was coming if Parker’s case was allowed to go to trial, a mob made up of locals including farmers, merchants, and even a Baptist preacher stormed the Hinds County jail the night of April 25, 1959 and demanded Parker be turned over to them. Parker put up a vicious fight but was eventually overwhelmed by the mob, driven to a bridge overlooking the Pearl River, shot twice, run over by another vehicle, and tossed body into the river below. His body was found nine days later. After quick deliberation, a coroner’s jury declared the death of Parker “occurred at the hand of a person or persons unknown,” while local newspapers argued the perpetrators were likely from another county.⁷⁶ Evers, who had met with the

⁷⁵Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 434-436.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 437.

Parker family after his initial indictment and helped them secure the aid of R. Jess Brown, learned of the lynching on television. Myrlie Evers claimed Medgar “smashed the bedroom dresser with his fist” and cried out “why? How can people do such things?” His body wracked with sobs, he screamed “I’d like to go get a gun and just start shooting!” Then, after a few minutes, he calmed himself down, took a shower, and headed into the office. “Somebody’s going to pay for this,” he told her as he headed out the door. “And I’m not leaving. I’m going to stay here and fight until someone does the same thing to me.”⁷⁷

Evers and the NAACP investigated the incident and demanded the FBI undertake an investigation of its own. They were not the only ones who asked for a federal investigation. Distressed with the continued existence of extralegal mob violence and aware of the negative publicity the incident would bring on the state of Mississippi and his administration, Governor Coleman also requested FBI assistance. He was also aware that the NAACP planned to use the Parker lynching as a key element in its crusade for the passage of a federal civil rights bill. Two days after Parker’s death, the NAACP fired off its next salvo in the campaign with a memo directed at the President and members of the House Judiciary Committee that read “the brutal beating, kidnapping, and probable lynching of Mack Charles Parker in Poplarville, Miss., on April 25 offers tragic demonstration of the need for strong federal civil rights legislation to protect the lives and rights of American citizens in areas where state and local authorities are either unable or unwilling to do so.” Furthermore, it attacked the systems of white supremacy throughout

⁷⁷ Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, The Living*, 225-226.

the south, tying their leadership structure to the crime itself. “This crime,” it read, “is the natural consequence of an organized campaign of law defiance led by governors of states, members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives and state and local politicians.”⁷⁸

FBI investigators arrived in Mississippi shortly after Coleman placed his official request and immediately began the process of accumulating all evidence and questioning locals. The investigation force was so large, at one point up to 60 agents were working in and around Poplarville. According to Philip Dray, “so intense was the FBI invasion of Poplarville and so ceaseless the questioning that one of the mob suspects died and two others were hospitalized.” By the time the investigation concluded, the report of the incident reached 378 pages and was, according to United States Attorney General William Rogers, “one of the most complete investigations I’ve ever seen.” In all, the members of the FBI’s Mississippi Bureau managed to piece together a comprehensive breakdown of the lynching, identified the participants of the mob, and had even extracted confessions from a few of them. The Justice Department, wary of indicting and prosecuting members of the mob on conspiracy charges, decided the better option was to support a prosecution of the mob by the state of Mississippi, backed by the information found in the report and making FBI agents available as witnesses.⁷⁹

Yet despite the relative open and shut nature of the case, when the report was presented to the local district attorney, he ignored it completely and refused to call any

⁷⁸Official release, NAACP, April 27, 1959, General Office File, Crime: Mississippi, Parker, Mack Charles, 1959-1960, Papers of the NAACP Part 20, White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965, Reel 1.

⁷⁹ Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 438.

FBI witnesses. Due to his intransigence, the grand jury was not presented with any of the information and no indictments were handed down. Pearl County residents, incredulous at what they deemed an “invasion” by spies of the federal government, supported the district attorney’s actions. The Justice Department, annoyed by the clear efforts made by local officials to obstruct the carriage of justice, brought federal charges under Sections 51 and 52 of Title 18, the “Conspiracy Section” of the United States Criminal Code. The federal judge who presided over the grand jury, however, was a Southerner named Sidney Mize. In his opening remarks to the grand jury, he remarked “there’s no place in the nation where the relation between the races is as good and highly respected as Mississippi.” Then, through a series of specific manipulations, Mize convinced the jurors they would have to indict all or none of the alleged mob conspirators, which greatly decreased the likelihood of indictments. His plan worked. Despite the comprehensive investigation of the lynching, a docket full of witnesses, and even a handful of confessions, no indictments for the murder of Mack Charles Parker were handed down.⁸⁰

People across the nation recoiled in shock and anger. If they had not previously considered the need for federal civil rights legislation prior to the Parker case, that quickly changed. Gus Courts, who had fled to Chicago after Mississippi citizens’ councils ran him out of the state, told the *Chicago Defender* “strong civil rights laws are the only thing that will stop lynching in Mississippi and gain the vote for Negroes. All these Federal investigations will do nothing but hurt Negroes until the proper laws are

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 439-443.; “Lynch Probe Ends Without Indictments,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 1960; “U.S. Jury Refuses Lynch Indictment: Finds No Basis for Action in Mississippi Case,” *New York Times*, January 15, 1960; “Parker Case Lynch Jury Indicts None,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, January 15, 1960.

passed.”⁸¹ A *New York Times* editorial depressingly asked of the refusal to indict Parker’s lynchers: “What to do about it?” It concluded nothing much could be done outside of federal intervention. “The Parker case emphasizes the need for Federal anti-lynching legislation. It also suggests that the Civil Rights Commission undertake its contemplated inquiry into the administration of justice in respect to civil rights, something that the Parker case shows to be in serious jeopardy in Mississippi.”⁸²

When news of the failed indictments reached him in New York, Roy Wilkins exploded. He immediately dashed off a telegram to the Attorney General which demanded the FBI report of the Parker investigation be released to the public “so that the world may know who the suspects are and be able to appraise the quality of justice administered in the state of Mississippi. These ‘flagrant and calculated’ miscarriages of justice demonstrate anew the urgent need for strong civil rights legislation.”⁸³ Evers also released an official statement that called for “federal legislation with teeth” that would guarantee equal rights to all races. It had been Evers who had met with Parker’s mother before her son’s lynching and assured her the NAACP would do whatever it could to ensure Mack Charles was given a fair trial. He had failed in that endeavor, but was determined to everything in his power to ensure Parker’s death had not been in vain.⁸⁴ In response to Wilkins’ hastily worded, angry telegram, the ACLU issued a response of its

⁸¹Morten E. Baker, “‘Do-Nothing’ Lynch Jury Angers Man Who Fled State,” *Chicago Defender (Daily edition)*, January 18, 1960.

⁸² “Bad News from Mississippi,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1960.

⁸³ Official Release: Release FBI Report on Lynching, Wilkins Urges Attorney General, January 1, 1960, General Office File, Crime: Mississippi, Parker, Mack Charles, 1959-1960, Papers of the NAACP Part 20, White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965, Reel 1.

⁸⁴ Cliff Sessions, “Demand Names of Lynch Suspects,” *Chicago Defender (Daily Edition)*, January 18, 1960; “Urge Rogers Release FBI Lynching Report,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 23, 1960.

own, reminding him that a public unveiling of the report was a violation of the Fifth and Sixth Amendments to the United States Constitution. Wilkins quickly apologized, remarking that “we were so outraged that we yelled for something that we felt certain would ease some of our pain.”⁸⁵

That pain continued largely unabated in Mississippi as the 1950s came to an end. A look back at the decade revealed some progress in the aftermath of *Brown*, but the growing level of white resistance had successfully slowed the NAACP’s efforts to a crawl in most respects. Ross Barnett, an ardent race-baiter who had previously run two unsuccessful campaigns for governor, harnessed the anger of white segregationists over the FBI’s “invasion” and maintained he would not kowtow to weak moderates on the issue of race relations. In his study of the Parker lynching and subsequent investigation, Howard Smead noted that “in Mississippi at this time, being called a racial moderate was tantamount to being called a communist, and the term ‘moderate’ itself was extremely misleading.” Barnett’s election posters read “Remember Hungary. Remember Little Rock. Remember the Occupation of Poplarville by J.P. Coleman and the FBI.” A vote for Ross Barnett was a vote for the protection of the Southern way of life. His campaign strategy worked. In the 1960 gubernatorial election, Barnett was elected the 52nd Governor of Mississippi.⁸⁶

Barnett’s election was a watershed moment for Evers and the NAACP in Mississippi. Though Coleman had been no friend of the movement for racial equality, he had at least attempted to curb the power of the councils and spoke out against white-on-

⁸⁵ Smead, *Blood Justice*, 198.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 170-172.

black racial violence. Under Barnett's tenure, all bets were off. According to John Salter, Barnett's ascendancy "completed – if, indeed, such had not already existed – the Citizens' Council coup in Mississippi." At the same time, Barnett also worked to expand the powers of the Sovereignty Commission. Under Coleman, the Commission had mostly existed as a pro-segregation public relations agency. Under Barnett, its role was expanded to that of a secret detective agency. It also transformed into an organization through which the citizens' councils were funded with tax dollars, essentially turning them into smaller pieces of a quasi-state agency. "Mississippi was a total situation," Salter explained. "Total segregation, total repression, a total monolith."⁸⁷

Though the Parker lynching had been horrific, perhaps no event in the early 1960s served as a better example of Salter's assessment than the case of Clyde Kennard. Not only did it stand as undeniable evidence the Sovereignty Commission had developed a stranglehold on the state, but it rocked Evers and members of the Mississippi movement to their cores. John Dittmer argued the Kennard case was, "in many respects, the most tragic of the decade."⁸⁸ Born in 1927, Kennard hailed from the town of Hattiesburg in Forrest County, Mississippi. As a child, he spent time living with family in Chicago before he enlisted in the United States Army during World War II, where he served as a paratrooper. At war's end, Kennard returned to Chicago, where he attended the University of Chicago, but eventually quit his studies there and moved back to Hattiesburg to work on his family's chicken farm. In Hattiesburg, Kennard became involved with the local NAACP and subsequently met Evers. The two became good

⁸⁷ Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 13.

⁸⁸ Dittmer, *Local People*, 56.

friends. When he attempted to register to vote in 1957, he was turned away by the registrar, but the rejection did not hinder his determination to press for civil rights. In the hopes of finishing his education, he sought to enroll at Mississippi Southern College, located not far from his home.⁸⁹

In December of 1958, Kennard wrote a letter to the editor of the *Hattiesburg American* about the subject of integration in Mississippi. “In our state,” he explained, “the officials spend much of their time and perhaps much 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.” The price of segregation, he argued, was its largest folly. “After our paralleled graduate schools, where do our parallels of separate but equal go? Are we to assume that paralleled hospitals are to be built for the two groups of doctors? Are we to build two bridges across the same stream in order to give equal opportunities to both groups of engineers? Are we to have two courts of law...two legislatures...and of course, two governors?” There could be no question. Integration was paramount to the foundation of a prosperous, equal society. “This, I believe, is our creed,” Kennard explained. “And though it is not perfect, still I had rather meet my God with this creed than with any other yet devised by human society.”⁹⁰

Kennard’s letter, combined with his application to Mississippi Southern College, placed him directly in the sights of the Sovereignty Commission. In response, Governor Coleman called Kennard before him in 1958 and offered to pay his expenses to attend

⁸⁹ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 165.

⁹⁰ Clyde Kennard, “Letter to the Editor,” *Hattiesburg American*, December 6, 1958.

any college or university in America. Kennard refused, asserting he wanted to remain in Mississippi and attend college close to his home. In September of 1959, Kennard's application was rejected by Mississippi Southern. Seeking answers, Kennard met with Mississippi Southern President William D. McCain to further discuss his rejection. Also in the meeting was Zack J. Van Landingham, a leading investigator of the Sovereignty Commission in charge of collecting information on Kennard. In light of this meeting, it quickly became apparent that Kennard's life was in danger. According to Van Landingham, the head of the Hattiesburg Citizens' Council told him that if he wanted Kennard's life snuffed out, he could make it happen. "Kennard's car could be hit by a train or he could have some accident on the highway and nobody would ever know the difference," he was told. Though Van Landingham was no supporter of Kennard or his ambitions, apparently the suggestion of arranging an accident was too much for him to consider.⁹¹ Instead, Kennard was framed for allegedly stealing five pounds of chicken feed from a cooperative warehouse in Forrest County. It was a comically tragic situation. According to John Dittmer, Kennard's supposed accomplice "was so confused on the witness stand that he could not even get his story straight." The district attorney eventually led him through his testimony, "supplying him with the information as to when and how Kennard allegedly set up the theft." For his "crime," Kennard was sentenced to a seven-year prison sentence in the Parchman Farm penitentiary.⁹²

The Sovereignty Commission's handling of the Kennard case shed a great deal of light on the amount of power the agency possessed. Van Landingham, a former

⁹¹ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 164.

⁹² Dittmer, *Local People*, 82.

investigator with the FBI, worked on the case for over a year and left no stone unturned. In a December, 1958 memorandum to Governor Coleman, Van Landingham noted he had contacted a former special agent of the FBI to dig into Kennard's army records, specifically as pertained to his time stationed at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. "No criminal record, arrest record, or any other identification data with reference to Kennard" turned up. When Kennard submitted his application to Mississippi Southern in 1959, Van Landingham sent another memorandum to Coleman to tell him he had spoken with a few prominent black citizens in Hattiesburg who knew Kennard and would dissuade him to apply to the college. The use of black informants or collaborators was a common tactic employed by the Sovereignty Commission, which helped to build a network of useful spies willing to infiltrate the NAACP at every level.⁹³ As was clear in the Kennard case, the results were usually devastating.

Evers was disgusted by Kennard's arrest and immediately spearheaded a campaign for his release. On November 22, 1960, he issued a news release in which he called Kennard's conviction based on falsified evidence "the greatest mockery to judicial justice." This was especially true, given that no indictments were handed down in the Mack Charles Parker case despite mountains of evidence. The press release also ran in the pages of the *Hattiesburg American*. The publication of Evers' angry release provided an unforeseen opportunity for his enemies to ensnarl him in a trap, which they did by arguing Evers' statements had been made with the intent to "impede, degrade, obstruct,

⁹³Zach L. Van Landingham to J.P. Coleman, December 18, 1958; Zach L. Van Landingham to J.P. Coleman, August 27, 1959, Clyde Kennard Investigation Files, 1958-1960, Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, State Govt. Records, Series 2452, Box 16635, MDAH.

embarrass, interrupt, defeat, or corrupt the administration of justice in the Honorable Circuit Court of Forrest County, Mississippi, and said statement being an expression of contempt for this Honorable Court.” Evers quickly hired attorneys Jack H. Young and R. Jess Brown to represent him. They argued Evers’ statements were protected under the right of free speech set down in the First Amendment to the Constitution, but were unable to get the contempt charge dismissed. Evers headed to trial. He was convicted of contempt, fined \$100, and sentenced to thirty days in jail. He appealed.⁹⁴

As Evers defended himself in court, Kennard labored under horrific conditions at Parchman. Given the miscarriage of justice that placed him there, his experience mirrored that of the Mau Mau detainees laboring in Kenyan prison camps. His conviction and imprisonment had been intended to send a message: the white power structure would not be defeated. Though the work was backbreaking and exhausting, when he could, Kennard offered to write letters for illiterate inmates as well as teach them how to read and write.⁹⁵ The NAACP Legal Defense Fund handled his appeal. In August of 1961, Thurgood Marshall petitioned the United States Supreme Court to review Kennard’s conviction, arguing that he had been tried “by a jury procedure which systematically discriminates against Negro jurors,” and that “unless petitioner has a right...to present evidence to support his charge of jury discrimination, the protection offered by the Fourteenth Amendment against conviction by a jury from which his race has been excluded will be hollow indeed.”⁹⁶ In the meantime, Evers and the NAACP made every effort to keep the

⁹⁴ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 165-166.

⁹⁵ Dittmer, *Local People*, 82.

⁹⁶ “Court Asked to Review Miss. ‘Chicken Feed’ Conviction,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 8, 1961.

Kennard case in the news in addition to holding fundraisers for his family. However, in October of 1961, the Supreme Court denied a hearing on the case, thus affirming the lower court's decision. Evers was crushed. At a NAACP Freedom Fund banquet, he stood to give a statement about the Kennard case and broke down into tears. It was the only time John Salter remembered seeing Evers cry.⁹⁷

Evers won his appeal in June, successfully arguing that his statement in defense of Kennard was not contemptuous but rather protected under the right of free speech. However, he could not stop the physical deterioration of his friend Kennard, who at age of thirty-six was dying from intestinal cancer.⁹⁸ As his condition worsened, Evers and the NAACP implored Barnett to release Kennard from prison. Angered over the negative publicity the case had brought upon Mississippi, Barnett eventually agreed and suspended Kennard's sentence in January. He immediately flew to Chicago to undergo medical treatment at Billings Hospital on the campus of the University of Chicago.⁹⁹ When he arrived for treatment, Kennard's spirits were high, and he spoke of his desire to return home to Mississippi and run a motel on property he owned outside of Hattiesburg.¹⁰⁰ Like Evers, Kennard loved Mississippi despite all of its barriers and wanted to continue working to "help improve race relations in my state."¹⁰¹ He never got the chance to

⁹⁷ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 167.

⁹⁸ "NAACP Aide is Freed: Supreme Court of Mississippi Upsets Contempt Finding," *New York Times*, June 13, 1961; Mississippi Jurists Clear NAACP Figure of Contempt, Then Explain," *Chicago Defender (Daily edition)*, June 14, 1961.

⁹⁹ "Clyde Kennard Begins New Fight – For Life," *Chicago Defender (National edition)*, February 2, 1963.

¹⁰⁰ "Kennard Looks Ahead Despite Doom of Cancer," *Chicago Defender (Daily edition)*, February 4, 1963.

¹⁰¹ Kennard Plans Return to Miss.," *Chicago Defender (Daily edition)*, April 3, 1963.

return. Kennard died on July 4, 1963, American Independence Day. The irony of the date was likely not lost on his friends, family, or myriad of supporters.¹⁰²

Medgar Evers stood on the edge of the new decade at a career and personal crossroads. Efforts to publicize the terrors of white supremacy and significance of the NAACP's desegregation and voter registration campaigns shed light on the Mississippi movement, but the counterinsurgency of massive resistance managed to slow civil rights progress to a crawl. Direct action efforts were on the rise across the South, however, and young people in Mississippi were paying attention. Evers played an important role in encouraging those young people to involve themselves in the fight for civil rights, and had come to understand that to be successful, strategies needed to possess a certain degree of fluidity.¹⁰³ While the Mau Mau radicals had failed in physically fighting their way to concessions on land and citizenship rights from the Kenyan government, their revolt had not been in vain. So long as calls for concerted action and unity continued among Kikuyu rebels, Britain could not hide the situation from the world nor avoid international pressure to bend toward Kenyan independence. Unceasing pressure, though high in its physical and emotional cost, worked. In the final years of his career, Evers' battles with the National Office over these issues would increase in both size and frequency. According to Myrlie Evers, the pressures of his position as head of the

¹⁰² "Clyde Kennard Dies; Lost Mississippi Bid," *New York Times*, July 5, 1963; "Kennard, Miss. Injustice Victim, Dies of Cancer," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 7, 1963.

¹⁰³ John Dittmer argued "the years that Evers had spent on the road meeting small groups of blacks across the state...had reached young people who, inspired by his example and by the black awakening in other parts of the South, were ready to move." Dittmer, *Local People*, 85.

NAACP movement in Mississippi also took a significant toll on her marriage to Medgar.

In time, those pressures would cost him his life.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 188-189.

CHAPTER 5:

“EVERYBODY KNOWS ABOUT MISSISSIPPI GODDAM”

“Please help me” was the cry Medgar Evers heard in his sleep every night. It was, in the words of his wife Myrlie, “a cry that haunted him, that drove him to frenzies of activity, that took him into danger and brought him back weak with rage at his powerlessness.”¹ For the first time since he had taken up the mantle of NAACP Field Secretary, Evers questioned whether the Association’s strategies to push back against Mississippi’s white power structure were the right course of action for himself, his family, and the state’s black population. Though he continued to believe in the National Office’s goal of shepherding its desegregation and voting rights efforts through the courts, Evers grew increasingly sympathetic to the idea of implementing direct-action tactics as a strategy for provoking federal intervention in Mississippi. The highly publicized efforts of the Montgomery boycotters and the Little Rock Nine proved that in a contentious international arena, direct-action was developing into a more effective means of forcing the federal government’s hand than relying on legal victories, and the inception of the Citizens’ Council and Sovereignty Commission portended greater difficulty in navigating the labyrinth of state-sanctioned political and economic barriers designed to protect white supremacy.²

Violence remained an ever-present concern, and each new wave of terror threatened what few gains the NAACP had achieved. Of the efficacy of direct-action strategies in Mississippi, Michael Vinson Williams surmised Evers “must have

¹ Evers-Williams and Peters, *For Us, The Living*, 210.

² Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 172.

considered the possibility that with violence directed against African Americans intensifying throughout the state, nondirect tactics would take too long to achieve the desired result.”³ This reasoning was especially plausible given the outcome of the Mack Charles Parker murder case. Despite the existence of the 378-page FBI investigation, including a comprehensive breakdown of Parker’s lynching and confessions from members of the lynch mob, the grand jury failed to produce any indictments. The Sovereignty Commission not only ensured acts of white-on-black violence went unsolved or unprosecuted, but in doing so, actively facilitated its continuation. Reaching from the halls of the Jackson statehouse to the most remote, rural areas of Mississippi, violence was a multifaceted tool essential to the preservation of the racial status quo and the defense of white supremacy against lawless Negroes and civil rights agitators. Of this, Myrlie Evers explained that “white men were elected to office on the unspoken promise that such would remain the case: the bigger the brute, the larger the vote.”⁴

This was certainly the case in Philadelphia, Mississippi in October of 1959, when police officer Lawrence A. Rainey killed Luther Jackson, a native of Neshoba County and black Korean War veteran. Allegedly seeking to arrest Jackson for public drunkenness, Rainey dragged him out of the vehicle, shot him dead, then called for back-up, saying “come on down here. I think I have killed a nigger.” Two witnesses, including Jackson’s girlfriend and another black woman who had passed by the scene, accused of Rainey of killing Jackson “for no reason.” For this, they were jailed, harassed, and fined.⁵

³ Ibid, 172.

⁴ Evers-Williams and Peters, *For Us, The Living*, 211.

⁵ Ibid, 212-213.

Despite these eyewitness accounts that contradicted his story, Rainey utilized a justification for his actions regularly applied by law enforcement: self-defense. The officer held that Jackson had drunkenly lunged at him when exiting the vehicle. True to commonly reinforced stereotypes employed to validate the legal and extralegal killings of black men since the earliest era of American slavery, Rainey repurposed Jackson's form into that of an uncontrollable black brute, possessing of a superhuman ability to withstand traditional means of restraint and in need of being put down by deadly means. By arguing he feared for his life at the hands of an uncontrollable, dangerous Negro, Rainey's actions ticked off all the boxes required to accept the murder as a justifiable homicide. After a short investigation, the Neshoba County Coroner endorsed this position, labeling the case closed.⁶

Rainey's reign of violence did not end there. In May of 1962 he was involved in the shooting death of a twenty-seven-year-old black epileptic with a history of institutionalization named Willie Otis Nash. Fearful that his "mind had gone bad again," Nash's father called law enforcement to transport his son to the mental hospital for treatment. Though hopeful Willie would receive the help he needed, Levie Nash feared for his son's life when Sheriffs Rainey and Hop Barnett arrived to pick up his son. During a previous epileptic episode, Barnett had called Willie a son-of-a-bitch and threatened to murder him. Levie Nash was right to be fearful. Willie never made it to the mental hospital that day. Both sheriffs claimed Willie had been killed attempting to reach for a gun in the glove compartment despite being handcuffed in the backseat. When the

⁶ Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi*, (New York: Scribner, 1988) 253-254; Dittmer, *Local People*, 79.

county coroner examined the body, Willie Nash's death was also ruled a justifiable homicide.⁷ In the years that followed, Rainey's reputation for brutality fueled his ascendancy up the Neshoba County law enforcement ladder. Rather than view his record as proof he was unqualified to act honorably and fairly in his position, 67% of Neshoba County voters elected Rainey Deputy Sheriff in 1961, justifying the application of state-sanctioned violence in maintaining white supremacy. His campaign slogan was "the man who can cope with any situations that may arise."⁸

Just as the colonial government's tightening of proverbial institutional screws worked to quell the Mau Mau threat in Kenya, the escalating violence and intensity of state-sponsored white backlash threatened to derail the Mississippi movement completely. But while deeply discouraged, Evers was not ready to give up. Instead, his consideration of direct-action tactics indicated his philosophy of social justice was undergoing a transformation. He had always possessed a militant nature, notably indicated by decision to always keep a firearm nearby and his fascination with the Mau Mau. Despite their struggles to maintain a cohesive resistance under British pressure, he took a page from the Mau Mau blueprint to force the insanity of Mississippi's white power structure into the open. By 1960, this worldview widened to include the use of direct-action tactics in the hopes of forcing federal intervention. Though the Eisenhower administration had dragged its feet on responding to the Little Rock crisis, it had

⁷ Renee C. Romano, *Racial Reckoning: Prosecuting America's Civil Rights Murders*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 26; Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us The Living*, 213-214.

⁸ Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 253-254; Florence Mars with Lynn Eden, *Witness in Philadelphia*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 78-79; Romano, *Racial Reckoning*, 26.

ultimately felt compelled to act under a deluge of damaging international criticism, setting a precedent its subsequent efforts to avoid further race-related disruptions could not erase.⁹

According to John Salter, Evers heard “on good authority” that Democratic President John F. Kennedy, elected in November 1960, might begrudgingly intervene in Mississippi if its racial tensions exacted a negative hit on the administration’s international image or party support across the South. Given Evers’ annoyance with the National Office for supposedly striking a deal to ignore Mississippi until change happened elsewhere, the possibility of influencing the Kennedy administration was no doubt welcomed.¹⁰ Utilizing direct-action to engage Mississippi’s black youth in the movement also greatly appealed to Evers, who hoped to harness the militant energy of students at Alcorn and other colleges that remained relatively untapped within the NAACP’s legal framework. Though he worked effortlessly to recruit students into local youth councils, the Association’s focus on its slow-moving voting rights and desegregation campaigns coupled with the stifling atmosphere of racial oppression hurt recruitment efforts. Those who agreed to join the youth councils were few in number and, in the case of the Jackson councils, meant they barely functioned as an operating body. Rather than fear a developing desire among Mississippi’s black youth for mass protest, Evers hoped to serve as a crucial connective agent between students calling for locally led, direct-action and the organizational resources of the NAACP.¹¹

⁹ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 130-131.

¹⁰ John Jones interview with John R. Salter, Jr. and Ed King, January 6, 1981, 38-39, MDAH.

¹¹ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 148-149.

The growing brazenness of Mississippi's state power structure offered up its own testing ground for a militant, direct-action response to white backlash. Governor Barnett's election cemented the ascendancy of Citizens' Council representatives to the highest positions of authority in the state, but his move to transform the State Sovereignty Commission into a detective agency effectively pitted the two organizations against one another. Since its creation in 1956, the Sovereignty Commission had primarily functioned as the public relations arm of the state's white power structure, marking anti-segregation advocates as communist subversives. Under Barnett's tenure, the Commission began subsidizing Council propaganda projects with official state tax funds. While most Council members supported the Commission's more activist role, a sense of rivalry developed regarding strategy and policy influence on Barnett's administration. Aware of their squabbling, Evers did what he could to take advantage of the levels of hysteria such a divide represented. If he could not directly defeat the Councils and the Commission through legal mechanisms, Evers hoped to drive them to defeat themselves.¹²

An NAACP event celebrating the fifth anniversary of the *Brown* decision in May of 1959 bolstered this possibility. Roy Wilkins was the keynote speaker, and in the months leading to the event, Evers and local NAACP branches publicized the Executive Director's forthcoming participation. Sovereignty Commission's lead investigator, Zack J. Van Landingham, gathered information about the event by informants paid to infiltrate

¹² McMillen, *The Citizens Council*, 333-342, J. Michael Butler, "The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and Beach Integration, 1959-1963: A Cotton Patch Gestapo?" *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 68, No. 1, (February 2002): 112-113; Woods, *Black Struggle Red Scare*, 95-97, 144.

NAACP meetings as part of “a secret underground organization of Negroes to assist in maintaining segregation in Mississippi.”¹³

One month prior to Wilkins’ arrival, Van Landingham sent a memo to Sovereignty Commission director Maurice Malone incorporating information passed on to him by a black informant named B.L. Bell, who reported Medgar Evers told him the NAACP planned to file a desegregation suit in Jackson in the coming months.¹⁴ Bell and other members of the black middle class unwilling to fight segregation caused Evers’ blood to run cold. Much like the African loyalists in Kenya, these individuals traded their dignity and freedom for bribes and false senses of security at the hands of a white power structure determined to exploit them. On many occasions, he openly referred to such individuals as Uncle Toms who worked to preserve racial segregation and prevented the “more aggressive students” in the state’s black communities from speaking out and acting against racial oppression.¹⁵

The Sovereignty Commission favored a calculated response to the NAACP’s plans, which ruffled feathers inside the Citizens’ Councils. At a Commission meeting on April 23, 1959, Senator Earl Evans of Canton, Mississippi reported 90% of black Mississippians opposed the NAACP. If that was indeed the case, he suggested the commission locate “a large group or delegation of Negroes opposing the NAACP” to

¹³ Memorandum from Zach J. Van Landingham to File 9-9, January 15, 1959, SCR ID # 97-106-0-151-2-1-1, Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, MDAH; Charles C. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle Over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980*, (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 85.

¹⁴ Letter from Zach J. Van Landingham to Maurice Malone, Director of the State Sovereignty Commission, April 17, 1959, SCR ID # 2-71-0-9-2-1-1, Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, MDAH.

¹⁵ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 177.

picket the anniversary event with placards that read “Go Home Roy Wilkins, We Don’t Want You Stirring Up Trouble in Mississippi.” When Van Landingham relayed the query to Bell, the school supervisor replied that in light of the “Poplarville incident,” it was doubtful a picket line outside the meeting would be of much value to the anti-NAACP cause. Facilitating negative press attention was something Van Landingham and other members of the Sovereignty Commission wanted to avoid so soon after the Parker case, so the picket plans were scrapped.¹⁶ Members of the Jackson Citizens’ Council were in no mood for surreptitious responses to the coming invasion of NAACP officials. They favored sending a strong message that desegregation efforts and destruction of the racial status quo would not be tolerated. Spearheading this response was Elmore Greaves, Director of the Jackson Council. He went before the Justice of the Peace of the Fourth District and filed an affidavit for the arrests of Wilkins and Evers on misdemeanor charges for conspiring to “overthrow or violate” the segregation laws of Mississippi “through force, violence, threats, intimidation” or any other means.¹⁷

Afraid of the national publicity that would stem from the arrest of NAACP officials, Van Landingham received permission from Attorney General Joe Patterson to prevent the warrants from being carried out. Neither Wilkins nor Evers was made aware of the situation, and Wilkins soon returned to New York. The following day, Van Landingham defended himself in the *Jackson Daily News*, arguing that arresting Wilkins and Evers

¹⁶ Letter from Zach J. Van Landingham to Maurice Malone, Director of the State Sovereignty Commission, April 30, 1959, SCR ID # 9-9-0-30-1-1-1, Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, MDAH; Letter from Zach J. Van Landingham to Maurice Malone, Director of the State Sovereignty Commission, May, 6, 1959, SCR ID # 9-9-0-32-1-1-1, Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, MDAH.

¹⁷ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 173-174.

would have given the NAACP what it wanted and hurt the cause of maintaining segregation.¹⁸ Greaves was livid. He fired off a response excoriating state officials for not taking advantage of the opportunity to stymie the NAACP and apply force to the message that outside agitators would not be tolerated. No one was spared his wrath, wrapped in a skewed transnational framework. For his decision not to enforce segregation laws, Greaves labeled Governor Coleman “Mississippi’s goodwill ambassador to the integrated hinterlands,” stating he found it “inconceivable that our governor could be frightened at the prospect of ‘the world’s biggest nigger’ languishing in a Mississippi jail.” Greaves also expressed surprise that the Sovereignty Commission “was organized to wet-nurse visiting negro dignitaries” and labeled Evers “the Mau Mau admirer who is on the NAACP payroll as Mississippi field secretary.” He concluded by asking of the “fearless moderates wring[ing] their hands about the ‘bad publicity’ accompanying the slight inconvenience to the negro Wilkins which the administration of justice might demand,” would anarchy be “preferable to a bad press?”¹⁹

Evers certainly did not think so. According to Michael Vinson Williams, he “reveled in the infighting between the two segregationist groups and their leadership” and “pointed to the amount of press coverage the whole episode garnered.” He also took notice of the positive effect the divisions between Council and Sovereignty Commission officials had on the state’s black citizenry following the situation, arguing it “was favorable to the NAACP.”²⁰ By imploring greater numbers of black Mississippians to

¹⁸“State Forestalls Wilkins’ Arrest: Incident Just What NAACP Wanted, Declares Official,” *Jackson Daily News*, May 18, 1959, 2, 5.

¹⁹ “J.P. Accused of Blocking Arrests, *Jackson Daily News*, May 19, 1959.

²⁰ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 174-175.

become politically active, the odds of driving a wedge between the white power structure over the issue of “bad publicity” increased exponentially. Violent retribution was not required to become a successful Mau Mau-type force for change. Rather, it required solidarity and determination among the masses to act. The National Office wasted no time in publicizing the failed arrest attempt, putting together an official report for public release that included a reprint of Mississippi Codes 2339. The “crimes” listed in the code, given institutional efforts to silence black dissent across the state by utilizing the very same tactics, represented the height of irony.²¹ Wilkins also spoke out to the press from his office in New York, arguing that the decision to withdraw the warrants “is clear indication that someone in authority realized the folly and futility of arresting us for exercising our constitutional right to freedom of speech” and promised the NAACP would “take every possible step” to fight segregation in Mississippi.²²

As members of Mississippi’s white power structure fought amongst themselves, the last of the Mau Mau rebels faced defeat in the forest reserves in Kenya. However, increasing international criticism of the colonial government’s treatment of captured Mau Mau prisoners led to growing anxiety in Parliament that their doctrine of colonial trusteeship might disintegrate. News of atrocities committed against Mau Mau detainees found its way into international press accounts, and the colonial government’s actions embarrassingly ran counter to the imperial image of the British Empire as a civilizing force in the world. Her Majesty’s government was in a state of crisis regarding image and

²¹ “Mississippi Threatens Freedom of Speech,” May 1959, Papers of the NAACP Part 20, White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965, Reel 2.

²² “Wilkins Sees Arrest Attempt as Intimidation,” *St. Petersburg Times*, May 27, 1959.

strategy. To many officials, including Colonial Secretary Lennox-Boyd, Governor Baring, and Prime Minister Winston Churchill, a loss of the Kenya colony was unconscionable and a threat to rationale of the empire at large. According to Caroline Elkins, not only did officials fear the loss of Kenya might set a precedent others would follow, but just as the forces of white supremacy dictated that the lifting of racial barriers in Mississippi would hearken the death of white civilization, British officials also believed losing Kenya would be a grievous defeat to the “forces of dark savagery.”²³

On March 3, 1959, an event at the Hola detention camp in Kenya’s Coast Province reinforced concerns over the future of colonial trusteeship and challenged officials’ definitions of dark savagery. Located in the Tana River District, the Hola camp housed detainees deemed uncooperative and zealous “hard core” Mau Mau adherents. On orders from the camp’s commandant, eighty-five of the hard core were forcibly marched to a site one mile away and ordered to dig an irrigation trench. They refused the work order on grounds they were not prisoners but political detainees and freedom fighters under no obligation to perform hard labor. Angry over their defiance, John Cowan, the Superintendent of Prisons, ordered the men into a twelve feet deep trench. When Cowan blew his whistle, security guards unleashed a reign of terror on the detainees that lasted for three hours. In his recollection of the horrific event, former detainee James Muiguai exclaimed "I remember the order being issued in Swahili, '*Piga mpaka wafanye kazi*' (flog them till they work), they were beaten like unwanted animals." By the time the

²³ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 305-306.

beatings were finished, eleven of the detainees were dead and dozens more badly wounded.²⁴

Brutality at Hola camp was not limited to the massacre on that fateful day. The use of violence had been set down in an official policy called the “Cowan Plan,” under which detainees could be beaten, tortured, sexually abused, or forced to labor under terrible conditions at the will of the camp supervisor. Its intent was to coerce detainees into confessing, and ultimately renouncing, their Mau Mau oaths. Based on the official myth of Mau Mau as “a collective psychosis that invoked a complete rejection of civilization,” the Cowan Plan was justified as a means of permanently separating Pipeline detainees who refused to renounce their oaths from those who would agree to rejoin Kenyan colonial society as willing subjects of the crown.²⁵ It had originated in the aftermath of the failed House of Commons vote to institute an independent inquiry into the Kenya camps. The largely partisan decision to allow Secretary Lennox-Boyd and Governor Baring to continue overseeing the “rehabilitation efforts” in the camps essentially gave Cowan carte blanc to use varying degrees of violence to force the hard core to work.²⁶

Cowan’s actions at Hola Camp resulted in political fallout. This was especially true because the deaths of the detainees were originally blamed on the consumption of contaminated water, a charge that Labour Party operatives in Kenya argued were falsehoods. Barbara Castle jumped at the opportunity to reveal a massive cover up.

²⁴ Wanjohi Kabukuru, “Kenya: The Hola Massacre,” *New African*, December 2003, 34-35.

²⁵ Caroline Elkins, “The Struggle For Mau Mau Rehabilitation in Colonial Kenya,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2000): 28-29.

²⁶ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 342-346.

Lennox-Boyd and Baring tried to cut calls for independent inquiries off at the pass by issuing a March 12th press release admitting the injuries on the bodies of the dead detainees might have been due to violence, but added the findings were inconclusive. On March 18th, the colonial government opened its own internal investigation by Senior Resident Magistrate W.H. Goudie. In his final report issued in May, Goudie admitted the detainees had died due to violence at the hands of prison guards, but was careful to argue it was “impossible to determine beyond a reasonable doubt which injuries on the deceased were caused by justifiable and which by unjustifiable blows, and which injury or combination of injuries resulted in the shock and hemorrhage causing death.” Justifiable blows, as specified in the report, were any used by guards to “compel” troublesome detainees to work.²⁷

Goudie’s assessment was widely condemned by members of the Labour Party, who called for a full investigation of the murders. As the House of Commons prepared for hearings, Commandant M.G. Sullivan and Deputy Commandant A.C. Coutts of the Hola Camp were suspended from their positions and the camp opened to visiting reporters for tours. Baring hoped it would result in more favorable press coverage of the events, particularly as the debate over an investigation kicked off. During discussion of the issue on June 16th, Barbara Castle accused Lennox-Boyd of orchestrating a cover up to protect the top officials and pin blame for the murders on Sullivan and Coutts. She also took the opportunity to once again question the entire system of Mau Mau rehabilitation in the camps, arguing confessions of Mau Mau detainees extracted via torture “should

²⁷Ibid, pp. 347-348; “Guards Get Blame in 11 Kenya Deaths,” Dispatch of the *Times, London*, reprinted in the *New York Times*, May 7, 1959.

horrify this house.” Lennox-Boyd, in typical fashion, managed to expertly evade the lines of questioning by opposition leaders and redirect blame for the violence away from those in power. In using the same “civilizing” language put forth to justify the rehabilitation process, he maintained any prisoner deaths at the hands of guards were “the result of misjudgment by the authorities of the depth of brutality and savage nature of the detainees.”²⁸

In the final vote, the House split down party lines to defeat a Labour Party motion to censure Lennox-Boyd and colonial government officials collectively responsible for the widespread violence in the camps.²⁹ In July, Sullivan and Coutts were officially dismissed from their positions while Lennox-Boyd, who narrowly escaped censure, retired as colonial secretary shortly thereafter.³⁰ Yet while a battle to maintain the colonial government’s policies of Mau Mau rehabilitation had been won, the tide was turning in the larger moral war being waged by the Empire regarding the issue of human rights and illiberal actions by its colonial authorities. According to historian David Anderson, “after Hola there was no way back.”³¹ As incidents of violence against Africans in Kenya gained further attention in the international press, the hypocrisy in the call to defeat the dark forces of savagery through the application of British law and culture was on worldwide display. This was especially true given the Empire’s eventual ratification of the European Convention on Human Rights in 1961. Though officials

²⁸ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 348-349; The Hola Detention Camp 16 June 1959, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, vol 607 cc 248-384.

²⁹ “Kenya Censure Fails in London, Commons Defeats Laborite Motion in Death-by-Beating of 11 Mau Mau Captives,” *New York Times*, June 17, 1959.

³⁰ “Kenya Camp Chief Ousted,” *The New York Times*, July 24, 1959.

³¹ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 327.

managed to both work within and around the Convention by assuming official states of emergency, the brutal suppression of insurrections exacted a terrible toll on the colonies. In his extensive study of the British Empire and the European Convention, A.W. Simpson explained “to be sure...it was thought possible from a military point of view, at least by some, to crush colonial rebellions, but it was certainly not possible, even with restraint, to look good in the process.”³²

Looking good was a turn of phrase with extensive geopolitical implications. Though the post-World War II era had seen the inception of the European Convention and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the central force driving concerns about international embarrassment regarding the suppression of insurrections was a fear of communist infiltration into Africa. By the beginning of the 1960s, those fears were heightened as several prominent African colonies in addition to Kenya groaned under the yolk of white settler rule and state-sponsored violence. In Algeria, efforts by French colonial leaders to squelch dissent led to the deaths of over 150,000 Algerians and French citizens combined, while violence over decolonization efforts resulted in scores of African and Belgian settler deaths in the Congo. In South Africa, the violent massacre of sixty-nine black demonstrators by white police officers in Sharpeville followed boycotts by black South Africans against the government’s apartheid laws. As the horror unfolded, it was captured by television cameras, revealing the brutality of the South African regime on the global stage. The human cost was horrendous. Yet the efforts of colonized

³² Simpson, *Human Rights and the End of Empire*, 1057.

Africans to transform their desire for independence into action influenced an atmosphere of resistance and solidarity that connected oppressed peoples worldwide.³³

Within this framework, the shadow of British actions in Kenya loomed large. A sizeable segment of British voters initially supported military actions to defeat the Mau Mau, but the colonial government's crackdown on the insurgents and suspected sympathizers backfired. Internal squabbles over the preservation of colonial trusteeship played out in the House of Commons and on the pages of newspapers around the world. In the United States, government officials viewed an unstable African continent as a breeding-ground for Soviet infiltration that threatened the global balance of power and American access to crucial natural resources in the Middle East. At the same time, escalating racial conflicts at home intensified the spotlight on the hypocrisy of American democracy and threatened the credibility of the United States in the international arena. For the incoming Kennedy administration, striking a cautious balance between responding to criticisms of American racial discrimination and minimizing the possibility of violent Southern white backlash was deemed crucial to winning the Cold War. Secretary of State Dean Rusk summed up importance of the issue when he declared American racism "the single biggest burden that we carry on our backs in foreign relations."³⁴

Initially, NAACP officials hoped the young president's administration would be more open to publicly supporting the cause of racial equality after the adoption of a strong civil rights plank at the 1960 Democratic National Convention, despite the tenuous

³³ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 353-355.

³⁴ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 152-155; Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 135-141.

path tread to its inclusion. Kennedy's assessment of race relations during his career in the United States Senate left much to be desired. His voting record revealed he had spent very little time around black Americans, and had even less experience breaking down and understanding the pervasive discrimination blacks faced across the nation. But leading up to the election of 1960, Kennedy worked to reverse the opinions of black leaders and court black votes, meeting to discuss race relations with Wilkins and Martin Luther King, Jr. He also actively supported the incorporation of a civil rights plank into the Democratic platform at the national convention, which included a call for federal legislation to end literacy tests, poll taxes, and empower the Attorney General to file civil injunctions against civil rights violators in federal courts.³⁵ However, during his first few months in office, any action taken by Kennedy to support the push for racial equality was largely symbolic. While his courtship of black voters helped swing the election in his favor, Kennedy's win over Richard Nixon was by the slimmest of margins. The Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson ticket carried a large majority of Southern electoral votes, but Southern Democrats had no intention of acquiescing to desegregation demands. Instead, they utilized their control of over half of thirty-eight congressional committees and federal funding to their political advantage, effectively enabling them to hold Kennedy's

³⁵ The selection of Texas Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson as Kennedy's running mate, intended to maneuver around the liberal flank of the party and ensure Southern Democratic votes, appalled several black leaders. It had been Johnson who had overseen the removal of a crucial part of the 1957 civil rights bill authorizing the Department of Justice to take action against individual civil rights violators. However, the decision to add Johnson to the ticket was accepted by Wilkins – ever the pragmatist – as a smart selection. Not only did he believe it would garner Southern backing for the ticket, effectively pledging the Southern conservative wing of the party to support the civil rights plank, Wilkins labeled Johnson “the shrewdest legislative fox I have ever seen.” Mark Stern, “John F. Kennedy and Civil Rights: From Congress to the Presidency,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Foreign Policy, Human Rights, and Political Alignment, 1789-1989 (Fall, 1989): 798-809.

legislative agenda hostage. To placate his supporters calling for an end to racial oppression at home and abroad, Kennedy appointed racial liberals to key administration positions, but made no further efforts to stir the waters of racial tension.³⁶

In Mississippi, symbolic appointments did nothing to stop the deluge of oppressive violence raining down on its black citizenry or aid Evers in eliciting support from much of the state's black middle class. However, his work had begun to tap into the rebellious energy fermenting in the state's black high schools and colleges. Awakened to the possibilities of mass action, the air of militancy around the students was a refreshing counterpoint to the fear-based conservatism of many educators and preachers in Mississippi's black communities. In the aftermath of the Alcorn protest, Evers canvassed statewide for the creation of new NAACP youth councils. By encouraging members to take the initiative and conduct their own student-led protests, Evers sought to harness that energy to strategically exploit the hysteria of the white power structure and connect the Mississippi struggle to the national movement for civil rights.³⁷

The youth in Mississippi were not the only people influenced by the direct-action tactics utilized in Montgomery and Little Rock. Students across the South, many of whom were members of NAACP youth councils, were inspired to shift the national

³⁶ The racial liberals appointed to key administration positions included Secretary of State Rusk, Robert Kennedy as Attorney General, Sergeant Shriver as head of the Peace Corps, Chester Bowles as Undersecretary of State, and Harris Wofford as the Special Assistant to the President on Civil Rights. But Kennedy's primary concern as president was winning the Cold War, not actively working to ensure racial equality if it came at the expense of national cohesion. Viewing himself as a "cool-headed pragmatist" rather than a moral idealist, his support of African anticolonial movements and a slow, moderate move toward desegregation in the South stemmed from the same ideological assessment: that instability and violence at home or abroad would expand the Sino-Soviet bloc into Africa and damage the United States' image as a light of democracy in the world. Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 135-141, 157-163.

³⁷ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 148-149, 176.

movement for civil rights in a new direction. A key moment occurred on February 1, 1960. North Carolina A&T students and members of the local NAACP youth council Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair, Jr., Franklin McCain, and David Richmond initiated a sit-in at the segregated lunch counter in the Greensboro Woolworth department store. Predictably, they were told the lunch counter did not serve Negroes, but though they had prepared to nonviolently resist any physical blows that might come their way, they only received confused looks from onlookers. News quickly spread to the student body, some of whom agreed to join with the four men when they returned to the lunch counter in the coming days.³⁸ Again, the protestors met no resistance, but their actions did interest local reporters, who captured footage that hit the national television and wire services. Initial reactions by Greensboro officials had been muted, but the protest's expansion and the angry white backlash it garnered influenced them to step up efforts to stop the sit-ins from continuing and encourage the owner to temporarily close the department store.³⁹

As plans for additional sit-ins in other Greensboro stores were announced, the sting of financial losses loomed large for Woolworths. So did the threat to segregated lunch counters beyond Greensboro's borders. For less than a week after the original Woolworth sit-in began, students in cities and towns across North Carolina, including Fayetteville, Charlotte, Durham, Raleigh, and Winston-Salem, initiated their own sit-ins

³⁸"Negroes in South in Store Sitdown: Carolina College Students Fight Woolworth Ban on Lunch Counter Service," *New York Times*, February 3, 1960.

³⁹No state law required segregation in North Carolina eating establishments. Rather, lunch counters were segregated as a matter of established custom. Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), 9-10; "Bomb Scare Fails to Halt 'Sit Down' Against Bias," *Chicago Defender*, February 9, 1960.; "Seek Service at Greensboro Lunch Counter: A&T Students Stage Sit Down at Woolworths," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 13, 1960; "Explains Student Sitdown Strike," *Chicago Defender*, February 13, 1960.

at lunch counters in downtown variety stores. As the protests spread, they remained peaceful. Nonetheless, city and state officials reacted with disgust. In Raleigh, Mayor William G. Enloe publicly condemned the protestors for endangering the city's "friendly and cooperative race relations by seeking to change a long-standing custom in a manner that is all but destined to fail," while North Carolina Attorney General Malcolm B. Seawell claimed the sit-ins posed "a serious threat to the peace and good order in the communities in which they occur."⁴⁰

The reactions of angry officials did nothing to hinder the broadening of the protests. Within two weeks of the Greensboro sit-in, black and white college students initiated their own sit-ins against segregated eating facilities in over thirty cities across the South, prompting additional condemnations from white officials and praise from civil rights leaders. Among the latter were the organizational heads of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), formed in 1942 by members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. As pacifists, they drew inspiration from the use of nonviolent mass resistance by Gandhi in India and from the calls for self-determination among the colonized peoples in Africa. In the United States, they set out to use nonviolent, direct-action methods to fight against all forms of racial discrimination. CORE focused much of its attention on eradicating housing and employment discrimination in urban areas, but in the first decade of its existence it spearheaded a direct-action campaign challenging segregation laws in interstate travel called the Journey of Reconciliation. In response to the United States Supreme Court's 1946 ruling in *Irene Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia*, declaring

⁴⁰ "Negroes Extend Store Picketing: Raleigh is 6th Carolina City Affected – Student Action May Spread Here," *New York Times*, February 11, 1960.

segregation in interstate travel unconstitutional, black and white members of CORE traveled on interstate buses through Tennessee, Virginia, Kentucky, and North Carolina, where they suffered harassment and arrest for violating state segregation laws and customs.⁴¹

The attempts to force compliance with the Supreme Court decision by participants on the Journey of Reconciliation played a key role in influencing McNeil, Blair, McCain, and Richmond's initial decision to sit-in at the Woolworth lunch counter. Their experiences participating in the youth council of the Greensboro NAACP, which held the reputation as one of the largest chapters in North Carolina, inspired them to act against segregation. Yet as the sit-ins spread across the South, the national office of the NAACP was deafeningly silent on the matter. Some local chapters offered their support, but when calls for legal aid for the protestors rang out within the growing movement, it was not the NAACP National Office that stepped in to provide assistance. Instead, CORE took up that position in addition to facilitating training workshops in nonviolent, direct-action protest. Hoping to keep control of the situation, the four students reached out to the president of the NAACP's Greensboro chapter, Dr. George Simkins, Jr. Floyd McKissick, a black activist and lawyer from nearby Durham, agreed to serve as legal counsel for the protestors. When Simkins contacted the National Office to inform them of his branch's endorsement of the sit-ins and the plans for their continuation, he was rebuffed and accused of "violating organizational policy." In response, he turned for help to James Farmer, soon-to-be Executive Director of CORE. According to Raymond

⁴¹ Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 22-57.

Arsenault, Simkins's call "sent shock waves through the CORE office" and "'did not endear him' to his NAACP superiors."⁴²

Martin Luther King, Jr. and the SCLC also publicly backed the developing sit-in movement. At a packed rally in Atlanta on February 16, 1960, King called for the protests to continue and implored participants not to fear arrests. "No great victory comes without suffering," he explained, and emphasized black men and women across the South were willing "to fill the jailhouses to be free."⁴³ Ella Baker agreed with King's sentiment. In her estimation, the sit-ins proved the movement had the potential to shift in a militant, grassroots direction. To tap the wellspring of this militant energy, Baker coordinated a leadership conference at Shaw University for two hundred youth leaders to meet and discuss how to build on the momentum of the sit-ins. Frustrated with the SCLC's overly bureaucratic, hierarchical internal structure, its emphasis on top-down, leader-led protest strategies, and the way the organization undervalued the contributions of its female staffers, Baker was all too happy to move on from its ranks in order to encourage the development programs for mass action and grassroots organizing among radical youth. On the final day of the conference, her hopes were realized when the student participants formed their own autonomous organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In her analysis of SNCC's formation, Barbara Ransby explained Baker sought out radical youth possessing passion, creativity, and a "brazen fighting spirit" who she did not want to see "shackled by the bureaucracy of existing organizations." Instead,

⁴²Ibid, p. 85.; William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 79-85.

⁴³"King Lauds Groups for 'Sit-Down' Act," *Chicago Defender*, February 18, 1960.

SNCC's members fashioned themselves community organizers seeking to transform the energy of the sit-ins into militant, grassroots strategies for change.⁴⁴

For Roy Wilkins, the rising tide of direct-action in the South fomented a sense of anxiety rather than excitement. While the Association did not discourage its branches from providing assistance to sit-in participants, it refrained from endorsing the protests or actively encouraging its youth councils to participate in direct-action campaigns. Even though the most treacherous period of the Red Scare was over by 1960, red-baiting remained a crucial tactic employed by Southern officials to discredit and destroy the civil rights organizations. Still smarting from the "invasion" of federal troops into the South during the Little Rock Crisis, Arkansas Representative Dale Alford stood up on the floor of the House in February of 1959 and claimed communists were behind the local NAACP branch's decision to integrate Central High School. Not to be outdone by such lofty accusations, Representative John D. Flynt, Jr. of Georgia argued communist sympathizers were out to "stir up agitation" throughout the South, while Mississippi Representative John Bell Williams lamented the misunderstood region was "the victim of some of the most vicious, malicious propaganda ever seen." In June, Southern Dixiecrats introduced a bill (HR 3) onto the House floor seeking to limit the abilities of federal courts to strike down state laws and brand the NAACP as a subversive organization.⁴⁵

As direct-action campaigns spread, they were plagued with accusations of communist-inspired influence by anti-colonial movements in Africa and India. Seeking to

⁴⁴ Ransby, *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement*, 184-187, 239-247.

⁴⁵ "Alford Blames Reds for Race Troubles in South," *Chicago Defender*, February 18, 1959; "Dixiecrats Using New Tactics, Wilkins Says," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 20, 1959.

shake off accusations of communist infiltration, the National Office jumped at every opportunity to disassociate the Association from the real or perceived intrusion of red elements. In September of 1958, Gloster Current oversaw the dissolution of three NAACP branch units in Chicago. Theodore A. Jones, President of the Chicago branch, publicly indicated the executive action had been taken due to the “possibility of communist infiltration” in the units. Several branch members formed a group to protest the action as untrue and unconstitutional, but Current and the National Office stood by their decision, arguing the dissolution of the branch units had been carried out “in accordance with national branch policy.” Confident in the Association’s ability to eliminate threats of subversion, Wilkins critiqued the Dixiecrat’s HR 3 proposal as a “naked anti-Negro bill” clothed in an “anti-communist garment.”⁴⁶ Threats also included Association members who advocated armed resistance. As Medgar Evers’ decision to arm himself with firearms indicated, the realities of living as a black man or woman in Mississippi meant armed self-defense was considered crucial to survival, but the NAACP had long attempted to discredit violent resistance as a means of achieving civil rights aims.⁴⁷

One advocate of armed resistance was Robert F. Williams, president of the Monroe, North Carolina branch of the NAACP. As a child, Williams witnessed countless acts of violence committed against blacks by whites and returned home from Army

⁴⁶ “New Tactics Used to Halt Racial Advances, Wilkins Tells Nation,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 18, 1959.

⁴⁷ According to John Salter, Evers owned nine firearms. While he agreed that Evers “wasn’t an aggressive practitioner of violence...he certainly believed in his right to keep and bear arms to protect one’s self, one’s family, and one’s home.” Jones interview with John R. Salter, Jr. and Ed King, January 6, 1981, 34, MDAH. For more on the critical role armed resistance played in the Mississippi Black Freedom Movement, see Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013).

service after World War II determined to resist white supremacy. While working as a labor and community organizer, he successfully rebuilt the Monroe chapter after threats and pressures from the white community had reduced its total membership to six. Aware of how apprehensive certain segments of the black middle class were about involvement in the Association, Williams recruited working class and poor blacks in pool halls, beauty parlors, and tenant farming communities. Though the chapter certainly had an element of middle class representation, Williams utilized a grassroots approach to recruit and give voice to anyone who had been abused, mistreated, or imprisoned.⁴⁸ In October of 1957, Williams and other branch members engaged in a shootout with members of the local Klan after conducting a “stand-in” at a swimming pool in the local white country club. At a rally outside Monroe, Klan leader “Catfish” Cole whipped the crowd into a frenzy of bloodlust, arousing fears of NAACP-sponsored interracial mixing that would doom the white race to extinction. After the rally, several Klan members attacked the home of Dr. Albert Perry, a close associate of Williams and Vice-President of the Monroe branch. In response, Williams and his men met the Klan with a return of gunfire, eventually driving them out of the neighborhood.⁴⁹

In 1959, Williams agreed to defend two black male youths, David Simpson and James Thompson, accused of trying to molest three white girls. The case stemmed from the actions of Simpson and Thompson, ages eight and ten respectively, who had playfully

⁴⁸ One of those acts of violence Williams witnessed was the senseless beating of a black woman by local police officer Jesse Helms, Sr., the father of United States Senator Jesse Helms, Jr. Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power*, (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 1-2, 81-82.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 83-89.

engaged in a kissing game with three young white girls. Police arrested the two boys, who were refused the right to legal counsel, convicted of sexual assault, and sentenced to indeterminate terms in the Morrison Training School for Negroes.⁵⁰ Williams called upon the NAACP State and National Offices for help but quickly learned both were leery of taking up a defense of the accused in a sex case. According to historian Timothy Tyson, the NAACP adopted a conservative, distanced approach on issues of “interracial sexuality, knowing that the deep-rooted taboo fueled white resistance to its goals.” Frustrated, Williams set out to publicize the case himself, firing off press releases, calling television networks, and petitioning President Eisenhower to intervene.⁵¹ He also chose to ally himself with the Socialist Workers Party, a Trotskyite group hoping to embolden its program for racial equality that sponsored Williams as he traveled to speak about the boys’ plight in labor-friendly venues across the nation. Eventually, press coverage of the case garnered the attention of the State Department, which quickly condemned Williams’ advocacy as damaging to the image of the United States abroad. Williams responded by stating “if the U.S. government is so concerned about its image abroad, then let it create a society that will stand up under world scrutiny.”⁵²

These actions did not endear Williams to Wilkins, but the final straw that broke the back of his relationship with National Office executives began in May of 1959. In response to the acquittals of two white men who had violently attacked black women,

⁵⁰ Timothy B. Tyson, “Robert F. Williams, ‘Black Power,’ and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (September 1998): 550-553; “Seek Youths Convicted in Monroe, N.C.,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, November, 1958.

⁵¹ “Claim ‘Kissing Kids’ Railroaded: Wait Ike Reply on Kissing Kids,” *Chicago Defender*, November 22, 1958.

⁵² Tyson, “Robert F. Williams,” 553-554.

Williams publicly called for blacks to fight injustice on the spot and if necessary to protect themselves, “be willing to kill if necessary.”⁵³ Predictably, Southern segregationists jumped on his comments as proof the NAACP was engaged in “a revolutionary enterprise.”⁵⁴ In response, Roy Wilkins suspended Williams from the Monroe chapter and issued a press release stating that while black Americans were no longer willing to accept a double standard of justice, the NAACP “has never in its history advocated the use of violence.”⁵⁵ At the NAACP’s annual convention in July, Wilkins bore the brunt of much criticism, mostly stemming from a belief he was hyperfocused on accusations of communist-infiltration and blind to the potential of militant, nonviolent direct-action protests because the largest group associated with them – the SCLC – was threatening the NAACP’s position atop the hierarchy of civil rights organizations.⁵⁶

By the time the sit-ins expanded across the upper regions of the South, NAACP officials could no longer afford to waffle in support of direct-action protests or ignore the militancy and self-empowerment they reinforced in their participants. While the Association sat on its hands, the movement seemed poised to pass into the arms of

⁵³ The first case concerned an accusation of assault by a black hotel maid against a white railroad engineer named B.F. Shaw, who repeatedly kicked the woman in the head and pushed her down the stairs after she had accidentally awakened him from sleep. Though he did not even show up for his court appearance, the judge dropped the charges against Shaw. The second case concerned a sexual assault charge brought by a pregnant black woman named Mary Ruth Reid against a white man named Lewis Medlin. During the trial, the defense attorney strategically placed Medlin’s wife beside him in the courtroom and implored the jury to question how a white man would ever want to leave such a pure white flower for a black woman. The all-white jury took only a few minutes to acquit Medlin of all charges. Ibid, 556-557.

⁵⁴ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 150-151.

⁵⁵ “NAACP Leader Urges ‘Violence,’ North Carolina Aide Makes Statement – Association Quickly Suspends Him,” *New York Times*, May 7, 1959, 22.; Louis Lautier, “NAACP Directors Upheld in Robert F. Williams Case, Union City N.C. Official Suspended for Meeting ‘Violence with Violence’ Stand,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 21, 1959.

⁵⁶ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 153-165; “NAACP Approves Suspension of ‘Fire with Fire’ Branch Head,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 11, 1959.

organizations advocating direct-action such as CORE and the SCLC. Wilkins had no intention of playing second fiddle to those organizations, but wanted no part of protests that might bring about violence surely blamed on revolutionary red elements inside the NAACP. Blessedly, as the sit-ins grew they not only remained overwhelmingly peaceful, but were successful in leading to the desegregation of lunch counters in several cities and towns across the Upper South. Within a month of their inception, the NAACP offered official endorsements of the protests and called for the withholding of trade from any chain stores that refused to serve black customers. At an April 16th speech at a city club forum in Cleveland, Wilkins laid blame for the sit-ins on the system of white supremacy across the South. The youth, he argued, had been forced by repressive patterns of discrimination to stand up and reject Jim Crow through bold, peaceful action.⁵⁷

In Mississippi, Evers watched the sit-ins spread with a sense of excitement. By utilizing independently led, militant tactics, students had further shifted the movement in a direction toward mass action that could not be ignored. Looking to in-state colleges like Alcorn A&M and Tougaloo, Evers hoped the students there would recruit members to the NAACP youth councils, carry out peaceful public demonstrations of their own accord, and embolden fearful members of Mississippi's black communities to join. Yet for all of his excitement, Evers was keenly aware that Mississippi was not the Upper South. While the sit-ins moving across the region had been peaceful up to that point, the level of state-sponsored racial oppression and violent retribution in Mississippi meant there was very

⁵⁷ "Confab Backs Sit-Ins; Spurs Vote Campaign," *Chicago Defender*, April 5, 1960; "South to Blame For Sit-Ins, Wilkins Tells Clevelanders," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 28, 1960.

little guarantee similar demonstrations would be as successful.⁵⁸ C.R. Darden, president of the NAACP Mississippi State Conference of Branches, was apprehensive about the use of direct-action. Notoriously cautious, Darden shied away from aggressive tactics he believed would antagonize whites and lead to additional attacks on the NAACP. He also publicly excoriated Evers, Ruby Hurley, Herb Wright, and Gloster Current for usurping his authority at the NAACP Southeastern Regional Meeting earlier that year by discussing ways of involving Mississippi youth council members in sit-down protests.⁵⁹

The attack on his integrity was no surprise to Evers or members of the State Conference, the latter of whom several demanded an apology from Darden for his comments. But on the danger of incorporating sit-ins across the state, Evers was not indifferent to Darden's concerns. Yet if the Mississippi movement did not move towards the incorporation of direct-action, the possibility of maintaining a spotlight on the state's racial horrors, driving a wedge between factions of the white power structure, and harnessing the militant energy of the youth councils would be diminished. To strike a balance between intensifying the NAACP's efforts and decreasing the chances of violent retaliation, Evers called for a community-led boycott of white owned businesses in the Capitol Street business district during the Easter holiday season. As was the norm across Mississippi, black customers in the district's boutiques, variety stores, and hotels and restaurants were treated in an abusive and undignified manner, refused service until all

⁵⁸ Williams, *Evers*, 176-180.

⁵⁹When he assured conservative members of the State Conference no sit-ins were planned as part of the Jackson boycott, Darden balked at the proposal. He even went so far as to send Gloster Current an official complaint about Evers' conduct, which Darden deemed antagonistic. Myrlie Evers-Williams and Manning Marable, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers, A Hero's Life and Legacy Revealed Through His Writings, Letters, and Speeches*, (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 170-174.

white customers had been helped, and banned from patronizing segregated public facilities including lunch counters.⁶⁰ By encouraging the black community to facilitate and support the boycott, Evers hoped its success would not only strike back against the economic foundations of white supremacy, but lead to increased NAACP memberships and a community willingness to transition toward participation in more direct-action protests in the future.⁶¹

The Jackson boycott lasted a week. Hundreds of students from Campbell as well as nearby Jackson State College and Tougaloo College volunteered to spread word about the event, passing out ten thousand mimeographed handbills and making personal phone calls asking black citizens to avoid shopping in the white-owned businesses.⁶² Expectedly, the *Jackson Daily News* and *Clarion-Ledger* described the boycott a failure led by “a handful of screwball agitators,” but despite these attempts to downplay its impact, the boycott resulted in the loss of revenue for white-owned Capitol Street stores and benefitted Jackson’s black-owned businesses.⁶³ In addition, it united Jackson’s black citizens together in larger numbers than prior NAACP campaigns had done. Predictably, it also grabbed the attention of State Sovereignty Commission officials, who rushed to collect information on as many participants as they could identify.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ O’Brien, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 14-15.

⁶¹ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 176-180; Dittmer, *Local People*, 85-86.

⁶² W.C. Shoemaker, “Jackson Negro Boycott Vowed,” *Jackson Daily News*, April 4, 1960; “Boycott Set Here by Negroes,” *Jackson State Times*, April 4, 1960; “No Demonstrations: Ask Boycott by Negroes,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, April 9, 1960, reprinted in SCR ID # 2-135-0-12-1-1-1, Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, MDAH; Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 180-181.

⁶³ “Boycott Fizzles,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, April 12, 1960, , reprinted in SCR ID # 2-135-0-15-1-1-1, Editorial, *Jackson Daily News*, April 13, 1960, reprinted in SCR ID # 2-135-0-18-1-1-1, Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, MDAH.

⁶⁴Informants infiltrated NAACP meetings and reported boycott participants were not only interested in boycotting white-owned establishments to the benefits of their own businesses, but were also tied to

That the boycott had succeeded despite efforts by the Citizens' Council and Sovereignty Commission to pressure it out of existence was emboldening, and Evers hoped it would encourage further solidarity within Jackson's black community in the days and months ahead. In the meantime, he was heartened by direct-action spreading to the city of Biloxi, where a doctor named Gilbert Mason was leading black residents in "wade-in" protests to desegregate the city's whites only beaches. Ranking slightly below Jackson with a total population of 44,053 residents, around 12% of whom were black, Biloxi boasted a diversified economy, including manufacturing, shipbuilding, and construction industries that drew large numbers of out-of-state employees into the local workforce. The construction of nearby Keesler Air Force base during World War II and the manufacturing of a twenty-six mile stretch of beaches also imbued the area with a federal presence and tourism economy that on its face seemed to facilitate a quieter racial atmosphere, but also made it a hotbed of potential protest as calls for direct-action made their way across the South.⁶⁵

Unlike the Jackson boycott, which promised no public demonstrations, the Biloxi wade-ins were designed to confront beach segregation in the same way sit-ins were used to push back against segregated stores and restaurants. The possibility of violent white backlash was particularly high in Biloxi, where black anxiety over being associated with

NAACP-sponsored voting rights campaigns. They collected the names and financial information of leading boycott participants and passed it on to members of Jackson's Citizens Council. Zach L. Van Landingham "Supplementary Report: Boycott By Negroes, Jackson Mississippi, April 10-17, 1960," April 22, 1960, SCR ID # SCR ID # 2-135-0-22-1-1-1, 2-135-0-22-4-1-1, 2-135-0-22-5-1-1, Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, MDAH; Williams, *Evers*, 180-183.

⁶⁵ J. Michael Butler, "The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and Beach Integration, 1959-1963: A Cotton Patch Gestapo," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (February 2002): 112-113.

the NAACP had damaged the Association's ability to maintain an active branch in the city. When Mason announced the protests, the State Sovereignty Commission immediately opened up investigations to discredit him and other desegregation petitioners as NAACP stooges intent on destroying peaceful race relations in the region.⁶⁶ Acutely aware the future of direct-action and the success of the movement in Mississippi hinged on the NAACP treading carefully in the case, Evers encouraged Mason to take the initiative when he felt the time was right and to contact the national office for bond money.⁶⁷ He was soon horrified to learn a mob of forty white men armed with blackjacks, baseball bats, and chains had brutally attacked the protest participants on the beach. It quickly spilled over into local black neighborhoods, where the white mob moved through the streets striking passersby indiscriminately. Once the violence had subsided, over a dozen were injured and five individuals suffered non-life threatening gunshot wounds. The Biloxi police department feigned ignorance of the scope of the violence and made no arrests, claiming only one patrol car had been sent to the scene with orders to observe the proceedings.⁶⁸

Despite law enforcement's attempts to downplay the severity of the situation, word of the assault spread from local to national news agencies. Shocked by the intensity of the violence, the *New York Times* dubbed the attacks on peaceful black swimmers "the worst racial riot in Mississippi history," accompanied by a photograph of men, women,

⁶⁶ Ibid, 117-118.

⁶⁷ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 183-186.

⁶⁸ "Try to Swim at Mississippi Beach," *Chicago Defender*, April 25, 1960.; "11 Wounded in Biloxi Racial Violence: Swimming in Gulf Sparks Mass Riots," *Chicago Defender*, April 26, 1960; Dittmer, *Local People*, 86-87.

and children fleeing the white mob. To counter the story, Biloxi civic leaders blamed the NAACP for purposely inciting the riot and “acting as an agent of the enemies of the United States” by inspiring and financing demonstrations like the wade-ins with “money from overseas.”⁶⁹ Since the wade-ins had dissolved into the kind of widespread acts of violence and claims of communist infiltration the National Office worked hard to offset, Roy Wilkins vehemently denied charges the NAACP had planned or facilitated the protests. Yet while he stressed a lack of direct involvement, Wilkins appointed Legal Defense Fund attorney Robert L. Carter to oversee the cases of the wade-in participants.⁷⁰ His willingness to enlist the talents of one of the Association’s top attorneys indicated Wilkins was not unaware of the growing efficacy of direct-action or its significance to the movement, but outright endorsements of the protests went a step too far. Evers and Mason wasted no time in capitalizing on Wilkins’s move. Together, they worked to ensure the Biloxi situation garnered the attention of Justice Department officials by gathering affidavits and passing on information that detailed how Biloxi had received federal funds to repair its seawall and build a strip of public beaches after a hurricane struck the area in 1943. In excluding blacks from those beaches, the county and city had violated its contract with the federal government. Evers hoped the information would result in “immediate action” from the Department of Justice and the Civil Rights Commission.⁷¹

⁶⁹ “N.A.A.C.P. Counsel Goes to Defend Biloxi Victims,” *Chicago Defender*, May 4, 1960.

⁷⁰ “Mississippi ‘Swimming’ to Head for the Courts,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 3, 1960.

⁷¹ Medgar Evers to Robert L. Carter, May 5, 1960, Papers of the NAACP Part 20, White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965, Reel 14.

The move quickly paid off. The National Office used the information to form a public campaign challenging segregated public beaches in eleven states from New Jersey to Texas, and on May 17th, the Justice Department brought a suit against Harrison County and the city of Biloxi. The first of its kind, the suit charged that in excluding blacks from its public beaches rebuilt with federal funds, both the city and county had violated federal guidelines.⁷² The Sovereignty Commission responded by quietly vacating its operations on the coast and shifting its attention elsewhere in the state. Though it was by no means neutralized, the Biloxi situation highlighted the Commission's greatest weakness: its efforts were inept in the face of federal power.⁷³ Fueled by such limited yet significant moves forward, Evers took advantage of the reactionary sense of militancy growing within Biloxi's black community. Together with Mason, he established a new NAACP branch in the city and distanced the state office from Gulfport branch president Felix Dunn, who in the aftermath of the wade-in riot met with Sovereignty Commission officials in order to work out a compromise with the city to erect a blacks-only beach.⁷⁴

Splitting from Dunn and denying NAACP involvement in the talks with the Sovereignty Commission openly warned that black "Toms" benefitting from the reinforcement of white supremacy had no place in the Mississippi movement. Those who facilitated a culture of fear and self-loathing only retarded progress, and Evers remained steadfast in his belief that the movement could not survive unless its black communities

⁷² "Mississippi Beaches Challenged by Local Government," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 22, 1960; "U.S. Sues to Open Biloxi Beach to All," *New York Times*, May 18, 1960.

⁷³ Butler, "The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and Beach Integration," 138-139, 145-148.

⁷⁴ Prior to that point in time, fears of white reprisal made the establishment of an active branch all but impossible. However, after the attacks on wade-in protestors, many of Biloxi's black residents viewed the NAACP as a useful tool in their fight to integrate the beaches. Williams, *Evers*, 185-186.

took the initiative to confront the forces of white supremacy head on.⁷⁵ Several members of the Mississippi NAACP State Board agreed. No longer content to adhere to C.R. Darden's conservative stance, the board elected Aaron Henry its new president.⁷⁶ Henry openly advocated a more militant style of protest and was not afraid to aggressively speak out against the Association's enemies. At an RCNL meeting earlier in the year, Henry stood up and accused B.L. Bell of acting as a Sovereignty Commission informant. Bell denied the accusation, but Henry's public criticism concerned Zach Van Landingham. The Commission could not afford to have its conduit of paid informants cut off, particularly in light of the militancy growing among Mississippi's black youth.⁷⁷

Van Landingham's concerns were well founded. In a letter to a Mr. Carter of New York on March 15, 1961, Evers excitedly wrote of helping Tougaloo youth council members plan direct-action protests against public parks, libraries, bus terminals, and other conveyances. He hoped to rely on the National Office for legal help in defending the protest participants, tying the militant zeal of the students to the organizational resources of the NAACP. On March 27, 1961, nine students were arrested for conducting a sit-in at the Jackson Public Library. The next morning, fifty students marched to the city jail in solidarity with the "Tougaloo Nine." As they neared the building, the marchers

⁷⁵ "No Compromise in Mississippi," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 7, 1960; Butler, "The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and Beach Integration," 136-137.

⁷⁶ Dittmer, *Local People*, 87.

⁷⁷In an internal memo, Van Landingham suggested the Commission consider replacing Bell on the payroll if Henry continued his attacks. The Commission also opened up investigations into Henry's financial transactions in the hopes of locating proof of tax law violations as a means of discrediting him. However, investigators struggled to pin down anything they could use in their campaign against the new state president. Zach L. Van Landingham, "Memo to File 9-9, Subject B.L. Bell," January 26, 1960, SCR ID # 2-2-0-56-1-1-1, 2-2-0-56-2-1-1, "Memo to File, Aaron Henry," February 23, 1960, SCR ID # 1-16-1-35-1-1-1, 1-16-1-35-2-1-1, Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, MDAH.

were attacked by police officers armed with clubs, tear gas, and trained dogs.⁷⁸ The following day, violence erupted again outside the courthouse when peacefully assembled protestors broke into applause as the nine arrested students were escorted from the courtroom, prompting another unprovoked attack by law enforcement when a police officer yelled “move ‘em out!” Evers, who was among the injured in the melee, issued an angry press response detailing how “women and children in the group were beaten unmercifully” and denouncing the police state tactics of Jackson’s law enforcement.⁷⁹ In New York, Roy Wilkins responded with a public attack of his own. Branding the Jackson police “attackers rather than protectors” who instigated violence as a means to demonize peaceful protestors as criminals, he labeled Ross Barnett a modern day Simon Legree and demanded the governor “call off the dogs” because “slavery is over.”⁸⁰

The Jackson library sit-in was a watershed event in the Mississippi movement. Myrlie Evers deemed it the moment “Negroes took the offensive in the struggle for citizenship.”⁸¹ The willingness of Mississippi’s black youth to carry out a direct-action protest reflected a growing sense of militancy and community solidarity Evers had tirelessly worked to promote. It also forced the NAACP National Office to sit up and accept that Mississippi would not be left behind in the national movement. Two weeks

⁷⁸ The Mr. Carter in Evers’s letter was most likely Robert Carter. Williams, *Medgar Evers*, p. 197.; M. Curry, “Sit-in Demonstration at the Jackson Municipal Library by Students at Tougaloo Christian College, Jackson, Miss,” April 1, 1961, SCR ID # 2-55-2-3-1-1-1, 2-55-2-3-2-1-1, Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, MDAH; “9 Seized at Sit-in at Jackson, Miss.,” *New York Times*, March 28, 1961; Dittmer, *Local People*, 87-89.

⁷⁹ “Police Halt March by Negro Students in Mississippi,” *New York Times*, March 29, 1961; “Police and Dogs Rout 100 Negroes: Clash Occurs at Courthouse in Mississippi Where 9 Students Are Convicted,” *New York Times*, March 30, 1961; “Dogs, Clubs Used on Negroes, Ask Whites to Leave,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 30, 1961.

⁸⁰ “Use Clubs on Negro Crowd,” *Chicago Defender*, March 30, 1961.

⁸¹ Evers-Williams, *For Us the Living*, 235.

after the sit-in, Evers and Henry met with a somewhat reluctant Wilkins in New York City to formulate 'Operation Mississippi,' a nationwide campaign to publicize the police attacks and mobilize political support to pressure state officials to end racial discrimination.⁸² Evers embarked on a speaking tour to NAACP chapters across the country, financial contributions poured in, and Attorney General Burke Marshall ordered an investigation by the Department of Justice and FBI into reports of police assaults on protesters.⁸³ Hoping to avoid additional federal interference, Sovereignty Commission officials responded by doubling down on their own public relations efforts. Members of its speakers' bureau were sent North to remind audiences that Evers and the NAACP were subversives and that "Negroes receive better treatment and more consideration of their welfare in Mississippi than in any state in the nation."⁸⁴

Though Sovereignty Commission officials hoped that refracting white supremacy through a Cold War prism could offset the threat of federal action, their strategy highlighted the growing probability of the reverse occurring. In April of 1961, President Kennedy found himself facing harsh criticism from several members of the United Nations Afro-Asian bloc after United States-backed insurgents failed to overthrow the

⁸² The campaign zeroed in on Jackson law enforcement as "not protectors but attackers," even linking the German police dogs used against protesters to a former Nazi SS officer living in Pittsburgh who specialized in "hate Negro training." Alfredo Graham, "Ex-Nazi Trained Mississippi Dogs in Pittsburgh," April 15, 1961; "NAACP Launches Mississippi Campaign," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 22, 1961; "Along the NAACP Battlefield: Mississippi Meeting," *The Crisis*, Vol. 68, No. 5 (May 1961): 291-293.

⁸³ "Fort Worth NAACP First With Funds for Mississippi," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 19, 1961; "U.S. Probing Violence in Mississippi," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 8, 1961.

⁸⁴ "Sit-in Demonstration at the Jackson Municipal Library by students at Tougaloo Christian College, Jackson, MS," April 1, 1961, SCR ID # 2-55-2-3-1-1-1, 2-55-2-3-2-1-1, "Investigative Period, April 4, 1961," April 11, 1961, SCR ID # 2-55-2-5-1-1-1, 2-55-2-5-2-1-1, Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records, 1994-2006, MDAH.; Claude Sitton, "Mississippi Backs Citizens Councils: State Agency Continues Aid to Foster Segregation," *New York Times*, March 31, 1961.

Cuban regime of Fidel Castro during the Bay of Pigs invasion.⁸⁵ Long critical of United States race relations, Castro and his supporters linked Cuba's revolution to the larger struggles of people of color around the world, declared solidarity with nationalist movements in Africa, and pointed out the hypocrisy of the United States demonizing communist governments as dangerous and repressive when it did nothing to ensure free elections across the American South. Black citizens ruthlessly beaten on public beaches as Sovereignty Commission officials red-baited and droned on about the tranquil state of race relations did nothing but hinder the image of power, stability, and strong leadership an embarrassed Kennedy administration worked to foster in the aftermath of the Cuban fiasco. The biggest hindrance to American foreign policy goals remained the scourge of white supremacy at home, and nowhere was that scourge more severely entrenched than in Mississippi. *Pittsburgh Courier* editorialist Eric Springer best summed up the ridiculousness of the situation when he proposed the United States ease Cold War tensions by trading Mississippi to Russia in exchange for a Siberian salt mine.⁸⁶

Dark humor aside, the inception of Operation Mississippi ensured the state would play a visible role within the larger movement. Evers also hoped the NAACP was warming up to the idea of direct-action as its participants – including a growing number of youth council members- also embarked on voter registration drives, desegregation campaigns, and amassed affidavits on police brutality. The path to success in Operation

⁸⁵ Aside from placing racial liberals in key administrative positions, Kennedy preferred to implement the Peace Corps as a way of improving the image of the United States abroad and working to spread American values in the Third World. Doing so avoided the legislative gridlock threatened by Southern obstructionists in the Senate. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 157-159; Apartheid South Africa was the only African nation to support the United States invasion of Cuba. Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 143-144.

⁸⁶ Eric Springer, "Civil Wrongs...and Your Rights," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 6, 1961.

Mississippi was via a consistent application of planned pressure, and Evers was prepared to pile it on. Mississippi was no British colony, but it was certainly the jewel in the crown of a Jim Crow empire. Evers had come to understand that embodying the spirit of the Mau Mau in Mississippi did not require leading a violent insurrection. Rather, it entailed creative planning to inspire the masses to force the world to reckon with their oppression. As the state-wide operation got underway, four members of the Inter-collegiate chapter of the Jackson NAACP followed this lead, initiating a “ride-in” on Jackson’s public buses. Evers was excited by their willingness to take action, and also happy that the National Office asked him to gather information on the bus company for a planned protest. According to Michael Vinson Williams, this “demonstrated that the pressure Evers placed on the NAACP leadership to act more forcefully had begun bearing fruit.”⁸⁷

This strategy was not without its challenges. As Operation Mississippi grew, so did the state’s visibility and designation as the final frontier of Jim Crow. By mid-summer 1961, outside organizations impelled by direct-action successes and the NAACP’s call to arms targeted the state for its own campaigns. As volunteers from SNCC and SCLC fanned out from Jackson into the surrounding regions, they built upon the groundwork laid by Evers and the state office, connecting to the youth councils and encouraging their members to undertake direct-action efforts of their own. However, as the Mississippi movement expanded, it ran the risk of growing disunity and instability. To counter these hazards, Evers adjusted strategies on the ground and facilitated inter-organizational communication to maintain momentum and morale in the repressive atmosphere of

⁸⁷ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 203-205.

institutionalized white backlash. In the process, his own philosophy of resistance underwent further transformation that placed him at a crossroads with NAACP leadership. Influenced by the success of direct-action and the energy of the youth he had worked tirelessly to connect to the civil right struggle, Evers envisioned a future devoid of organizational barriers to change. Perhaps no event better represented the beginning of this shift than the Freedom Rides.

In December of 1960, the United States Supreme Court handed down a decision in *Boynton v. Virginia* that held racial segregation in entities catering to interstate travelers, including restrooms, lunch counters, and waiting rooms, was unconstitutional. *Boynton* was a positive legal victory for Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP, but just as they had after *Brown*, many government officials, organizations, and businesses across the South refused to enforce the decision. In response, members of CORE declared their intention to embark on “Freedom Rides” across the South. Rooted in an earlier CORE project called the Journey of Reconciliation, a 1947 effort by sixteen participants to challenge Southern resistance to *Morgan*, the Freedom Rides called for interracial groups of passengers to ride interstate buses and patronize facilities that continued to uphold segregation statutes. While this type of direct-action protest was not new, it was deliberately confrontational. According to historian Raymond Arsenault, Riders purported to incite “a crisis of authority” and understood “their actions would almost certainly provoke a savage and violent response from militant white supremacists.” The decision to so openly defy custom for the cause of racial justice, Arsenault added, meant

“the civil rights struggle reached a level of intensity that even the sit-ins, potentially the most disruptive episode of the pre-1961 era, had managed to avoid.”⁸⁸

The architect of the Freedom Rides was CORE National Director James Farmer, Jr. Raised in East Texas and educated at Wiley College, Farmer gravitated toward radical politics and social ethics before taking a job in Chicago as Race Relations Secretary at the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a Christian pacifist organization intent on fostering social justice through nonviolent resistance. In 1942, FOR expanded its framework to include the facilitation of interracial direct-action protests to combat racial segregation and became CORE. As National Director, Farmer’s organizational goals were ambitious, and no better example existed than the Freedom Rides. In April of 1961, Farmer announced the Riders would consist of CORE and SNCC members and commence their journeys in May, delving as far South as Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Unlike the Journey of Reconciliation, women were allowed to participate in the Freedom Rides, but were restricted to separate buses from the men. In the days before their departure, Farmer spoke with Roy Wilkins, who questioned if CORE was going to follow through on its proposed “joy ride.” Annoyed by Wilkins’ underhanded description but not wanting to burn bridges with the NAACP leader, Farmer affirmed the Freedom Riders were prepared to set off with no delay.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ The decision built upon a precedent set by the Court in the 1946 case *Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia*, which stated racially segregating interstate passengers in motor travel was a violation of the Interstate Commerce Clause. For their actions, the participants in the Journey of Reconciliation were routinely harassed, threatened, and arrested. Ella Baker, who had recently resigned as NAACP Director of Branches and moved back to New York City, had planned to participate but was disappointed to learn riders were restricted to men for safety reasons. Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, pp. 3, 22-53.

⁸⁹ “Freedom Ride Will Test Bus Service,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 8, 1961; Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 109.

Wilkins' critical reaction to CORE's announcement reflected his conservatism regarding direct-action and his suspicion of other civil rights organizations, but his fears of escalating violent reprisal were not unfounded. In South Carolina, SNCC leaders John Lewis, Al Bigelow, and Genevieve Hughes were beaten after exiting their bus and entering a whites only waiting room. On the highway outside Aniston, Alabama, one bus was firebombed by almost two hundred white men. When passengers tried to escape, the mob attempted to trap them inside the bus until one of the Riders pulled out a pistol and forced the door open. Another bus was met in Birmingham by a mob of Klansman alerted to its arrival by local law enforcement. The scene was horrific. Dozens of Riders were badly beaten, some nearly to death. Even so, it did not deter their desire to continue their journey. The Riders planned to continue on to Montgomery, but they needed proper police protection to make it safely. Alabama Governor John Patterson refused to provide it, arguing the protests were the work of outside agitators stirring up trouble. In the meantime, news agencies relayed images of the mob violence around the world. Once again, the ugliness of American race relations was front and center on the international stage.⁹⁰

Kennedy administration officials were livid. This was the kind of situation they wished to avoid. The possibility of more violence, coupled with the political showdown any federal intervention would bring, was not what Kennedy wanted to concentrate on heading into a Vienna summit meeting with Nikita Khrushchev in June. The plot thickened when Attorney General Robert Kennedy learned that the FBI had information

⁹⁰ "Bi-Racial Buses Attacked, Riders Beaten in Alabama," *New York Times*, May 15, 1961; "FBI Probes Bus Riots in Alabama," *Chicago Defender*, May 16, 1961; Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 162-165.

about the Klan plot to attack the Freedom Riders before they arrived in Birmingham, but had not alerted Justice Department officials. One of the FBI informants had even participated in the violence, gleefully beating several Riders within an inch of their lives.⁹¹ Aware he could not stand by and do nothing, the President advised Robert Kennedy to handle the matter. Fearful that prolonging the situation would only lead to further bloodshed, the Riders agreed to leave Birmingham and fly to New Orleans by plane, bringing their journey to an end. The situation had seemingly been diffused.⁹²

But the Freedom Rides were not finished. SNCC members active in the Nashville movement joined with John Lewis in a call to resume the protests. When they continued into Alabama a few days later, they were arrested in Birmingham under the auspices of “protective custody” and driven to the Tennessee line. Undeterred, they returned to Birmingham by private car and prepared to resume the Rides. Anxious to get them out of Birmingham, the Kennedy administration worked out a deal with Governor Patterson to ensure the Riders’ bus was safely escorted to Montgomery by the Alabama Highway Patrol. When they arrived, all hell broke loose. No police presence was visible at the Montgomery terminal, offering up the Riders to a bloodthirsty mob. Armed with baseball bats and iron pipes, the unruly crowd attacked with specificity, targeting the Freedom Riders and any journalists who tried to stop the melee, injuring over twenty, some to the

⁹¹ Given J. Edgar Hoover’s history of red-baiting civil rights activists, the Bureau’s lack of action was likely more surprising to the Kennedys than it was to anyone active in the movement. Dittmer, *Local People*, 89.

⁹² Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 165-176.

point of near-death. Not even Justice Department officials were spared in the violence.

John Seigenthaler, Assistant to the Attorney General, was beaten unconscious.⁹³

Though only a few months into his presidential term, Kennedy was face to face with a local-turned national civil rights crisis he could not ignore in an international Cold War environment he could not control. The violence meted out to Freedom Riders was typical of the vigilante-style “justice” celebrated by white officials and white citizens alike, and the response of Alabama Governor John Patterson, who publicly bemoaned the presence of “agitators” and reiterated that state officials needed no help from the federal government in maintaining the law, was typical of the Jim Crow South. The ball was effectively in the Kennedy administration’s court, and with the clock winding down toward Vienna, the president begrudgingly sent federal marshals into Alabama.⁹⁴ For the Freedom Riders and their supporters, this move indicated possible progress, but they quickly learned the situation was far from deescalating. The arrival of Martin Luther King, Jr. on the scene to support the Freedom Riders inflamed the anger of Patterson and Montgomery’s segregationist devotees, the latter of whom formed an angry mob and attacked both the marshals and the Montgomery church they were guarding as a community prayer meeting was held inside. Desperate to avoid further federal

⁹³ “Kennedy Administration Moves to Stop Alabama ‘Freedom Rider’ Violence: Montgomery Bus Station Scene of Mass Disorder,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 21, 1961; “President’s Representative Suffers Attack,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 21, 1961; “Freedom Riders Attacked by Whites in Montgomery,” *New York Times*, May 21, 1961; “US Official is Knocked Unconscious, Montgomery Police Break Up Scuffles with Tear Gas,” *Washington Post*, May 21, 1961; Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 209-221.

⁹⁴ “US Marshals Ordered to Alabama to Curb Riots; Mob Attacks Bi-Racial Bus Riders in Montgomery,” *Baltimore Sun*, May 21, 1961; “Kennedy Orders Marshals to Alabama After New Freedom-Rider Mobbing,” *Washington Post*, May 21, 1961.

intervention and restore what authority he could, Patterson declared martial law and mobilized the national guard to help marshals disperse the mob.⁹⁵

The following day, both the Kennedy administration and Patterson – hyperaware of the potential political fallout - employed damage control. Kennedy spun the story as one of successful state and federal government coordination to diffuse a difficult situation caused by provocation on both sides, while Patterson praised his response to unwanted intrusion by the marshals.⁹⁶ Both were unsurprising responses given their respective political concerns. The Kennedy administration supported the legal arguments of the Freedom Riders but balked at its direct-action efforts as overtly provocative, while Patterson championed himself a staunch defender of white supremacy forced into an untenable situation by the federal government. But despite their efforts to state the contrary, there was no turning back from the path the Freedom Riders were carving out for themselves, nor could their actions be divorced from the growing influence of direct-action on the movement and its impact on the nation’s standing in the international arena. Just as they had after Little Rock, the Russians had a field day printing stories of beaten bus passengers in their state-run newspapers, referring to the violent incidents as examples of the “wild, bestial mores in a country pretending to teach others how to live.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ “Montgomery Under Martial Law; Troops Called After New Riot; Marshals and Police Fight Mob,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1961; Anthony Lewis, “Alabama Asks U.S. Help as New Violence Erupts,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1961.

⁹⁶ Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 229-245.

⁹⁷ “Russians Scornful: Refer to Alabama Violence as ‘Bestial’ US Custom,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1961, 22.

Evers certainly understood the reality of publicizing such hypocrisy first-hand, and he kept a watchful eye on the situation in Alabama as he continued shepherding the Mississippi movement forward. Following the library sit-in, black youth implemented direct-action protests including an effort to integrate the Jackson public zoo and a movie theatre in Vicksburg. The entrance of the Freedom Riders into Mississippi reinforced that growing sense of militancy, but the possibility of violent pushback akin to or worse than what had occurred in Montgomery threatened to shake the tenuous bonds of solidarity that had developed among the city's black community in the wake of the Easter boycott. The stakes were high, and Evers was reticent about Mississippi's readiness for the probable confrontation between activists and rabid segregationists threatening death to the Riders when they crossed state lines. This was reiterated by Roy Wilkins, who warned the Freedom Riders not to continue their journey into the Magnolia State, or at least to postpone it until a later date. Still, Evers knew the spirit of the Freedom Riders represented the 'no gains without pressure' direction the movement was headed, and Mississippi could not be left behind.⁹⁸

In comparison to Patterson, Mississippi authorities were better prepared for the onslaught of outside agitators headed into their state, largely due to the Kennedy's administration's efforts to avoid a repeat of the mob violence in Alabama. Unable to convince the Freedom Riders to accept his call for "a cooling-off period" and hoping not to set off new waves of violence by mobilizing federal marshals to Mississippi, Robert Kennedy made a deal with Governor Barnett. In return for their safe passage and

⁹⁸ John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 164; Dittmer, *Local People*, 90-99.

protection, the White House agreed not to enforce the *Boynton* ruling nor interfere in the state's plans to have the Freedom Riders arrested for breach of peace. The decision certainly fit the administration's pattern of prioritizing foreign policy concerns over civil rights protections, but it did nothing to stop more Riders from journeying into Mississippi and willingly filling jails. If anything, it emboldened the movement to continue and expand. Each day, another bus carrying Riders pulled in to the Jackson terminal, bringing the total incarcerated to over three-hundred by summer's end. Law enforcement authorities began transferring the jailed activists to penal farms, including the notorious Parchman Penitentiary. Riders transferred there endured cruel and demeaning treatment at the hands of guards, including being confined to their cells for twenty-four hours a day in the maximum-security wing.⁹⁹

Frustration over the mass incarceration of the Freedom Riders carried over into inter-organizational disputes inside the movement and troubled Evers. In a special report to the National Office on the status of the Freedom Rides, he noted the aggressiveness of CORE representatives in setting up community workshops without NAACP coordination. Far from being rooted in petty organizational competitiveness, Evers' concerns were underpinned by his belief that sustainable direct-action in Mississippi required patient, deliberate strategizing by the Association. While he viewed SNCC and CORE members as welcome additions to the fight for civil rights, their lack of organizational experience in Mississippi left them vulnerable to damaging mistakes that threatened to overturn

⁹⁹ Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 272-276, 316-317, 339.

NAACP gains within the black community.¹⁰⁰ Another problem was funding. CORE sponsored the Freedom Rides, but bond money for jailed Riders was in short supply. Though their actions were not officially sanctioned by the NAACP, Evers' office provided arrested Riders with bail money, often to the detriment of its coffers.¹⁰¹

Tactical frustrations aside, the pressures placed on federal authorities by the Freedom Riders succeeded in compelling the Kennedy administration to ask the Interstate Commerce Commission to step in and ban segregation in interstate transport in November of 1961. For the Riders who had placed their lives on the line and endured some of the most cruel and demeaning treatment imaginable in Mississippi's penitentiaries, the ICC ruling was a substantial victory to build on. Yet Kennedy remained reluctant to utilize his enforcement powers for fear of further alienating Southern Democrats whose support he still required for his legislative agenda. Because of this, he encouraged the development of the Voter Registration Project (VEP), coordinated by the Southern Regional Council, to disseminate funds to civil rights organizations including the NAACP and SNCC. In emphasizing his support for voter registration, Kennedy hoped to shift attention away from direct-action protests. However, there was also no denying the continuing influence of the Freedom Rides on Mississippi's black youth. One month after the first buses arrived, four Tougaloo students were arrested and jailed for organizing a home-grown Freedom Ride in Jackson. Despite the best efforts of

¹⁰⁰ These mistakes were both organizational and cultural in manner. SNCC and CORE representatives sometimes struggled to honor proper hierarchical structures within the state's black communities, prompting rebuffing from community leaders who felt their authority had been bypassed by outsiders. Dittmer, *Local People*, 117; Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 218-219.

¹⁰¹ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 208-209.

state-sponsored propaganda campaigns to demonize the activists as outside agitators, the “Tougaloo Four” were anything but.¹⁰²

Maintaining momentum and serving as a connective agent between the NAACP and the younger generation inspired to carry out direct-action was an important aspect of Evers’ transforming philosophy of activism, as was minimizing missteps. To generate solutions to these problems, Evers approached them in his own Mau Mau fashion. He altered the NAACP’s strategic approach to fit the changing environment by reviving the defunct Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a coalition of all civil rights organizations in the state. At a February 1962 meeting in Jackson at the behest of Evers, he and Aaron Henry, Bob Moses of SNCC, and Field Secretary Tom Gaither of CORE transformed COFO into an organization that gave the evolving Mississippi movement a unified image and funding arm. Through COFO, funds were appropriated from the VEP and disseminated out to member organizations for registration campaigns and to pay volunteers – mostly SNCC field workers - meager salaries.¹⁰³ The offering of VEP funds had been designed by the Kennedy administration to offset direct-action, but ultimately the funds covered them as support for the protests grew among Mississippi’s black youth. By committing the state office to COFO, Evers and Henry positioned the NAACP as a coordinating entity despite their continued frustrations with SNCC’s encroachment into

¹⁰² Yvonne Ryan, *Roy Wilkins: Quiet Revolutionary and the NAACP*, (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2014), 62; Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 333.

¹⁰³ “Stronger Civil Rights; Better Race Relations: Action by Kennedy Called for in 18 Key Proposals,” *Atlanta Daily World*, January 13, 1961; Dittmer, *Local People*, 118-120.

territory they felt the NAACP had gradually begun infiltrating, including the communities of the Delta.¹⁰⁴

Their concerns were well founded. As they canvassed the state, SNCC volunteers quickly learned how difficult their goals of registering black voters would be. Bob Moses, with the aid and advice of NAACP official Amzie Moore, initiated a voter registration projects that included workshops on passing literacy tests and conducting non-violent protests. They attracted many black students inspired by the movement's shift toward direct-action, and eventually evolved into sit-ins at bus terminals and department stores in the Delta region. For their efforts, they endured violence and arrests for breach of peace. This violence included the September 1961 murder of Herbert Lee, a black farmer, NAACP member, and SNCC volunteer shot to death in Amite County by E.H. Hurst, a member of the Mississippi state legislature. Hurst claimed he shot Lee in self-defense during an argument over money, but a black eyewitness named Louis Allen claimed he saw Hurst kill Lee in cold blood. Allen feared reprisal for telling the truth, and when giving testimony had corroborated Hurst's story out of fear. Hurst walked away from a murder scot-free and from that point forward, Louis Allen wore a target on his back.¹⁰⁵ As Evers well understood, an organizational apparatus in a state of flux was little match for the full force of the state's white power structure. Building on the foundation constructed by the NAACP was imperative for SNCC, but pushing too fast had the potential to frighten the black community back into silence.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ *Medgar Evers*, 221-222.

¹⁰⁵ "Free Miss. Lawmaker Who Killed Negro," *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 27, 1961; Dittmer, *Local People*, 109-110.

¹⁰⁶ Carson, *In Struggle*, 48-51.

That the Mississippi movement did not collapse under the weight of these challenges was a testament to Evers' fortitude and abilities to alter strategy on the ground while holding to the spirit of his original intent in joining the NAACP. COFO provided its members with a crucial space for communication and sharing, as well as serving as a collective mouthpiece for the state's civil rights organizations when dealing with white officials. While the national office remained wary of other civil rights organizations operating in the state, Evers considered supporting the members of NAACP youth councils working with SNCC and CORE paramount to the movement's evolution in Mississippi. According to Michael Vinson Williams, the growth of direct-action campaigns provided black youth "an opportune time to organize and participate in the struggle as soldiers of liberation rather than spectators of fortune."¹⁰⁷

One of those young people was James Meredith. A native of Attala County, his early life and personality somewhat mirrored Evers. Meredith was a U.S. Air Force vet who had looked up to his father, a registered voter with a reputation for not backing down to whites. Inspired by "a new spirit" sweeping through the state's black communities, he told Evers of his plans to apply at the University of Mississippi at Oxford. Evers promised him legal aid, but after alerting the National Office learned the NAACP remained averse to challenging segregation in higher education in Mississippi. Thurgood Marshall was irked by Evers' offer of support, not only because it had not been cleared by the National Office first, but also because he believed integrating Ole Miss was still as risky as it had been when Evers wanted to enroll a decade earlier. Meredith took this as a

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 226.

sign that the NAACP was of no use to him, but Evers hoped integration of Ole Miss would inspire black community support for NAACP voter registration and desegregation efforts across the state. Only after he carefully massaged the situation, which included him serving as a mediating voice on phone calls between Meredith and Marshall, did the Legal Defense Fund agree to take the case. Not only did Evers guarantee the NAACP backed Meredith, but his actions were another example of his growing willingness to challenge the National Office on matters deemed too dangerous to consider.¹⁰⁸

Steeped in lost cause mythology, the institutional identity of Ole Miss was revered as a powerful symbol of segregation, especially in the era of post-*Brown* massive resistance. Efforts by Ole Miss officials and state representatives to repeatedly block registration attempts bolstered this reality.¹⁰⁹ However, the pressures exerted on Mississippi's white power structure via direct-action protests revealed growing fissures between the Sovereignty Commission and the citizens' councils. In a May 1962 commencement address entitled "The Practical Way to Maintain a Separate School System in Mississippi," Sovereignty Commission Public Relations Director Erle Johnston bemoaned the presence of "militant hot heads of both races" as barriers to racial

¹⁰⁸ Charles W. Eagles, *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 219; "Negro's Suit Asks Entry at Mississippi U: Hits Requirement of O.K. By 5 Alumni," *Chicago Tribune*, June 1, 1961; "Negro Files Suit for Admission to All-White U. of Mississippi," *New York Times*, June 1, 1961; "Set June 12 for Hearing on Bias at U. of Miss," *Chicago Defender*, June 3, 1961; "Sues to Enter University of Mississippi," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 10, 1961; William Doyle, *An American Insurrection: James Meredith and the Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 31.

¹⁰⁹ These barriers included refusing Meredith's application because he did not have five recommendations from university alumni and transfer credits from institutions affiliated with the Southern Association of Colleges, and jailing him for allegedly violating state law in falsely registering as a voter in a county he did reside in. "Court of Appeals to Hear Miss. U. Admission Case," *Atlanta Daily World*, January 6, 1962; "Negro in Integration Suit Jailed in Mississippi Case," *New York Times*, June 7, 1962.

harmony. Evers condemned the speech, as did Citizens' Council leaders who deemed it a conciliatory nod to eventual integration. Jackson County Council President Clarence W. McGowen went so far as to suggest the Commission was "infiltrated by our enemies" and called for its elimination. Johnston's speech was publicly endorsed by only one elected administrative official, William F. Winter, a notable moderate on race relations. Undeterred by the unpopularity of his position, Johnston hit back at the Councils, denouncing them as power-hungry entities whose "chief objective in Mississippi now appears to be making white people hate other white people."¹¹⁰

While the situation did not bear resemblance to the Hola Massacre, it derived a strategic principal from that tragic event modified to fit the situation in Mississippi. Forcing federal intervention had the potential to continue driving wedges between the white power structure over the issue of "bad publicity" in a similar fashion. Meredith well understood this. In an interview given three decades after the ordeal, he maintained the Kennedy administration "would do nothing on my agenda" if they were not compelled to employ troops against Mississippi's state forces.¹¹¹ One month after Johnston delivered his address, the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals issued a ruling in his case that made it possible for Meredith to sow that discord across state-federal lines and in the halls of the Jackson statehouse. Reversing a lower court decision, the Fifth Circuit Court affirmed Meredith had been denied entry into Ole Miss because of his race

¹¹⁰ Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and State's Rights*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 97-100.

¹¹¹ Katagiri interview with James H. Meredith, January 11, 1984, MDAH, excerpted in Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission*, 104.

and ordered an injunction forcing the university to admit him as a student.¹¹² In a response aired statewide on television and radio, Governor Barnett labeled the situation the biggest crisis in Mississippi since the Civil War, declared social integration a step toward genocide, and reassured white citizens he would stand firm the “naked and arbitrary power” of the federal government.¹¹³ Barnett’s bloviating intended to pressure the Kennedy administration to back down from possible intervention just as much as it was to stir his segregationist base. In Washington, the president and his staff searched for ways to avoid another federal-state showdown that might dissolve into violence and would certainly complicate his bid for renomination in 1964.¹¹⁴

But Meredith was determined to force the Kennedy administration to employ troops to help him successfully desegregate the university, and the NAACP backed his strategy, declaring anything less than federal military intervention in Mississippi “strengthens the hand of racists there and everywhere.”¹¹⁵ Though the situation was rapidly escalating, tensions still running high from the Johnston dust-up influenced Barnett’s decision to keep the Sovereignty Commission largely on the sidelines during the Ole Miss affair.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, attorney and Sovereignty Commission Thomas

¹¹² “Court Orders U. of Mississippi to Admit Negro Undergraduate,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1962; “‘Ole Miss’ Must Admit Negro,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 30, 1962; “Court Tells ‘Miss.’ to Open Univ.,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 7, 1962; “Writ is Ordered to Open Mississippi U. to Negro,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, June 26, 1962.

¹¹³ “Barnett Defies Federal Court on Mississippi U. Integration,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1962; “Mississippi Preparing to Defy Federal Court,” *Atlanta Daily World*, September 15, 1962; James E. Clayton, “Greatest Test Since the Civil War Takes Place in Mississippi,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, September 23, 1962; John R. Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 40-41.

¹¹⁴ Theodore Sorenson to John F. Kennedy. Memorandum for the President, Subject: Mississippi and Meredith. 28 Sept., 1962. Subject Files, 1/20/1961 - 11/22/1963. Papers of John F. Kennedy: Presidential Papers: President's Office Files, 1/20/1961 - 11/22/1963. National Archives.

¹¹⁵ “N.A.A.C.P. Calls for Action,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1962.

¹¹⁶ McMillen, *The Citizens’ Council*, 342.

Watkins, an attorney with a reputation as a reasonable negotiator, was instrumental in crafting a solution that would concede to federal intervention yet help Barnett save face. This included a suggestion that Meredith register by entering through the back door of the registrar's office while Barnett stood guard at the front, allowing the governor to claim he was misled by the Kennedy administration. Ultimately, Barnett balked at this plan after attending the Ole Miss-Kentucky game, where thousands of football fans praised his defense of segregation.¹¹⁷ President Kennedy responded by federalizing the Mississippi National Guard to campus, after which a bloody riot broke out when a mob of armed segregationists pelted the soldiers with rocks and bottles. By the time federal marshals were dispatched and order was restored, scores were injured and two people were dead.¹¹⁸

Once again, the Kennedy administration found itself compelled to intervene in the South. By forcing federal intervention, Meredith's enrollment had broken another significant barrier to black equality in Mississippi and fortified the importance of American race relations in its foreign policy. Overseas, newspapers stretching from England to India followed the story, highlighting American hypocrisy and questioning the federal government's concerns for its black citizens.¹¹⁹ However, after he ordered federal troops into Mississippi, accounts overwhelmingly praised Kennedy's handling of

¹¹⁷Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission*, 106.

¹¹⁸ "Mississippi Surrenders!" *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 1, 1962; "Two Slain in Riot of Miss. Students," *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 1962; Thomas Buckley, "Tear Gas and Sticks Repel Wild Student Charges," *New York Times*, October 1, 1962.

¹¹⁹ The Paris newspaper *L'Aurore* mocked the United States as a "so-called model civilization" where "people still distinguish between their kind according to the color of their skin" while the Soviet *Isvestia* claimed the U.S. government had "shamelessly capitulated" to rabid segregationists. "Mississippi Reaction in Europe Press," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 30., 1962.

the crisis, with the Swedish newspaper *Stokhoms-Tidningen* going so far as to declare “[t]here is hardly to be found a corresponding example in the world of a Government so powerfully protecting the rights of a minority.” Chester Bowles praised Kennedy’s intervention in the Meredith situation as “a turning point not only in our struggle against segregation in this country, but in our efforts to make the people of Asia, Africa, and Latin American understand what we are trying to do.”¹²⁰ Though Kennedy had been reluctant to intervene, there was no doubt his decision to do so had garnered positive press coverage abroad, and he reminded Mississippians in a televised address that the eyes of the world were upon them.¹²¹

Desperate to hit back, Barnett blamed the Oxford riot on the Kennedy administration, while Citizen Council representatives took credit for encouraging the governor and the students to defy federal authorities.¹²² But try as they might to spin the story as one of noble resistance, state officials could no longer claim Mississippi’s educational system was segregated. Sovereignty Commission efforts to revitalize its image by proposing an acceleration of the speakers’ bureau program failed to garner support for Barnett’s actions outside of the Jim Crow South. With frustrations running high, it was unsurprising that Johnston’s ascension to the directorship of the Commission the following March was met with protest by members and supporters of the Councils

¹²⁰ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 163-166

¹²¹ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 159-160.

¹²² This included William J. Simmons, who served as Barnett’s right-hand man in Oxford, and Executive Director Louis Hollis and Public Relations Director Richard Morpew. Officially, the Councils denounced violence, but according to Neil R. McMillen, their propaganda materials and public speeches “accounted in no small way for the high degree of student agitation apparent in a mob willing to assault – with bottles, bricks, fragments of concrete, and Molotov cocktails – battle-ready federal marshals.” McMillen, *The Citizens’ Council*, 342-343.

who deemed it a move toward accommodationism.¹²³ For Medgar Evers, the Ole Miss case was a substantial victory for the advancing Mississippi movement. In remarks published on the eve of Meredith's enrollment, Evers announced black Mississippians were "more determined now than ever to demand their full Constitutional rights" and alerted observers to "look for an acceleration in the tempo of the civil rights struggle," including new voter registration campaigns and integration efforts by black students statewide.¹²⁴

By the autumn of 1962, that acceleration was visible in and around Jackson. In August, the NAACP sponsored a petition to desegregate the city's public schools, while the North Jackson NAACP Youth Council planned to carry out a series of direct-action protests downtown. Together with representatives from SNCC and CORE, the youth council members proposed a boycott of the Mississippi State Fair and of Capitol Street businesses that came to be known as the Jackson movement. Inspired by the rising atmosphere of resistance and building on the organizational precedent established by Evers, participants aimed to disrupt the downtown economy until city officials integrated public spaces and businesses discontinued discriminatory practices toward black customers and employees. Militant and determined to exploit the segregationists' hard-line strategy, these students were the foot soldiers Evers had long worked to embolden, an army of Mississippi Mau Maus united in their desire to protect and defend their home transformed into a vanguard for change. By utilizing public and commercial spaces as sites of black resistance, the protests linked the experiences of Jackson's urban

¹²³ Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission*, 115-121.

¹²⁴ "More School Suits Set in Mississippi," *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 29, 1962.

population to the work of movement activists in rural areas, placing emphasis on solidarity among the masses as an essential element in the NAACP's Operation Mississippi publicity campaign.¹²⁵

To publicize their efforts and enlist financial help, the North Jackson Youth Council published a newsletter called the *North Jackson Action*. Evers, who had embarked on a six month fundraising tour following Meredith's enrollment, encouraged the students to use the newsletter to raise funds for bail money in addition to sharing information about their planned protests. John Salter, a recently-arrived Tougaloo College sociology professor and veteran of the labor movement, served as the youth council's advisor and worked with Evers to prepare for the response from Mississippi authorities, including harassment, obstructionism, and possible state-sanctioned police violence. As the second week of October neared, Jackson movement participants called on the city's black community to boycott the segregated State Fair activities. A thousand boycott leaflets were distributed in Jackson while Evers issued an NAACP release calling for black citizens to remain at home.¹²⁶

By the third day of the boycott, Evers declared it 95 percent effective, dwarfing previous NAACP efforts to target the event.¹²⁷ For members of the Jackson movement, it represented a strong first step on the path to uniting the black community to challenge city-wide segregation. Next was a boycott of downtown businesses during the Christmas season, proposed by Evers and similar to a boycott in Clarksdale the previous year led by

¹²⁵ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 230; O'Brien, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 27.

¹²⁶ "Urge Boycott of Mississippi State Fair," *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 11, 1962; Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 49.

¹²⁷ "Miss. Fair Hurt By Boycott On Jim Crow," *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 23, 1962.

Aaron Henry and the Coahoma County NAACP. The results there had been mixed. Henry announced the boycott was about 40 percent effective, but his encouragement of participation from CORE, SCLC, and SNCC representatives frustrated Gloster Current and Roy Wilkins, who disliked Henry's willingness to include members of other organizations in NAACP operations.¹²⁸ Even following COFO's inception, NAACP national officers including Wilkins remained wary of issuing public support for inter-organizational campaigns, particularly those that relied on NAACP funding. For Evers, the National Office's resistance had become an increasingly frustrating barrier, but investment in the development of youth activism reinforced his hope in the success of the Jackson movement.¹²⁹

John Salter echoed Evers' irritation with the National Office, especially when he observed a "climate of fear" on display at the 17th Annual Mississippi State Conference of Branches held in Jackson that November. Wilkins, Current, Ruby Hurley, National Youth Director Laplois Ashford, and other high-ranking officials were on hand to discuss the promotion of voter registration drives, community relations efforts, and desegregation campaigns. Yet it was only in the meetings of youth delegates where Salter witnessed visible excitement for boycotts and direct-action. Skeptical adults present in these meetings seemed inspired by the words of their youthful members, but Salter better understood the magnitude of the challenge Evers faced in shepherding the Jackson movement forward. Evers pressed on as always, continuing his fundraising tour as the *North Jackson Action* ran a call-to-arms titled "Start Putting Your Money on Strike."

¹²⁸ Dittmer, *Local People*, 122-123.

¹²⁹ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 232.

Youth Council members assembled at Salter's home to strategize and were joined by dozens of new students from Tougaloo, who announced their intention to revive the defunct Tougaloo College NAACP chapter.¹³⁰

The Youth Council zeroed in on four principle goals for the boycott, including a demand for courtesy titles for black customers, guaranteed service on a first-come, first-serve basis, equality in hiring and promotion, and the desegregation of restrooms, seating, and water fountains.¹³¹ One hundred-fifty downtown businesses were involved, and the boycott was officially sponsored by the North Jackson and West Jackson youth councils, Jackson and Campbell College NAACP chapters, and representatives of CORE and SNCC. As students distributed leaflets and made telephone calls, Salter proposed the campaign include picketing in the downtown area to garner additional press attention. When Salter and five other picketers walked to the front of the Woolworth store on Capitol Street, they were met by almost fifty police officers and a handful of newspaper reporters. The increased police presence was deliberate and sent a message: protesters would not be tolerated. Salter and the other five picketers were quickly arrested on charges of obstructing the sidewalk.¹³²

The arrests marked the beginning of the white power structure's efforts to push back against the Jackson movement, but the energy built regardless. By February of 1963, Aaron Henry announced the boycott was almost 70 percent effective and had driven four or five downtown stores out of business.¹³³ This increase was especially

¹³⁰ Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 52-56.

¹³¹ "Begin Phone Campaign to Boycott Miss. Stores," *Chicago Defender*, December 15, 1962.

¹³² Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 62.

¹³³ "Equal Hiring, Equal Pay Latest Drive For Rights," *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 18, 1963.

important given the threat of additional arrests and the National Office's failure to provide bond money for the original six picketers, mention the boycott in the pages of the *Crisis*, or file the Jackson school-desegregation suit that had been prepared by Evers months prior. Divisions within the upper echelons of the Association regarding the efficacy of direct-action and a slow response to the movement in Mississippi would have been infuriating nonetheless, but the fact that the boycott was growing while the National Office dragged its feet widened the chasm between it and Evers. Despite these roadblocks, however, the Jackson movement played an important role in encouraging solidarity within the city's black community and linking the struggles of black Mississippians in both urban and rural areas to a larger network of activism across the state. By early Spring of 1963, Aaron Henry had transformed COFO into a coordinating entity connecting SNCC projects in the Delta to support networks in other areas of the state, and Evers spent an increasing amount of time traveling across Mississippi to shore up NAACP branches and encourage other COFO-supported campaigns. Though he remained concerned about SNCC's lack of organizational discipline, he acknowledged its positive influence on the youth movement. To cut ties with them entirely would not only have alienated blacks in the Delta, but fractured the network connecting students hard at work in both rural and urban areas.¹³⁴

The situation shifted in April of 1963, when the National Office made an about face and set about promoting the Jackson movement with aplomb. Jackson movement participants whispered Wilkins' decision to throw his support behind the boycott was

¹³⁴ Evers had been forced to scrap together bond money from the SCEF, Gandhi Society, and a New York attorney. Dittmer, *Local People*, 159-160; Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 81.

caused by fears the SCLC, with Martin Luther King, Jr. at its helm, might turn its eyes to a state-wide campaign in Mississippi and challenge the NAACP's foothold there.¹³⁵ Initiated earlier that month, the SCLC's Birmingham campaign drew public attention to segregation in Alabama and forced city officials to desegregate public facilities. The intransigence of white officials on full display, culminating in attacks by police officers and dogs on innocent children, shocked the world and prompted President Kennedy to send Attorney General Burke Marshall to Birmingham to mediate an end to the crisis.¹³⁶ But discussions between the national officers about the situation were anything but softly whispered. Current quickly fired off memorandums to the branches that practically shouted the need for them to accelerate direct-action protests. If the SCLC moved into Jackson or any other major Southern cities with NAACP projects underway, Current argued it would "make it that much harder for the NAACP to carry on its work effectively."¹³⁷

While these reasons for concern were not surprising to Evers, he also understood Birmingham created momentum the Jackson movement could not let pass it by. Given the significance of the images from Birmingham, he did not hesitate to take advantage of opportunities to promote the Jackson movement on television. On May 20, 1963, he gave a televised response to criticism of the Jackson movement by Mayor Allen Thompson, who declared Jackson's black citizens satisfied with race relations and the boycott the

¹³⁵ Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 95.

¹³⁶ "U.S. Contacts Civic Leaders To End Birmingham Dispute," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, May 7, 1963; John D. Pomfret, "President Voices Birmingham Hope," *New York Times*, May 8, 1963. For more on the Birmingham Crisis and the Kennedy Administration's response, see: Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 169-177 and Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 160-161.

¹³⁷ Memorandum, Current to Hurley et al., May 13, 1963, NAACP Papers, Part 3, Box A236.

work of outside agitators. Evers countered with a blistering speech in which positioned the work of the NAACP and the experiences of black Mississippians within a transnational framework. Just as black Jacksonians “learned about the new free nations in Africa” and saw “black prime ministers and ambassadors, financiers and technicians,” so too did the rest of the world see “what white people are doing.”¹³⁸

Thompson’s public proclamation of racial harmony fell on deaf ears inside the Jackson movement, though black business leaders and ministers in support of the boycott agreed to meet the mayor with a list of demands that expanded on the original four set forth by the Youth Council. With the NAACP’s blessing, these included demands of salary increases for black municipal employees, the hiring of black police officers and crossing guards, and the desegregation of all public schools. Though some of these individuals had quietly supported civil rights activity, their willingness to meet the mayor head on reinforced the importance of the Jackson movement in spurring community solidarity. Their efforts were in vain, however. Thompson refused to accept the bulk of the demands, and less than a week later, more demonstrations were planned for downtown Jackson. On May 28th, a group of student volunteers joined Salter for a planned sit-in at the Woolworth lunch counter, where they were met by a jeering mob. Photographs captured the horror of their experiences as dozens of angry white men accused the protestors of being communist stooges and brutally beat, spat upon, and covered them with food and drinks. Police officers stood aside and allowed the mob to

¹³⁸ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 244-245.

torment the protesters for two hours until the store manager turned off the lights and closed for the day.¹³⁹

Undeterred, Salter and the students planned for additional more sit-ins and picketing, bolstered by classes on non-violent sit-in techniques offered by representatives from CORE at the NAACP headquarters in Jackson.¹⁴⁰ Almost a thousand black Jacksonians – members of the NAACP and many who had never participated in civil rights activity before - packed the Pearl Street Church that evening to show their support. After an invocation delivered by Reverend Ed King and spirited renditions of several freedom songs, Evers reminded those in attendance “this is only the beginning!” and was greeted by loud applause.¹⁴¹ Editorials in the next day’s *Jackson Daily News* and *Clarion-Ledger* accused the demonstrators of being outside agitators and stooges manipulated by the “red” NAACP, but the overall tone of the city’s segregationist news media was one of escalating concern.¹⁴² Students had led the way, and adults in Jackson were waking up to join them, calling for a “massive desegregation drive.” On May 31st, hundreds of students from Jackson High Schools staged a march that pitted them against scores of helmeted police officers. With what Salter described as “cold-blooded, mechanical efficiency,” he and Evers watched as officers shoved and clubbed students, tore banners and flags from

¹³⁹ Thompson agreed to hiring black police officers and crossing guards but refused to accept the other demands. “Three Beaten in Mississippi Sit-Ins,” *Chicago Defender*, May 29, 1963; Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 132-136; O’Brien, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 119-144.

¹⁴⁰ “Integrationists Plan More Jackson Protests,” *Austin Statesman*, May 30, 1963.

¹⁴¹ O’Brien, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 148-149.

¹⁴² Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 137-142.

their hands, and ushered them into garbage trucks. By the end of the day, over five hundred people were arrested and locked up in make-shift jails at the state fairgrounds.¹⁴³

The NAACP's public reaction was swift. Roy Wilkins, who had recently arrived in Jackson to personally participate in promoting its movement and, subsequently, block any efforts by the SCLC to institute its own project, held a press conference to condemn the "Nazi-type tactics" used to break up the protest and promise the Association would continue to back the Jackson campaign. Evers noted Jackson's youth were ready to march in more mass demonstrations and that the NAACP was proceeding with care.¹⁴⁴ Wilkins, when asked by students if he would participate himself, agreed to protest. The following afternoon, he and Evers were arrested alongside Helen Wilcher for picketing on Capitol Street.¹⁴⁵ Jackson newspapers cheered the arrests as part of the crackdown on demonstrations, with the *Jackson Daily News* gleefully adding numbers to the "agitation box score" it printed on its front page. But the arrests only further galvanized young members of the movement. When Wilkins and Evers returned to the NAACP headquarters in downtown's Masonic Temple, they were met by John Salter and students lined up with signs and flags, ready to head out on another march for freedom. Then a strange thing happened. Wilkins announced no new marches were planned. Salter was confused. Because of the publicity they brought to the Jackson movement, he thought it

¹⁴³ "531 Negroes Arrested in Mississippi Protest," *Los Angeles Times*, June, 1 1963; Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 149-150.

¹⁴⁴ "Police Patrol Uneasy Jackson as Negroes Proceed With Care," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, June 1, 1963.

¹⁴⁵ "Negro Wilkins Arrested in Jackson," *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 1963.

probable to assume mass demonstrations would continue. Just as the Jackson movement picked up steam, the National Office seemed intent on slowing it down.¹⁴⁶

According to Wilkins, the Jackson movement was headed in a new direction. Rather than mass demonstrations, its focus was on a widening of the boycott and a renewed emphasis on voter registration and legal challenges in the courts. Given increased participation in the Jackson movement by members of the city's black community, there was hope it would translate to the Association's core programs. But this public explanation was not satisfactory for everyone behind-the-scenes. If anything, it revealed the limits to which the National Office was willing to go regarding direct-action. Despite his arrest for picketing, Wilkins had no desire to be a Martin Luther King, engaging in civil disobedience and braving arrests to martyr himself for the cause of justice. The nature of direct-action threatened the respectable organization he expected the NAACP to be, disciplined and devoid of radical influence.¹⁴⁷ This decision demoralized Evers, who showed increasing signs of physical and mental exhaustion. He was routinely harassed by police, his home had been pelted by Molotov cocktails and spammed by menacing phone calls, and he had little time to rest. Shifting away from mass demonstrations effectively pushed the students and community organizers back to the margins. For Evers, this amounted to a retreat from the militant direction the Jackson movement had taken, and he quietly told Myrlie he was considering leaving the Association altogether and finding a new means of organizing grassroots direct-action efforts for change.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 154-156.

¹⁴⁷ According to John Salter, his connection to leftist attorneys and activists was a source of constant concern for Wilkins and other national officials. Dittmer, *Local People*, 165.

¹⁴⁸ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 61-62.

He never got the chance. Before Evers could come to a final decision about his future, he was murdered in his driveway in the early morning hours of June 12th. It was less than two weeks after his arrest in front of the Woolworth's on Capitol Street and only a few hours after John F. Kennedy had endorsed the passage of a federal civil rights bill in a televised address. After years of public pronouncements calling for civil rights leaders to push for gradual changes in American race relations, the president changed course. In his speech, Kennedy highlighted the international scope of America's "moral crisis," noting Americans were "committed to a worldwide struggle to promote and protect all those who wish to be free." National civil rights leaders lauded his message. Martin Luther King called the speech "a hallmark in the annals of American history" that would "bring a new sense of hope to the millions of disinherited people of our country." Roy Wilkins offered his praise as well, though he noted Kennedy failed to include a focus on discrimination in employment in addition to his calls for desegregation.¹⁴⁹

Kennedy's views on race in America certainly shifted during his time in office, but there was no doubt the catalyst of his speech was the escalating situation in Alabama. On the heels of the Birmingham crisis, attempts by black students Vivian Malone and James Hood to enroll at the University of Alabama led to standoff between Alabama Governor George Wallace and the Kennedy administration. After a federal court injunction was issued ordering the university to desegregate, Wallace, who made headlines when he had proudly exclaimed "segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!" at his inauguration, stood in the doorway of the registration center with a contingent of state

¹⁴⁹ "Kennedy Pleads for Equal Treatment For All Citizens," *Chicago Tribune*, June 12, 1963; "Dr. King Praises Speech as Hallmark in History," *New York Times*, June 12, 1963.

troopers. In response, Kennedy federalized the Alabama National Guard to escort the students in to be registered, after which Wallace reluctantly stepped aside.¹⁵⁰ No violence followed the situation as it had at Ole Miss the year prior, but Kennedy was concerned violent incidents might increase should “street demonstrations” continue. Civil rights legislation would offer federal protections to “get this...out of the street” and, perhaps just as importantly, out of the newspapers. Direct-action was working to force federal action.¹⁵¹

Evers watched the historic presidential address and then attended a mass meeting at the New Jerusalem Baptist Church. According to several participants, Evers praised the brave souls willing to continue picketing stores and promoted a voter registration drive, but he looked tired and sad.¹⁵² Kennedy’s speech was an eloquent promise to protect the rights Evers had spent so long fighting to achieve in Mississippi. Yet just as his years of embattled organizing began yielding fruit, his efforts to push the movement forward were cut off at the knees by Wilkins and the National Office. Jackson’s white officials refused to back down to desegregation demands. On June 6th, Mayor Thompson encouraged the Hinds County Chancery Court to issue an injunction restraining the NAACP, CORE, and movement participants from carrying out boycotts and public demonstrations. Attendance at mass meetings fell, and the energy of militancy surrounding the Jackson movement diminished. Dave Dennis, who had been conducting classes on nonviolence, returned to the Delta region with several others to work in SNCC projects. They were followed out of

¹⁵⁰ “Alabama Showdown Nears: Governor Wallace Gets Warning By Kennedy,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 11, 1963; Claude Sitton, “Governor Leaves, But Fulfills Promises to Stand in Door to Avoid Violence,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1963.

¹⁵¹ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 179.

¹⁵² Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 282-283.

town by several newspaper reporters who no longer felt the need to stay around for lengthier periods of time. The movement had stalled. Evers' death would deal it another devastating blow.¹⁵³

Given the escalation of death threats he endured in the final year of his life, it was as unsurprising as it was tragic his was taken by an assassin's bullet. Shot in the back by a gunman hidden in a vacant lot across the street, Evers managed to crawl the thirty or so feet to his front porch before collapsing in a heap. Myrlie and the children opened the door to find Evers barely breathing and losing his battle with consciousness. Amidst the chaos, neighbors arrived to help assess the situation and provide transport to the hospital, but there was little hope for survival. Even in his semi-conscious state, Evers seemed to understand this. Or perhaps in those last moments, he felt he had done everything he could. The last words he spoke before succumbing to his wounds were "turn me loose." Back at the house, frightened onlookers watched as Jackson police officers assessed the scene. On the driveway, a stack of sweatshirts lay amidst piles of Evers' papers, covered in blood. Written across the front of the sweatshirts, in bold lettering, were the words "Jim Crow Must Go."¹⁵⁴

News of the assassination sent shockwaves across the nation and seemed to reinforce the fears of Wilkins and others who believed escalating direct-action protests would lead to additional violence. But the reality of the situation was far more complex. Throughout his career, Evers had learned to live with fear and relentlessly pushed forward, never wavering in his goals to dismantle Mississippi's white supremacist system. In nine

¹⁵³ O'Brien, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 184-192.

¹⁵⁴ Evers-Williams and Peters, *For Us the Living*, 302-303.

years with the NAACP, he almost single-handedly compelled the National Office to not only pay attention to Mississippi's plight, but to force the federal government and the world to see it too. In the process, he helped embolden a new generation to action across urban/rural and class lines. In the years that followed his murder, Mississippi became ground zero for the national movement, led by young activists determined to push against the white power structure at all costs. They were Mau Mau in Mississippi.

CONCLUSION:

“HISTORY HAS REACHED A TURNING POINT, HERE AND OVER THE WORLD”

As the sun rose on the day of his funeral, five thousand people made their way into the Masonic Temple to celebrate the life of Medgar Evers. People packed into every available space inside the main hall, and those who could not find room spilled into the corridors. Seated in the front row with her children was Myrlie Evers, the personification of strength and grace. For almost a decade, she had worked alongside Medgar to procure black freedom in Mississippi. His sacrifice was hers too. She had lost her husband. Her children had lost a father. Next to her sat Charles Evers. Always the troublemaker of the family, his was not the life ultimately taken by violence. The absurdity of the moment was not lost on him. Seated a few rows behind them in a reserved section of the auditorium was Martin Luther King, Jr. and several SCLC associates. On stage were Roy Wilkins, U.S. diplomat Ralph Bunch, and other NAACP officials. Dr. T.R.M. Howard gave the eulogy. Throughout the room stood people from all walks of life and places in Mississippi. They came from the Delta, the Gulf Coast, the pine belt, and the hill country. They were young and old, students, professionals, ministers, businessmen, homemakers, and farmers. Many had participated in mass demonstrations or voter registration drives, but some had not. As the music swelled, their voices raised in chorus. *We shall overcome.*¹

Outside, city officials steeled themselves for the mass march from the Masonic Temple to the Collins Funeral Home. As the throng of thousands exited the ceremony,

¹ O'Brien, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 212-214.

law enforcement officers lined the streets while photographers and news cameras grabbed close-up footage. For two hours, marchers slowly walked in 102-degree heat. The line of people, dressed in their Sunday best and carrying bibles, stretched so far it was difficult to see where it ended. At the front of the column were several Jackson ministers, Roy Wilkins, and Dr. King. When they turned into the black business neighborhood and reached the funeral home, the marchers stopped. For several moments, it was quiet and still until a voice rang out in song and spread over the crowd. *Oh, freedom! Oh, freedom over me. And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free.* The police officers, in their blue helmets and night sticks, demanded the marchers return home. The song changed. *This little light of mine.* One by one, people turned their eyes toward downtown and sang. *All over Capitol Street, I'm going to let it shine!* Then the crowd surged toward the intersection of Farish and Capitol, demanding equality and justice for Medgar Evers. John Salter, caught up in the stream of people, noted “there was no fear, no fear-based apathy, no servility, no more of the past of Jackson and Mississippi, not even a spirit of violence – only the toughness bred by hard lifetimes combining with the hopes and the aspirations of generations into a determined and powerful forward thrust.”²

Though the marchers did not display fear, police officers did. As the crowd moved toward them, they broke into a run and retreated down Capitol to form a new barricade. The summer heat had reached a boil as the marchers closed in on the intersection, sweating, singing, and crying out for freedom. Back at the Masonic Temple,

² Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 209-215.

Dr. King watched as the mass demonstration took shape, but was quickly whisked away by aides who feared for his life. Only a few hours after he arrived in Jackson, he headed back to the airport. In the street, police officers unleashed dogs, mercilessly beat marchers with their guns and clubs, held them at gunpoint, and herded twenty-seven people into paddy wagons. In response, someone threw a brick at the officers and others joined in. As the demonstration dissolved into a melee of violence, Justice Department officials and cameramen rushed to document the situation. For several more minutes, the battle between police and angry marchers raged on until John Doar, Assistant Attorney General in the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, walked forward, arms outstretched, and implored the crowd to disperse. He was soon joined by CORE's Dave Dennis and the NAACP's Willie Ludden. Together, they convinced the angry crowd to disperse, and the confrontation came to an end.³

It was the largest black protest in the history of Mississippi.⁴ News accounts of that day differed in their coverage of the demonstration and ensuing violence. Predictably, Jackson's mainstream newspapers praised the brutally repressive tactics of the officers and blamed the situation on white outside agitators resolved to destroy the city's peaceful race relations. White Mississippians refused to believe blacks were capable of leading mass demonstrations, even in their angry and mournful state.⁵ Articles in national black newspapers underscored the sense of despondency permeating Jackson and black communities across the nation. In the *Chicago Defender*, columnist Alfred

³ O'Brien, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 216-219; Evers-Williams with Peters, *For Us, The Living*, 319-322.

⁴ Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 219.

⁵ "Funeral March Finishes in White-Led Agitation," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 16, 1963.

Duckett asked “how abysmally deep is hate?” An editorial by Ray Abrams in the *Baltimore Afro-American* described the Mississippi capitol as no less repressive than it was in 1846.⁶ Writing for the *New York Times*, veteran civil rights reporter Claude Sitton was circumspect in his description of the events. He carefully reconstructed each moment and highlighted the frustration felt by many in the Jackson movement at the more moderate aims of Wilkins and recently arrived NAACP officials. Though the violence was the top story, his report on the frustrations of the militant students provided them a degree of legitimacy missing from the analysis of other mainstream outlets.⁷

This publicity was particularly important given the situation that unfolded inside the Pearl Street Church following the day’s riotous events. Once the crowd was dispersed, Gloster Current called together a meeting of NAACP officials and the Jackson movement strategy committee. From the moment the meeting began, it was clear to John Salter that NAACP officials, partnered with conservative ministers, had decided to end the mass direct-action phase of the movement. There was talk of federal involvement, but when pressed to explain what that meant, NAACP officials were vague. They also pushed back against additional SNCC involvement on the strategy committee, which prompted several SNCC representatives and Salter to walk out in protest. According to Salter, the decision to end the first real mass movement in Jackson, “in the most intractably segregated state in the Union, a movement that had the full support of the

⁶ Alred Duckett, “A Hatred Too Deep To Reach,” *Chicago Defender*, June 22, 1963; Ray Abrams, “Jackson Same Now As It Was in 1846,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 22, 1963; Sara Slack, “A City Mourns a Man,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 22, 1963.

⁷ Claude Sitton, “27 Are Arrested in Jackson Riots After Evers Rite,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1963.

grassroots people and that had plowed through mass arrests, widespread police brutality, and murder...seemed like a nightmare.”⁸

His despair was well-founded. The success of the Jackson movement led SNCC, CORE, and the SCLC to publicly declare they would shift more field secretaries and volunteers to participate in the protests. Students from Jackson, its surrounding areas, and the rural parts of the state were ready to converge on the city and press the movement forward. For the first time since Evers began his work nine years before, the people had come together across rural/urban and class lines in mass demonstrations and linked themselves with the larger movement for black freedom nationwide. In the televised speech he gave a few days before his murder, he declared “history has reached a turning point, here and over the world,” and added “how much better to have turbulence to effect improvement, rather than turbulence to maintain a stand-pat policy.” In a tragically ironic way, Evers’ death was a catalyst for the expansion of that turbulence and the culmination of his efforts to unite black Mississippians and induce them to shake the foundations of white supremacy in Mississippi until it was destroyed.⁹

NAACP national officials disagreed. Rather than celebrate the sense of inter-organizational solidarity brought on by Evers’ death, they viewed it with suspicion. This was especially true after the violence broke out at the intersection of Capitol and Farish. No one was more direct about this than Roy Wilkins. At an NAACP rally in Alexandria, Virginia the day after the funeral, Wilkins delivered what *Washington Post* staff reporter Anita Ehrman described as a “bitter attack on rival Negro civil rights groups for claiming

⁸ Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, 228-229.

⁹ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 244-248.

credit for advances won by the NAACP.” He specifically named CORE and King’s SCLC as groups that “start a little and then rush off somewhere else. They are here today, gone tomorrow.” Only the NAACP, he argued, could sustain and financially afford a long fight for civil rights in America. Giving money to one of the other organizations instead of the NAACP was, in his estimation, “like a Baptist church giving money to a Presbyterian church.” Where Evers had come to appreciate the contributions of rival civil rights organizations and worked to coordinate better communication among them, Wilkins continued to view them as a threat. In the months to come, he urged NAACP supporters to engage in Association campaigns pressuring Congress to pass federal civil rights legislation, which he claimed would “take care of most of the problems that have arisen.”¹⁰

Just as Evers had understood and exploited, those problems were best understood within an international context. But just as mass demonstrations across the South had forced Kennedy to intervene in support of civil rights activists, the violence in Jackson threatened to undermine the image of stability the administration cultivated and the success of the civil rights legislation working its way through Congress by the summer of 1963. With that in mind, NAACP officials supported behind-the-scenes efforts by Robert F. Kennedy to negotiate a peace settlement and concessions with local black ministers in Jackson. Those concessions included the hiring of six black police officers and eight crossing guards, the promotion of one black garbage truck driver, and consent for seven black municipal workers to operate heavy machinery. There was to be no biracial

¹⁰ Anita Ehrman, “Wilkins of NAACP Attacks Rival Civil Rights Groups, *Washington Post, Times Herald*, June 17, 1963.

committee, desegregation of public facilities, or any new mass demonstrations in the city. It was a slap in the face to the people who gathered at the mass meeting to hear the mayor's concessions read aloud. But the group voted ten-to-one to accept the concessions anyway. According to Dorie Ladner, one of the first Tougaloo students and NAACP youth council members to promote the use of mass demonstrations in Jackson, angry meeting participants accepted the agreement under duress. To do otherwise would have led to "all out war and likely more loss of life."¹¹

By the end of June, 1963, the direct-action phase of the Jackson movement was over. For many of the young militant students who willingly risked their lives to protest and spent nights jailed like cattle at the state fair grounds, the peace settlement was a betrayal of everything they and Medgar Evers had stood for. NAACP officials pressed the need to continue participating in voter registration drives as Congress debated civil rights legislation, but several students left Jackson altogether. Some returned to their homes, while many others moved on to participation in SNCC-led projects in Mississippi's rural areas. In the meantime, Jackson residents turned their attention to the investigation and trial of the man accused of murdering Evers, forty-two-year-old Greenwood resident and Citizens' Council member Byron De La Beckwith. A salesman for a fertilizer company, Marine Corps veteran, and avid collector of guns, Beckwith was described by friends as "a chronic letter-writer on the racial issue." In one of those letters, published by the *Jackson Daily News* in April of 1957, Beckwith declared that during World War II, "I proudly served my nation in a segregated Marine Corps. We fought on a

¹¹ O'Brien, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 228-230.

segregated battlefield to preserve the right and privileges of all Americans.” His belief in segregation, he explained, was as strong as his belief in God.¹²

Like a hunter stalking his prey, Beckwith tracked Evers for days before he shot him. On several occasions his car slowly crept past the Masonic Temple as members of the Jackson movement conferred inside. There was no questioning his intent. Beckwith planned to murder Evers and was searching for the perfect opportunity. He found it on the night of June 12th as he lay hidden in a vacant lot across the street from Evers’ home. Because of the uptick in threats to his life, Evers worried about the possibility of someone hiding there and warned his wife and children to always exit their car on the right side and under the cover of darkness when returning home at night. Just as Beckwith understood the importance of perfect angles in sharpshooting, so did Evers. But the precautions he took were not enough to save him. Beckwith’s weapon of choice was a model 1917 Enfield high-powered rifle with an attached United telescopic sight, loaded with seven Super Speed Springfield live rounds. The bullet hit Evers with such force and produced so much damage that Jack Young, who arrived on the scene minutes later, remarked he never knew there was so much blood in the human body. The rifle was discovered half concealed in nearby woods amidst honeysuckle vines and contained one fingerprint on the scope. On the twelfth day of the investigation by local police and FBI agents, Beckwith was arrested and charged with murder.¹³

¹² “Beckwith Letter Reveals: He Wants Segregation in Both Heaven and Hell,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 8, 1964; “Mississippi Man Is Seized By FBI In Evers Slaying,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1963.

¹³ Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 291.

His trial commenced seven months later in Jackson. Despite District Attorney Bill Waller's efforts to construct a strong case against Beckwith, the atmosphere of the proceedings was circus-like from the beginning. The Mississippi legislature allowed the courtroom to be integrated to avoid accusations of racial bias, but on several occasions Governor Ross Barnett confidently strode into the chamber, shook hands with Beckwith, and conversed with him in front of the all-white male jurors.¹⁴ These actions were consistent with his Barnett's initial reaction to Evers' death. Though he promised cooperation with federal authorities to locate the perpetrator and that justice would be served, his words lacked conviction or sympathy. "Apparently, it was a dastardly act," he remarked.¹⁵ Local news coverage was condemnatory of the murder, including Beckwith's hometown newspaper, the *Greenwood Commonwealth*, which denounced the killing as a savage crime committed by a warped soul. But for all the shock and public rebukes by white Mississippians, there was no precedent for a murder conviction and few people expected one. Beckwith was on trial in a system designed to protect him, not Evers.¹⁶

If this was not obvious to some outside observers, it was to Beckwith. He was jovial at times during the proceedings, chatting with jury members, drinking soda pop, and offering cigars to Prosecutor William Waller. His defense centered on the argument his rifle was stolen and that there was no conclusive proof he had been near the Evers home the night of the murder, even though several witnesses testified to seeing him in the

¹⁴ Dudley Lehew, "Mississippian Charged With Murder of Evers," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, June 24, 1963; O'Brien, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 242-243.

¹⁵ "Find Old Gun Near Home of Slain Negro," *Chicago Tribune*, June 13, 1963; "\$5,000 Reward Offered for Slayer of NAACP Official," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, June 13, 1963; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 288.

¹⁶ Bobby DeLaughter, *Never Too Late: A Prosecutor's Story of Justice in the Medgar Evers Case*, (New York and London: Scribner, 2001), 90.

area that evening.¹⁷ The result of the case was a mistrial. For Mississippi, even a few white jurors voting to convict a white man of murdering a black man was significant, but not enough to avoid the problem of a hung jury.¹⁸ A second trial followed two months later. Again, an all-white male jury decided Beckwith's fate. This time the jury split 8-4 in favor of acquittal, prompting another mistrial.¹⁹ Beckwith was released on a \$10,000 bond and returned to his hometown a local hero. Waller did not ask for a third trial. It was yet another blow to Evers' family and the black citizens of Jackson. Their calls for justice went unheeded. Evers' death was another lynching without consequence in Mississippi.²⁰

Yet for all the setbacks endured by civil rights activists in Mississippi, there was no denying the existence of a movement there. For so long, Mississippi had been ground zero for racial oppression, filled with black citizens terrified to speak out together for equality. But Medgar Evers tapped into traditions of armed self-reliance and networks of community support to build a crucial organizational base for the NAACP. Rather than accept that the system of white supremacy was too deeply entrenched and dangerous to challenge, Evers did so at every possible opportunity by facilitating a rise of militancy among the youth and shaping them into the Mississippi version of Mau Mau-type force for change. In the process, he promoted an understanding of the importance of fastidious grassroots organizing and the ability to alter strategies on the ground. Though it ultimately cost him his life, his work helped birth a new generation of activists who

¹⁷ "Beckwith Denies Slaying of NAACP Leader," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 6, 1964.

Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 289.

¹⁸ "Mistrial Declared On Byron de la Beckwith," *Chicago Defender*, February 8, 1964.

¹⁹ Al Kuettner, "Beckwith Jury Again Ends With Mistrial," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 18, 1964; John Herbers, "Beckwith's 2d Trial Ends in Hung Jury," *New York Times*, April 18, 1964.

²⁰ "Beckwith Back Home, Will Return To Work," *Chicago Defender*, April 20, 1964; Williams, *Medgar Evers*, 292-294.

carried on Evers' legacy as they fanned across Mississippi and connected to the larger national movement. At every turn on the road to freedom, they faced obstacles. But they did not stop pushing ahead. They learned that change followed unrelenting, determined action that forced the federal government, and the world, to pay attention.

The situation unfolding in Kenya seemed to reinforce this philosophy. Following the embarrassing unveiling of the Hola camp massacre and Lennox-Boyd's resignation as colonial secretary, British conservatives were compelled by new secretary Iain Macleod and Labour Party officials to consider colonization of Kenya as no longer beneficial to Britain's global interests. Though they remained somewhat dismayed by the rising tide of African nationalism, their larger fears stemmed from the possibility that African nationalists would fall under the control of communist elements. To prevent this, officials argued decolonization and a handover of power to African personnel considered agreeable to British interests was the best option moving forward. Eventually, this included the release of Jomo Kenyatta in August of 1961. He was a powerful symbol of freedom for African Kenyans, and colonial officials worried his continued imprisonment might divide the newly created national government and reinforce feelings of resentment toward Britain. His discharge from prison in 1961 signaled a first important step to rehabilitating his image in a way that downplayed his attachment to the violent Mau Mau (which he continued to deny having led) and promoted his belief in the positive aspects of a functioning coalition government.²¹

²¹ Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya*, 159-164.

Yet despite these moderating influences, Kenyatta remained a freedom fighter in the minds of Kenyans and admirers the world over. Even though the insurrection against the colonial government failed to liberate Kenyan Africans from their state of perpetual exploitation and repression, the Mau Mau shook the foundations of the British imperial system and ultimately contributed to its collapse. In Mississippi, movement activists aimed to shake the system of white supremacy to its core and bring about its eventual downfall. They had a blueprint: mass participation, in the form of direct-action and voting rights campaigns, fostered publicity, helped embolden black communities, and challenged the federal government to intervene and uphold the rights of its citizens. Just as Evers well understood, it was never easy to achieve these ends and confusion often reigned in the process. This was especially true when Charles Evers appointed himself NAACP Field Secretary in place of his brother. Unlike Medgar, Charles spent considerable time living out of state in Chicago and engaged in some unscrupulous activities, including bootlegging. His less than stellar image was not the only problem. His domineering personality and determination to be his own man apart from Medgar's legacy alienated him from black leaders throughout the state. Rather than work with other civil rights organizations, Charles retreated from facilitating grassroots, inter-organizational participation.²²

Nonetheless, the militant wing of the Mississippi movement pushed onward despite these setbacks. As summer turned into fall, COFO-sponsored organizations set in motion a new campaign that pitted the forces of mass participation against the state's

²² Dittmer, *Local People*, 178.

white power structure. Local NAACP branches, together with CORE and SNCC, began work on a statewide “Freedom Ballot Campaign.” By registering black voters in a mock election to correspond with the state gubernatorial election in November of 1963, organizers hoped to demonstrate to the nation and the world that blacks in Mississippi would vote en masse if given the opportunity. The campaign officially kicked off in Jackson in October. The chief strategists selected Aaron Henry as their candidate for governor. To reach their goal of 200,000 ballots, organizers built a campaign infrastructure from top to bottom that included rallies, a publicity arm, and volunteers knocking on doors across the state. Despite constant harassment from white authorities, the freedom vote was a success. With only a month of preparation, almost 84,000 cast votes in an election that unified participants and pressed them to see past their fears. There was much work to be done, but the campaign proved the COFO coalition could successfully work together to coordinate statewide campaigns for change.²³

The election was especially resonant given the assassination of President Kennedy later that November. His administration had consistently stepped carefully where Mississippi was concerned, only intervening if all other options were exhausted and, in the case of Jackson, transforming that intervention into a means of halting the direct-action phase of the movement. Yet the president’s decision to endorse federal civil rights legislation was a strong indicator direct-action pressure and mass action worked to bring much needed pressure to bear on administration officials. COFO strategists understood

²³ “Mississippi Negroes Plan Freedom Election.” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 19, 1963; “Freedom Vote’ Planned in Miss.,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 26, 1963; “90,000 Cast Freedom Ballots: Henry-King Slate Win,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 4, 1963; Dittmer, *Local People*, 201-205.

the gravity of those concerns about America's image abroad and maneuvered with them in mind. This was also indicated by the support of black Mississippians for the SCLC-led March on Washington earlier that summer, when 200,000 people marched to the Lincoln memorial. Sympathy marches occurred around the world, and international newspapers praised the messages, size, and solidarity of the participants. It left Kennedy very little choice but to support it despite continued Southern opposition and signaled a new era in American foreign relations. According to Mary Dudziak "the moral power of the movement, the brutality of resistance, and the ever present international gaze meant that civil rights could not be subordinated." It was no longer possible for the President to be seen as a strong leader abroad unless he exhibited strong leadership on civil rights.²⁴

Being "seen" as a strong leader was different than acting like one, however. While Kennedy publicly endorsed a civil rights bill in Congress that aimed to destroy segregation in public accommodations and education, he balked on the addition of voter protections to placate the anger of Southern Senators. Still, his endorsement went a long way in gaining Kennedy support abroad, and his assassination only intensified pressure on Congress to move the bill through both houses. Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson, was determined to push it through the Senate and past the filibustering Southern contingent. In the meantime, COFO assessed the successes and failures of the Freedom Ballot Campaign. They discovered that while the campaign was effective in encouraging blacks to register, it was less effective in generating media coverage. Newspapers had been largely focused on outside student volunteers - particularly white students - who

²⁴ Dudziak, *Cold War, Civil Rights*, 192-200.

had taken part. In Mississippi Mau Mau-fashion, organizers altered their strategies to fit these new parameters and bring greater public attention to mass voter registration efforts. They put out a call for student volunteers to join in a new COFO-sponsored summer project to expand on the freedom ballot efforts that became known as Freedom Summer.²⁵

As President Johnson marshaled the civil rights bill through the Senate, hundreds of students descended on Mississippi in June of 1964.²⁶ Violence was ever present. The Ku Klux Klan, which had been largely dormant in Mississippi since the 1930s, reappeared to terrorize the student volunteers as they registered blacks to vote and established community centers called “freedom schools.” The worst of the terror was unleashed on student volunteers James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. While investigating the alleged bombing of a black church in Philadelphia, Mississippi, Chaney, a black native of Meridian, and Schwerner and Goodman, white New Yorkers in Mississippi for the first time, were murdered by Klansmen. For over a month they remained missing until their bodies were discovered by FBI agents buried under an earthen dam. Press accounts quickly gripped readers worldwide, particularly because two of the murdered students were white men. Over and over again, Mississippi was spotlighted in a way that damaged American credibility.²⁷

²⁵ Dittmer, *Local People*, 207-208; James P. Marshall, *Student Activism and Civil Rights in Mississippi: Protest Politics and the Struggle for Racial Justice, 1960-1965*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 70-81.

²⁶ Claude Sitton, “Negroes to Spur Mississippi Drive: 2,000 Workers to Conduct South’s Widest Program,” *New York Times*, March 16, 1964.

²⁷ Claude Sitton, “Graves at a Damn: Discovery is Made in New Earth Mound in Mississippi,” *New York Times*, August 5, 1964; “Three Bodies Found at Mississippi Damn Where Civil Rights Workers Disappeared,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, August 5, 1964.

Despite the deaths, Freedom Summer went on. In the freedom schools, COFO workers taught basic knowledge, skills, and job training, but the larger goal of their existence extended beyond immediate results. According to Charlie Cobb, a SNCC Field Secretary working in the Delta, the freedom schools were to be serve as the basis for “statewide student action” in the future. Much like Evers had worked tirelessly to cultivate a generation of young activists to challenge white supremacy through the NAACP youth councils, the freedom schools did so with an added element: to celebrate and preserve the culture of black Mississippians across rural/urban and economic lines.²⁸ This philosophy also led COFO to expand their program into a political party that directly challenged the legitimacy of the sitting Democratic delegation from Mississippi in the 1964 primary elections.²⁹ The Freedom Democratic Party, led by 64 delegates, marched into the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey with a fierce determination to force President Johnson and the rest of the Democratic Party to remove the Mississippi delegation for systematically excluding blacks from its activities. It was a shot across the bow at Johnson, who one month prior had signed the Civil Rights Act into law.³⁰ Though that legislation had been landmark in its intent and scope, black Mississippians refused to accept the continued entrenchment of white supremacy in Mississippi’s political system.³¹

²⁸ Dittmer, *Local People*, 258-259.

²⁹ “Insurgents Map Mississippi Plan,” *New York Times*, July 9, 1964; Dorothy Gilliam, “New Party to Challenge Mississippi Democrats,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, July 9, 1964.

³⁰ E.W. Kenworthy, “President Signs Civil Rights Bill, Bids All Back It,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1964.

³¹ Ultimately, Johnson maneuvered to block the FDP delegates from replacing the state delegation for fear doing so would hinder his chances to win election later that year. Offers of two seats to the FDP delegates were met by refusal and a walkout. Dittmer, *Local People*, 285-300; “Miss. Fight Will Highlight Dem Confab,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 15, 1964; Cabell Phillips, “Democrats Face Seating Battle,”

It was a little over one year after Evers' death. In the months and years that followed, the Mississippi movement experienced a series of additional victories and fractures, including the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and the eventual rupture of SNCC. The path forward remained difficult and filled with obstacles. But one thing was for certain: Mississippi was the center of worldwide attention in the fight for racial equality in America. This was Evers' greatest legacy.

New York Times, August 15, 1964; David Kraslow, "Presidential Neutrality Urged on Mississippi," *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 1964.

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