MEDGAR EVERS (1925-1963) AND THE MISSISSIPPI PRESS

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the University of North Texas in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

John R. Tisdale, B.S., M.A.
Denton, Texas
December, 1996
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Medgar Evers was gunned down in front of his home in June 1963, a murder that went unpunished for almost thirty years. Assassinated at the height of the civil rights movement, Evers is a relatively untreated figure in either popular or academic writing.

This dissertation includes three themes. Evers’s death defined his life, particularly his public role. The other two themes define his relationship with the press in Mississippi (and its structure), and his relationship to the various civil rights organizations, including his employer, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Was the newspaper press, both state and national, fair in its treatment of Evers? Did the press use Evers to further the civil rights agenda or to retard that movement, and was Evers able to employ the press as a public relations tool in promoting the NAACP agenda? The obvious answers have been that the Mississippi press editors and publishers defended segregation and that Evers played a minor role in the civil rights movement.

Most newspaper publishers and editorial writers slanted the news to promote segregation but not all newspapers
editors. The Carters of Greenville, J. Oliver Emmerich of McComb and weekly editors Ira Harkey and Hazel Brannon Smith denounced the segregationist groups.

Evers, too, is not easily defined. His life’s work produced few results but his mere presence in the most racist state in the country provided other civil rights organizers with an example of personal strength and fortitude unmatched in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The dissertation reviewed the existing primary and secondary source material, and included personal interviews with primary participants in the Jackson boycotts of 1963.

Evers compares with Abraham Lincoln in that both received little credit for their accomplishments until more than thirty years after their assassinations. Both represented the democratic philosophy of the common man’s ability to achieve deeds not possible in a caste system.
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Thanks to my wife, Cindy, for her patience and encouragement.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MEDGAR EVERS</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>&quot;I'LL TAKE MY STAND&quot;</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>VIGILANT GUARDS OVER THE CLOSED SOCIETY</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Hedermans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Carters of Greenville</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>J. Oliver Emmerich of McComb</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weekly newspapers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>OUTSIDE AGITATORS</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minor and the Times-Picayune</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The New York Times</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deadline Every Minute: The Wire Services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>NEW DIRECTION</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fresh Troops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Revolt of the Rednecks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Citizens’ Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protest Rhetoric Turns to Sit-Ins</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>James Meredith and the University of Mississippi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medgar Evers as a News Source</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>WINTER OF DISCONTENT</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wilkins Targets Jackson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The FBI and Medgar Evers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cold War Rhetoric and the Merchant Boycott</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>&quot;SOME SON OF A BITCH HAS KILLED MEDGAR&quot;</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. CONCLUSION: SOME THOUGHTS ON HISTORY AND MEMORY ... 135

WORKS CITED ................................................................. 147
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Medgar Wiley Evers, field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Jackson, Mississippi, pulled his light blue sedan into the driveway of his modest house just after midnight on June 12, 1963. Evers had spent a lengthy day with African-Americans discussing the heightening tension in Jackson over the merchant boycott and a city court injunction to halt the boycott. Ironically, he carried “Jim Crow Must Go” T-shirts when a gunman hiding behind a honeysuckle bush across the street shot Evers in the back. The bullet entered underneath the left shoulder blade and exited through the chest. The bullet broke a window, penetrated an interior wall, ricocheted off the refrigerator and struck a coffee pot. Evers collapsed before he reached the doorway. His wife and three children screamed when they found him near the front steps. As the Everses children shouted “Daddy, Daddy, get up!”, neighbors grabbed their guns and flipped on the front porch lights. The neighbors found Evers in a pool of blood, barely conscious. They placed him in the back of a station wagon, and transported him to the African-American hospital, where he died less than an hour
later at 1:14 a.m.\textsuperscript{1} By the middle of the next day, the name “Evers” appeared on the front pages of every newspaper.

This dissertation analyzes Evers’s relationship to the press in Mississippi, whether his death defined his life, particularly his public role in the movement, and his formal and informal relationships with the NAACP and other civil rights organizations.

To examine regional newspaper coverage effectively, it is necessary to explain mass media theory and its relationship to the treatment of minorities by the Mississippi press. Although the press has often resorted to sensationalism and come short of its utopian goal of fact-based reporting and writing, the deliberately biased treatment of anything pertaining to African-Americans by the Southern press in the 1960s must be examined and explained.

By the middle of the twentieth century, American leaders worried that misuse of the media threatened democratic

\textsuperscript{1}The most detailed accounts of the night Evers was assassinated are in \textit{The New York Times}, 13 June 1963; Myrlie E. Evers, \textit{For Us, The Living}. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1967; \textit{Jet} magazine, 11 July 1963; \textit{Jackson (Mississippi) Daily News}, the city’s afternoon newspaper; \textit{The (Jackson) Clarion-Ledger}, the city’s morning newspaper; \textit{The (Greenville) Delta Democrat-Times}, an afternoon newspaper; and \textit{The New Orleans Times-Picayune}, a morning newspaper. It is important to distinguish between the morning and afternoon newspapers because Evers was assassinated after the morning newspapers had gone to press. The more comprehensive accounts of the assassination are in the afternoon papers of June 12. The morning newspapers, on June 13, focused more on the investigation and less on the actual assassination.
institutions. They were apprehensive about rampant newspaper sensationalism during the ages of yellow and jazz journalism and the growth of totalitarianism in the USSR, Hitler's Germany, and Mussolini's Italy. *Time* magazine's Henry Luce selected Robert M. Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, to study whether the television, movie, newspaper, and magazine industries served the best interests of society. Luce came up with the idea of the commission and he provided the research funds. Members would consider concentration of ownership of mass media, sensationalism, relations of the government to the media, ethics, and many other issues.²

In releasing its findings in 1947, the commission rejected government regulation as unnecessary. The Hutchins Commission urged the press to provide a truthful, comprehensive, intelligent account of events, explain in context the ramifications of those events, and be a forum for the expression of divergent ideas by different groups.³

The last suggestion changed the basic operating structure of American journalism. The Hutchins Commission reaffirmed the media's right to operate under the "free marketplace of ideas" theory but also stressed the need for


journalists to portray fairly underrepresented groups and to avoid stereotypes. The commission said the mass media concentrated too much coverage of the economic elite, which led to an unrepresentative snapshot of daily life. The commission urged the press to paint a more representative picture of the population, paying particular attention to underrepresented groups, such as African-Americans. Known as the social responsibility theory of the press, this meant that journalists should become ethical watchmen and promote cultural pluralism. Conception of the social responsibility theory was a direct response to a fear of totalitarianism.

The Mississippi press failed both to report civil rights activities accurately and fairly, and to be active in promoting cultural pluralism. If reported at all, Mississippi newspapers relegated African-Americans to the back pages. Newspapers largely ignored the primary qualities of evaluating news—timeliness, proximity, prominence, rarity and human interest—when African-Americans made news. Reporters and editors respected Evers as a news source, but publishers ignored his message.

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Mississippi publishers disliked any challenges, personal or institutional, to the prevailing caste system. This work focuses on how publishers, editors, and reporters perpetuated the closed society of Mississippi through highly selective news coverage.

In the final weeks of his life, Medgar Evers made the front pages of American newspapers, and particularly Mississippi newspapers, because of the media attention generated from the merchant boycott in Jackson. Nationwide, newspapers hailed the assassinated NAACP leader as a principal leader of the civil rights movement.

Why did Medgar Evers become an icon of the movement after his assassination? How and where does Evers fit into civil rights and American history? The second and third themes of the dissertation are whether Evers’s death defined his life, particularly his role in the NAACP and whether other civil rights groups recognized him as a movement leader. The under secretary of the United Nations, Ralph Bunche, who also served on the NAACP board of directors, attended Evers’s funeral. Afterward, he wrote a magazine article describing what the assassination meant to the civil rights movement. He strongly believed Evers and Martin Luther King Jr. shared top billing in 1963. Historians have

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6Ralph Bunche, "Why I Went to Jackson," The Crisis, June-July 1963: 329-332. Bunche wrote the article on 15 June 1963, while traveling from Jackson to New York City immediately after attending Medgar Evers’s funeral.
questioned whether Evers possessed the organizational, rhetorical and public relations skills to be an effective leader. His job entailed informing the police and the media about mistreatment of African-Americans, but Evers, the "quiet integrationist," seldom called attention to himself. Myrlie Evers told her husband to "toot your own horn. If you don't, who will?" He possessed public relations and administrative skills, but Mississippi's mainstream press ignored him.

Newspapers cannot fully explain Evers's accomplishments, but they provide the best example of his relationship with the media. Two dailies in Jackson, as well as newspapers in Greenville, Greenwood, McComb, Natchez, Tupelo, and Vicksburg were studied to measure whether Evers successfully promoted the NAACP. The Memphis, Tennessee, and New Orleans, Louisiana, newspapers circulated widely in Mississippi and provide a bit more perspective.

The New York Times provides a comparative tool. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, The Times ranked as the eminent source of fair, accurate, and enterprise reporting. Jet, a magazine for African-Americans, provided a weekly

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synopsis of the civil rights movement with detailed coverage of Evers's death.

Evers founded the Mississippi Free Press to cover the civil rights movement. The newspaper provided contrast to others that ignored the movement.

Interviews with newspaper reporters and civil rights workers offer further explanations of Evers and the press. Evers and the NAACP instituted an effective public relations policy once the merchant boycott picked up steam in late April 1963. In the weeks before the assassination, the public relations personnel from the New York office visited Jackson to assist Evers.\(^9\) Especially during the boycott, Evers's speeches more forcefully challenged Mississippians to change.\(^{10}\) In spite of venomous and violent resistance from the white citizens of Mississippi, Evers and the NAACP forged ahead with a message of forced conciliation. Evers met with resistance in the African-American community, since many of its citizens feared any association with Evers might lead to economic reprisal from whites. The white-owned media in the state detested the NAACP. To express their grievances, the


\(^{10}\)Ethel Patricia Churchill Murrain, "The Mississippi Man and His Message: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Cultural Themes in the Oratory of Medgar Evers, 1957-1963" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern Mississippi, 1990), 137-139.
younger civil rights organizations and the NAACP used sit-downs and demonstrations. The existence of the Mississippi Free Press provided evidence that the daily newspapers did not serve African-American readers.

A few brave editors and reporters practiced the social responsibility theory of coverage for underrepresented groups, but most harshly criticized Evers and the NAACP's attempt to integrate the state.

Mississippi was the keystone state in defense of segregation and Jim Crow laws. Evers first witnessed abject poverty and wretched living conditions in the Delta where he sold cheap burial insurance to sharecroppers. The experience strengthened his resolve to join the civil rights movement.
CHAPTER 2

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MEDGAR EVERS

Medgar Wiley Evers was born July 2, 1925, outside Decatur in Newton County, Mississippi. His father, James, worked in a sawmill and his mother, Jessie, worked as a housekeeper for a white family. The couple had four children: Charles, Medgar, Ruth and Liz. Jessie had three children--Eva, Eddie and Gene--by a previous marriage. Medgar's parents named him after his maternal great-grandfather Medgar Wright, part African-American, part Native American and all slave.¹

The Evers family was middle-class in Depression-era Mississippi because they owned land. Medgar's grandfather, Mike Evers, was a free African-American who owned 300 acres in Scott County. Whites illegally took the land.² James owned a small farm, but money was scarce. The boys wore homemade coveralls during the week and green tweed pants for church. The boys wore lace-up brogans during the week and what Charles described as "Sunday shoes" for church services. The boys took off their shoes after church, or James would threaten to "whip us good." James's family operated funeral


²Ibid.
status. Despite the lack of disposable income, the family never endured the economic and social conditions that dominated the Delta region.

Jim Crow laws and the agricultural depression that followed World War I reduced African-Americans to even greater poverty than the late nineteenth century. Religious belief that a better life was only possible in the hereafter provided spiritual relief. The family prayed before each meal. The Everses regularly attended services and revivals at the Church of God in Christ. The civil rights leader’s childhood nickname originated at the church:

There was an old man in the church. He’d always shout and dance and carry on, and he--Medgar was about the same color, brown skin. And we started teasing him, ‘You act like old Brother Loper.’ And he (Medgar) just resented it. Oh, he’d just get furious. So then we started calling him Loper. Evers did not shout or “carry on.” His coolness under fire later served him well during the heat of the civil rights movement.

Two years older than Medgar, Charles moved to Chicago in the 1950s. Before leaving the state, Charles occasionally used an uncle’s ambulance to transport bootleg whiskey from Vicksburg. The religious upbringing did not readily permeate Charles’s character, but the discipline and values of the church made a more lasting impression on Medgar.

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From early playmates in Decatur to newspaper reporters who relied on Evers for factual and unbiased civil rights information, all agreed that Medgar was different.

High school classmate Y. Z. Walker remembered Medgar as studious and shy. Medgar was the conscience of his friends. Charles called Medgar the “saint of our family.” Bill Minor, who covered the civil rights movement in Mississippi for the New Orleans Times-Picayune, recalled Evers as “an excellent moderating influence” for civil rights participants. Cliff Sessions, the Jackson bureau chief for United Press International in the late 1950s and early 1960s, described him in religious terms. Jet magazine editor Chester Higgins called Evers the “finest person I ever met.” The steady, calm manner Evers displayed as leader of the NAACP in Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s evolved from the church and from the discrimination he witnessed.

Like other children, the boys swam, fished, hunted, and went to town with their parents. On one trip, future governor


5C. Evers, Evers, 25.


7Chester Higgins interview, Covering the South: A National Symposium on the Media and the Civil Rights Movement 3-5 April 1987, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi.
Theodore Bilbo stumped for state office on the courthouse square. The brothers listened as Bilbo warned whites about the evils of integration.

You see the two little niggers sitting down here. If you don’t do something about it, well, maybe someday they’ll be up here trying to represent you.8

The younger Evers turned to his brother and whispered: “You know Charlie, that ain’t a bad idea.”


Like most Depression families, the Everses bought groceries and supplies on credit. James paid the bill at the end of the month. The brothers decided to tag along, hoping to get a soft drink and candy with the change left from the bill. James believed the storekeeper overcharged the family, but he bought soft drinks before confronting the storekeeper about the discrepancies. After a heated argument, the storekeeper reached for the money drawer. The man kept a gun in the drawer. Without hesitation, the elder Evers smashed the lower end of the pop bottle across the counter to create a weapon. He glared at the store owner, saying, “I’ll kill you. If you go to that drawer, I’ll kill you.”9

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8Evers, interview with author.

9Ibid., 6.
The innocent chatter and gossip in the grocery store stopped. James told his sons to leave the store. "Don't turn back; just look at them and they won't bother you. Turn your back, they'll kill you."

The Everses quickly left town. The boys decided to guard the house for the night, with 10-year-old Medgar stationed at the rear of the house and 12-year-old Charles guarding the front. Both carried .22-caliber rifles. The fight for respect and civil rights started early.

The lynching of family friend James Tingle left an indelible mark on the Evers family. Whites said Tingle insulted a white woman. Without a trial, they dragged Tingle through Decatur, hung him, and shot him.

Tingle's blood-stained clothes eroded on a fence near the road where the Evers brothers walked the twelve miles to school. The whites rode buses. The bus driver slowed the bus so the white children could spit, shout, and throw rocks at the Evers, who dove into the ditches to avoid being hit. The dirt and mud stains on the worn and patched clothing compounded their slight from the self-proclaimed children of God.

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 12; C. Evers, Evers, 59.

12 Ibid., 42.
The Tingle murder reminded African-Americans of what they faced in the white-dominated world of the South. Over time, the man’s clothing became remnants, the red blood became rust-colored, but the message never faded that white superiority reigned in Mississippi.

"The way they treated him [Tingle] really got Medgar and me bitter toward white people. We knew we had to do something about it."

The brothers admired Mau Mau leader Jomo Kenyatta’s brutal retribution against whites in Africa, which ended in 1954. The brothers learned of the Mau Mau uprisings through radio reports and planned to organize a Mau Mau-like organization to kill whites, but the plan never made it past the conversation stage. If either fathered a son, the brothers agreed to name the child for the Mau Mau leader. Charles does not have any sons, but Medgar named his first-born son Darrell Kenyatta. Charles compared the uprisings of Kenyatta to the plight of Native Americans.

Before they struggled for equal rights, the Evers brothers confronted the Germans and Italians in World War II. Medgar and Charles both joined the U. S. Army, with Medgar leaving high school to join a segregated unit. Whites dominated the officer corps and African-Americans worked as cooks and janitors. In a letter to Charles, Medgar deplored

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13C. Evers, Evers, 59.

14Ibid., 74.
the segregated conditions: "When we get out of the army, we're going to straighten this out." In Europe, however, he encountered less segregation. He dated a French girl, ate with her family, and the two corresponded after Medgar returned home. 

He also witnessed the Nazi atrocities against the Jews. The "Nazi image was to recur frequently in his speeches and reports" as field secretary of the NAACP. Charles painfully remembered the paradox of serving his country, but unable to wear his uniform in Mississippi:

"They gave us thirty days to get out of uniform. Here's a country we'd gone and fought for, and to defend for freedom, yet, we couldn't be free to wear any army thing. You sort of felt proud to walk around with your army things. And they knew this. So whites in this state wouldn't allow us to wear our uniform. That bothered us." 

Medgar earned two combat stars for service in the Normandy invasion and for service in northern France, both of which he could not wear when he returned to Mississippi.

Mississippi's elected officials controlled the state. Voting was the key to progress for African-Americans. Decatur was a microcosm of Mississippi and the Deep South in 1946.

\[15\] James Flynn, Negroes of Achievement in Modern America (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1970), 221.

\[16\] C. Evers, Evers, 87; Myrlie B. Evers (with William Peters), For Us, the Living (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 24-25.

\[17\] Nossiter, Of Long Memory, 36.

\[18\] Evers, interview with author.
The list of 900 registered voters did not include any African-Americans. Medgar and Charles registered.

Charles and Medgar enrolled at Alcorn A&M College in fall 1946. Medgar remembered the college president, an African-American, discouraging students from voting. "I couldn't forget that." 19

Medgar, Charles and four friends went to Decatur for the general election. The segregationists warned James Evers to dissuade his sons from voting. About 200 whites blocked the entrance to the courthouse. 20 The tension abated when a white woman pleaded with the angry segregationists that "It isn't worth it. It isn't worth it." 21 The six men received ballots, but segregationists blocked the office. Charles wanted to vote, but Medgar persuaded his brother not to try. 22

As Charles and Medgar walked home, a car pulled up and threatened them. Medgar told Charles that "we'll get them next time," a reference to another attempt to vote. The brothers voted in the 1947 county elections.

Medgar re-entered high school in Alcorn. After completing the requirements, he used the G. I. Bill to enroll


20 Nossiter, Of Long Memory, 36; M. Evers, For Us, The Living, 26.

21 Elton C. Fax, Contemporary Black Leaders (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1970), 199.

22 C. Evers, Evers, 92-94.
in college, where he was a member of the glee club, played football, ran track, and edited the school newspaper for two years. During his junior year, students elected Medgar class president. He participated on the debate team and edited the yearbook in 1951 while pursuing a degree in business administration. Medgar excelled in school. He spurned a fraternity because of other commitments, one of which was working to change Mississippi.

Medgar met Vicksburg native Myrlie Beasley her first day on campus in 1950.

There was something in 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. He had a certain refinement, the air of a gentleman....

The couple married in December 1951 and Medgar graduated in 1952. He initially wanted to move to Chicago where he had worked each summer between semesters. Myrlie liked the idea of leaving the most segregated state in the nation.

Medgar, however, decided his love of Mississippi outweighed the possible economic benefits of Chicago. "There's land here, where a man can raise cattle, and I'm going to do that someday. There are lakes where a man can sink a hook and fight bass." Myrlie Evers did not share her husband's affection for Mississippi but she understood it.

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22M. Evers, For Us, The Living, 33.
24Ibid., 8-9.
25As quoted in Nossiter, Of Long Memory, 37.
He loved it [Mississippi] as a man loves his home, as a farmer loves the soil. Although it might sound strange, he also loved the freedom that was Mississippi—the freedom to move around and to simply be...Medgar also loved the relationship between people. Mississippi was his home. It was part of him. He felt a special closeness to the people.26

Dual careers: Selling insurance, selling memberships

Dr. T. R. M. Howard owned a life and hospitalization insurance company in Mound Bayou. The company hired Evers, who moonlighted selling burial insurance for Mark Thomas, an uncle who owned a funeral home in Philadelphia.27 Howard was a prominent African-American doctor involved in civil rights. The job with the Magnolia Mutual Life Insurance Company was one of the few employment opportunities available to African-American college graduates in the business community. Two-thirds of African-American men worked in jobs associated with agriculture. More than 80 percent worked on farms.28

Long-time NAACP member Aaron Henry worked as secretary for Magnolia and he recruited Evers into the NAACP. Henry the pharmacist and Howard the physician used the life insurance company as a front to conduct civil rights work.29


27C. Evers, Evers, 97.


29Nossiter, Of Long Memory, 38.
After serving in World War II to preserve the idea of democracy, Evers's daily contact with sharecropping families was a constant reminder of the great gulf that existed between the theory of democratic, representative and participatory government that he had fought in World War II to preserve, and the stark reality of people barely subsisting in his own state. Their predicament did not go unnoticed as Evers made his way into the shacks that dotted the tiny Delta hamlets and gravel roads of northwest Mississippi. The dilapidated shotgun houses offered little resistance to the cold winter rains or the stifling summer heat. He sold life insurance to families that could not afford the basic necessities. In late winter and early spring, sharecropping and tenant families often had little or no money left from the money earned from the late summer and early fall harvest of cotton and soybeans.

While the Delta experience moved Evers to action, changes occurred in the United States that laid a foundation for his work in the 1950s and 1960s. The Supreme Court ruled all-white primaries unconstitutional in 1944. President Harry Truman appointed a commission to review integration, education, and voting for African-Americans in 1946. A year later, the group advised Truman to end segregation.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the African-American middle class provided resources and talent to the civil rights movement. The first post-slave generation of African-
Americans migrated north in the late 1910s to find social, educational, and economic opportunities. Between 1890 and 1910, about 200,000 moved northward. From 1914 to 1919, about 500,000 left Dixie, with most moving to New York City, Chicago and Detroit.\textsuperscript{30} African-Americans left for jobs and political freedom.\textsuperscript{31} In Mississippi, more than 300,000 African-Americans left the state in the 1940s, according to 1950 U. S. Census Data. This earlier generation of northward migration produced a professional pool that provided the core of civil rights workers. Evers defied the statistics. His life and career, except for his military service, revolved around Mississippi.

With the judicial changes in the 1940s, Evers considered whether to attend law school. Moving across the Delta selling insurance, he attended civil rights meetings organized by Howard. In high school, Evers organized NAACP chapters throughout the state while he was in high school.\textsuperscript{32} Like Henry and Howard, Evers moonlighted for the NAACP. He organized meetings and sold memberships. He was persuasive.

He was very serious in his delivery. He wasn't a


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{31}James Gilbert, Another Chance: Postwar America, 1945-1968 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 102.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{32}George A. Sewell and Margaret L. Dwight, Mississippi Black History Makers (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 118.}
radical-type man. He was a man you knew was serious. He was actually a good salesman for the cause. This is how I viewed him, as a salesman, because he could talk to a group of people and get them to do something.33

At one of the mass meetings organized by Henry and Howard, NAACP member Emmett Stringer asked for a volunteer to desegregate the University of Mississippi Law School. Evers volunteered. In January 1954, the Jackson Daily News proclaimed: "Negro Applies to Enter Ole Miss."34 Medgar wanted his Alcorn transcripts sent to Oxford.35 Eight months passed before the state reviewed his application. Attorney General J. P. Coleman and other state administrators interviewed Evers, and asked him to accept an out-of-state scholarship. Evers declined.

I plan to live on campus in a dormitory, to use the library, eat in the dining hall, attend classes. But let me assure you that I bathe regularly, that I wear clean clothes and that none of my brown skin will rub off. I won't contaminate the dormitory or the food.36

The state cited a deficiency in the application letters. The law school required recommendation letters from the county where the applicant lived. Two friends in Newton County wrote recommendation letters, but Evers lived in the Delta.

33Nossiter, Of Long Memory, 39.
34C. Evers, Evers, 98.
35Ibid.
36Ibid.; Sewell and Dwight, Mississippi Black History Makers, 119.
A member since 1952, he stepped up his NAACP activities. Mississippi did not have a paid NAACP officer. Volunteer Glouster Current directed all local branches in 1954.

The NAACP limited its presence in Mississippi. The state office opened in 1945. By 1953, the organization counted 21 branches and 1,600 members. The membership numbers displeased the New York office. Mississippi accounted for 13 percent of the lynchings in the United States between 1889 and 1945. Henry and Howard remembered Evers's courage in applying to Ole Miss, and his aggressive recruiting for the NAACP. The pair considered Evers a perfect fit if the New York office decided to hire a full-time, paid staff member for Mississippi.

The Supreme Court's 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka struck down the "separate but equal" doctrine. Citing the Fourteenth Amendment, Thurgood Marshall argued the case for the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund. The Supreme Court ordered federal district courts to implement and uphold the decision. The NAACP reaped benefits from the case. In 1955, the Supreme Court provided federal courts with a blueprint to dismantle

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37 Nossiter, Of Long Memory, 40.

38 M. Evers, For Us, The Living, 98.

segregation. During that year, Marshall told branches to prepare reports on whether states voluntarily desegregated.\(^{40}\)

In 1953, Evers and Moore investigated and documented the substandard conditions in African-American schools. Howard, Moore and Evers visited Walter Sillers Jr., a Delta plantation owner and Speaker of the State House of Representatives. Evers never forgot the meeting in Rosedale where Sillers lived. Howard, Moore and Evers asked whether the legislator would exert pressure on the state to improve the schools. Sillers promised to build more schools. Sillers never faced his visitors, opting instead to look out the window of his office the entire meeting. Siller's actions angered the group.\(^{41}\) Only a few months after the decision, the NAACP decided to challenge segregation in Mississippi.

Glouster Current told' the NAACP to hire Medgar Evers. Marshall wanted a field secretary to investigate the conditions of schools. Charles told Medgar to "let me make the money, and you go out and fight for us, and I'll take care of you."\(^{42}\) NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins in New York City accepted Current's recommendation. The NAACP hired Evers in November 1954 for $4,500 a year. He found office


\(^{41}\)Nossiter, *Of Long Memory*, 41.

\(^{42}\)Evers, interview with author.
space at the African-American Masonic Temple on Lynch Street in Jackson. The two-room office became the nerve center of the civil rights movement from November 1954 until Evers's death in June 1963.43

With great energy and dedication, Evers hit the ground running.

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43Nossiter, Of Long Memory, 42.
In 1930 a Tennessee group argued for a return to an agrarian economy in a book titled "I'll Take My Stand," a familiar refrain from the Civil War period that Southerners still rallied around two decades after the agrarian plea. With hostile opposition from white Mississippians and an intimidated African-American community, Medgar Evers stood virtually alone against the closed society.

White Mississippi quickly organized after the Brown decision. The editor of the Jackson Daily News predicted "human blood may stain Southern soil in many places because of this decision, but the dark red stains of blood will be on the marble steps of the U. S. Supreme Court building." The newspapers opposed Brown. The Citizens' Council formed to align middle- and upper-class citizens against integration. The State Sovereignty Commission sought to intimidate African-Americans into resisting desegregation. Evers faced a united front blocking his path.

The African-American adults shunned Evers because they feared economic blackmail. The youth of Mississippi became the backbone of the movement. As the merchants, ministers and the emerging African-American middle class shuddered at the

\[^{1}\text{Jackson Daily News, 17 May 1954.}\]
thought of direct protest, many of the youths saw an outlet to the frustration of a post-World War II boom that excluded them.

In 1953, the state legislature fired a pre-emptive strike to mollify African-Americans and appease federal judges. The school equalization program attempted to remedy financial disparities in teacher pay, transportation, and facilities to fulfill the "separate but equal" doctrine. The legislature appropriated 300 percent more for whites than African-American schools. In 1952-1953, white teachers earned $2,109 and African-Americans earned $1,153.  

Evers needed to convince the conservative NAACP that the youth could open the doors of the closed society. Evers told youth groups that the NAACP best represented its hopes and dreams. It was a tough sell in the 1950s, even for those who wanted to be teachers.

Evers recruited outside Mississippi. The NAACP sent Evers on a speaking tour around the country in the late 1950s. He typically started his speeches with a description of his childhood in Mississippi and his World War II experiences. He described lynchings to Midwestern audiences, using the rhetorical skills learned on the Alcorn debate team. The gruesome facts, however, buttressed his "high-flown

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idealism." His NAACP badge afforded him instant credibility with the shocked audiences.

Evers used African-American protest rhetoric as a survival mechanism, and to promote civil rights. He encouraged civil discourse, but whites and African-Americans ignored him. Within the survival and freedom framework of rhetoric, Evers opted for non-violent moral suasion over violent revolution.

Non-violent moral suasion calls for a reform movement in which the established order remains, but changes to fit the needs of the protester. Violent revolution calls for a revolutionary movement which abolishes the establishment, replacing it with a better system of government.  

His childhood dream of leading a Mau Mau tribe would best fit the violent revolutionary tactics; either way, Evers sought a "better system of government." The NAACP's confrontational form involved legal maneuverings, fund-raising, and speeches. Moral suasion resulted in few tangible changes in Mississippi. Regardless, Evers never openly supported violent revolution.

The socially accepted forms of communicating ideas through the mass media were not available to Evers. Conversely, confrontation involved "agonistic ritual."

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It is a means of reaffirming loyalties, testing and changing them or offering new ones to replace old loyalties, always expressed in a kind of muted symbolic display designed to elicit a symbolic response which changes attitudes and values without major and unlimited conflict.⁵

For Evers, the closed society necessitated confrontation.⁶ Used in only limited circumstances, confrontational rhetoric occurs in societal breakdowns and when questioning society's moral systems. Frederick Douglas, Sojourner Truth, W. E. B. DuBois, Martin Luther King Jr., and Evers appealed to the "heart and conscience" of whites and "conservative" African-Americans. Nat Turner, Malcolm X, Stokley Carmichael, and H. Rap Brown proposed violent revolution.

Molefi Asante's model of African-American cultural themes framed Evers's rhetoric. Asante divides thirteen themes into three categories: religious (freedom, justice, power, deliverance of Israelites and religious protest), DuBoisian (democracy/justice, brotherhood/humanity, power-rhetorical protest and legal), and contemporary/secular (common enemy, conspiracy, hypocrisy, unity and power-violent).

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Evers used two themes in the DuBoisian category: power-rhetorical protest and legal, and democracy-justice. He avoided the common enemy and power-violent themes.

He did not bait his audiences (typically less than 100) into thinking that all whites represented a common enemy. His rhetorical approach reflected the conservative approach of the NAACP because any other strategy would have been "suicidal."  

In the late nineteenth century, Booker T. Washington stressed that African-Americans could improve within the social and economic constraints. Evers rejected Washington's thesis. Of a different generation, Evers believed democratic principles accorded rights to everyone.

He wanted to reorder the establishment, which used coercion and the threat of violence to maintain power. Evers's rhetoric illustrated a "cautious non-violent stance but not as cautious as most southern leaders." He favored non-violent protests, a change from the passive approach of the previous generation.

Reporter Wilson F. "Bill" Minor covered the civil rights movement in Jackson for the New Orleans Times-Picayune in the late 1950s and 1960s. Many south Mississippi residents

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*Murrain, "Mississippi Man," 137.
subscribed to the *Times-Picayune*. Minor also worked for *The New York Times*. He described Evers as a "straight shooter" who generated enthusiasm in his speeches because of the detailed accounts of violence against African-Americans. Evers's facts, not his rhetoric, captured the attention of audiences.\(^{10}\)

*Jackson Daily News* reporter W. C. "Dub" Shoemaker witnessed a different Evers during the merchant boycott. After a church rally one night, Shoemaker asked Evers why he became a "wild man" in the pulpit, an act that belied the field secretary's normally calm demeanor. "If I didn't react to what they wanted to hear, then they'd get somebody else." Evers increased the rhetoric as the tension from the merchant boycott increased in late May and early June 1963.\(^{11}\)

A police officer in Jackson for more than thirty years, Jim Black started as a patrol officer in 1958. The department promoted him to detective in 1961, and assigned him to monitor Evers's speeches. "I'd go in and sit among the press during the meetings and listen to the various speakers and take notes and then make reports of that."\(^{12}\) A body mike with a wireless transmitter relayed the speech to attentive

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\(^{12}\)Jim Black, interview with author, Jackson, Mississippi, 17 August 1992.
officers in downtown Jackson. At one meeting, the audience shouted, "throw them out, throw them out" concerning the press. A minister at the Pratt Memorial Church meeting accused the press of giving too much credit to the NAACP and not enough to SNCC, CORE, and COFO.

And they were beating on the back of our seats: 'throw them out; throw them out; throw them out.' Well, I became pretty concerned. And they started marching around in the church—and just a full-fledged demonstration. David Dennis, the CORE field secretary, told the crowd to sit down. After a few anxious moments, the marchers sat down. Evers controlled the agenda at NAACP-sponsored meetings, where "that would have not happened. I really believe that."

Shoemaker witnessed Evers respond to a disgruntled audience at a meeting in the Pearl Street African Methodist Episcopal Church. The day before the meeting, the American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) televised a story that many in the audience deemed uncomplimentary. The minister criticized the report and pointed his finger at the ABC film crew near the front of the church. Reporters traditionally sat in the first rows of pews. The incensed audience shouted "get them; get them; get them" and stomping their feet. With a full church, Evers rose from his position on the stage, put his hands on the back of the preacher's shoulders, pushed him back and took the microphone. With frightened reporters huddled in the pews, and an angry audience seeking to vent

Ibid., 8.
its frustrations on the media, Evers moved quickly. The “quiet integrationist,” as The New York Times labeled him, grabbed the microphone and simply shouted “Sit down.” The crowd quickly fell back into the pews.\(^\text{14}\)

Black and Shoemaker attended civil rights meetings because of job assignments. The police department instructed Black to pose as a reporter working with Shoemaker. Black attended most of Evers’s speeches.\(^\text{15}\)

Evers knew his shortcomings and recruited more masterful speakers during the merchant boycott in 1963. Evers assumed the role of master of ceremonies, introducing the speaker, and concluding the evening with a few words of encouragement. The audience often dictated the rhetoric Evers used.\(^\text{15}\)

At the height of the merchant boycott, comedian Dick Gregory visited Jackson for a one-night fund-raiser. During the preliminary introductions, Evers moved to the church pulpit to announce, “My intelligence tells me that we have a police officer in the house. But that’s all right. We have nothing to hide. He’s welcome here.” Evers knew Black worked for the Jackson police, yet the NAACP field secretary did not point or even glance at the officer. Gregory used the officer’s presence to deliver a message:

\(^\text{14}\)Shoemaker, interview with author.

\(^\text{15}\)Black, interview with author.

\(^\text{16}\)Murrain, “Mississippi Man,” 138.
And to the police officer in the house, go back downtown and tell your big daddy to 'stretch the barbwire, baby, 'cause we coming.'

When Evers did speak, he commonly used thematic approaches. He established credibility with references to his participation in World War II, his love of Mississippi, and the greatness of the United States. With war references, he often cited how well Europeans treated African-Americans. The NAACP's longevity aided his credibility. Evers made effective use of his Mississippi connections. Outside the state, his descriptions of murders and beatings captivated audiences.

Without credibility, civil rights leaders withered under the constant death threats, the lack of funds, and the pressure from the increasingly impatient African-American community. Mississippi changed little in the six years after the Brown decision. Evers maintained credibility because "other folks drifted in and drifted out" of Mississippi. Evers brought stability to a rapidly evolving movement whose philosophy and participants fragmented as the 1950s ended.

His stated philosophy was that 'I'll beat you. I'll win. It's morally right. It's legally right. It's the humane thing to do to get this racial thing behind us.' That's what he said in the movement....He was totally in charge."

In the three decades preceding his appointment as field secretary, the NAACP registered a few voters designed to offend the fewest numbers of whites. As the movement grew,

17Ibid.

18Shoemaker, interview with author.
segregationists targeted Evers. He altered his appearance. Traveling at night, he met behind closed doors with interested movement participants.

The media "discovered" Evers after his televised rebuttal to Mayor Allen Thompson’s televised speech of May 13, 1963. Thompson claimed Jackson treated African-Americans fairly, and that African-Americans should not participate in the planned merchant boycott. The speech shocked Evers into action. He called the Justice Department to demand equal air time within Federal Communication Commission guidelines. Seven days later, Evers responded to Thompson’s claims. Evers’s rebuttal rated as "one of Mississippi’s greater public addresses." 

The Jackson boycott of businesses began with a series of meetings in December 1962. Civil rights leaders asked to meet with Mayor Thompson to demand the city hire more African-American policemen and firemen. Thompson refused because "racial agitators" controlled the civil rights organizations. Movement leaders opted for a full-scale, non-violent series of demonstrations. Thompson met with business leaders on two occasions May 13 to address their worries about the tension in the city. At the second meeting, he announced plans to

19Murrain, “Mississippi Man,” 139.

address Jackson residents on a local television station. He vowed to defend Jackson from "racial agitators."  

That night, Evers and about a dozen rights workers listened as Thompson appealed to African-Americans to eschew civil rights workers for the betterment of the city. He blamed the NAACP for the civil unrest.

Fearing violence, the station asked Evers to tape his seventeen-minute response. Evers later attended a strategy session for the boycotts. Evers and rights workers watched the speech at a home next to the Masonic Lodge.

Jackson can change if it wills to do so... We believe there are white Mississippians who want to go forward on the race question. Their religion tells them there is something wrong with the old system. Their sense of justice and fair play sends them the same message.

Evers promoted the boycott despite objections from the NAACP headquarters. Evers appealed to whites and African-Americans. He expressed his lifelong struggle for justice and equality. The movement had changed since the 1950s. The protest and sit-in movements in Birmingham, Alabama, and Greensboro, North Carolina, signaled an end to the NAACP's legalistic approach. SNCC, CORE, and COFO moved into Mississippi. The NAACP and Medgar Evers felt a nudge to move aside or change. By 1960, even whites sensed the change. The

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21Ibid., 108.

22Ibid., 109-110.

23Ibid., 120.
media resisted. The new decade pitted Evers and the Mississippi media on opposite sides of a struggle that both knew was coming, but with an outcome that neither could predict.
CHAPTER 4

VIGILANT GUARDS OVER THE CLOSED SOCIETY

Mississippi newspapers blocked Medgar Evers's access to communication channels.¹ The newspapers mirrored the local power structure in their disdain for integration. Instead, national news organizations more thoroughly reported the violence of civil rights demonstrations in the state.² Newspapers ignored Evers as a topic for the news pages, but not the opinion pages. Editorial writers targeted civil rights leaders, including Evers.

One Mississippi reporter believed journalists "adequately" covered the civil rights movement.³ W. C. Shoemaker said his newspaper promoted "very strong opinions," but news executives did not dictate "what to cover, how to write, or how not to write" about civil rights.⁴

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John O. Emmerich disagreed. Southern newspapers, especially Mississippi newspapers, often mixed editorial opinion and fact-based reporting. Newspapers slanted the news. Hodding Carter III compared the segregated news columns with the segregated churches:

Not merely did it [the Southern press] ignore what was occurring in the Negro community, that is to say the really fundamental yearnings, changes and tensions; it ran no news of the Negro community whatsoever.

Newspapers relegated African-American news coverage under the heading “News of our Colored Folk” or in special segregated sections. Newspapers did not acknowledge African-American accomplishments, marriages, deaths or societal news. Lack of coverage often precluded slanted coverage. Newspaper publishers accurately reflected the conventional value systems of the chamber of commerce and the nine-hole country club. Carter’s explanation was not as an apologist. He believed Southern newspapers reported civil rights events

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8Ibid., 40.
more accurately after the 1954 Brown decision. Pressure from the Eisenhower and Kennedy presidencies changed the system.

Local television stations, like their newspaper counterparts, failed to cover the civil rights movement. In September 1955, civil rights attorney Thurgood Marshall discussed school desegregation on NBC’s “Today” show. During the interview, Jackson’s NBC affiliate, WLBT, flashed a “Cable Difficulty” logo on the screen. The station rejoined the network feed after the Marshall interview.⁹ Later that month at a Jackson Citizens’ Council meeting, WLBT station manager Fred Beard criticized the networks for “Negro propaganda.” Council members cheered his remarks. From that point forward, the state’s television stations regularly used the “Sorry, Cable Trouble” sign. The other primary station, WJTV, experienced technical problems with civil rights stories.

WJTV newscaster Bob Neblett apologized for referring on-air to the Birmingham, Alabama, jail as “half full of niggers now.” Evers’s Free Press reported the on-air slur, the only newspaper in the Jackson area to report the event.¹⁰

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The television affiliates rejected the visual revolution because networks reported civil rights stories.\textsuperscript{11} WLBT's Fred Beard complained to United Press reporter Cliff Sessions about wire service coverage of Evers. The Mississippi native tried to explain his role as an impartial journalist to Beard, but the station manager would not listen.

And he got all red in the face and he said, 'Sessions, you're an integrationist.' And he walked away and went about ten paces and stopped and turned around and said, 'Crawl back under your rock. You've been exposed; you're an integrationist.'\textsuperscript{12}

Another story involved Bob Hederman, who along with his two brothers—Henry and Zack—and cousin Tom, owned and operated the morning circulation \textit{Clarion-Ledger} and the afternoon circulation \textit{Daily News}. Hederman called Sessions to complain that a news story describing former Governor Ross Barnett as an "aging segregationist" was unfair because "everybody is aging."\textsuperscript{13} "White supremacists who held a visceral contempt for anything Yankee," best described the attitudes of the majority of publishers and editors in Mississippi.\textsuperscript{14}


\textsuperscript{12}Cliff Sessions, interview with author, Biloxi, Mississippi, 24 July 1992.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{14}Dittmer, \textit{Local People}, 64.
The Hedermans

Thomas and Robert Hederman moved to Jackson in 1894 from Scott County. The pair bought the Clarion-Ledger in 1920 and the Daily News from Fred Sullens in the 1950s. The Hedermans served as board members of the Mississippi Press Association and ran the chamber of commerce. Their views reflected the thinking of most of the state. When the civil rights movement enveloped the state in the early 1960s, the Clarion-Ledger and the Daily News boasted combined circulations of more than 90,000, and a statewide audience. In a 1966 speech, Robert Michael Hederman Jr. boasted that the Jackson newspapers "take second seat to no metropolitan daily in the United States. These papers are among the few in the nation with circulation in every county of their home state." The Biloxi Sun-Herald, the next largest newspaper, printed 28,000 newspapers each day in 1960.

Rivals before the merger, the Hedermans bought the Daily News in 1954 and moved its editorial staff into the Clarion-

15Ibid., 64-65; Nossiter, Of Long Memory, 83; Shoemaker, interview with author.

16Robert Michael Hederman Jr., The Hederman Story: A Saga of the Printed Word in Mississippi (New York: The Newcomen Society in North America, 1966). Established in 1923, the Newcomen Society promotes "material history, as distinguished from political history." The text of the speech did not contain page numbers. Hederman delivered his speech at the May 5, 1966, Mississippi Dinner of The Newcomen Society of North America, which was held at the Hotel Heidelberg in Jackson.
Ledger building. The move upset the Daily News staff. "We were hostile, I guess--hostile movers. We'd been raised not to like them." Editor Sullens poked fun at Colonel Hi Henry, owner of a competing daily newspaper:

The colonel became ill and the family physician was summoned. He put the stethoscope to the colonel's chest and said sadly, 'His circulation is just about gone.' The colonel jumped out of bed and said angrily, 'There's nothing wrong with my circulation. I have 5,000 more circulation than the Jackson Daily News.'

Until his death in 1958, Sullens battled state lawmakers and bureaucrats on the front page. Editors described Sullens as a "fiery newspaper editor of the old style." He "had a penchant for words, an extensive vocabulary, a fighting spirit, and varied moods. He could be romantic, even poetic, and at times humorous; but his newspaper was read more intently when he dipped his pen in venom."

The Jackson dailies represented the "benchmark of extreme racism." In its newspaper, the Citizens' Council reprinted Clarion-Ledger and Daily News editorials. The Hedermans belonged to the most powerful church in the state, the First Baptist Church on State Street across from the

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17 Shoemaker, interview with author.


19 Emmerich, interview with author.

20 Jackson Daily News, 10 October 1954; Emmerich, Two Faces of Janus, 57.
The newspapers and churches in Mississippi were two of the most segregated institutions in the state. The Hedermans newspapers reflected "what the people of the state believe and are prepared to defend." The Jackson newspapers served as the "drum beaters for segregation" and the "unenlightened racial attitude that prevailed." Organized religion upheld the closed society from the outset. Until the Brown decision, mainstream churches shaped the orthodoxy of segregation.

Southern Baptists believed the Brown decision constituted an attack on individual freedom. Of all the Christian denominations, only the state diocese of the Episcopal Church supported the decision.

A few Protestant ministers, however, joined the struggle. The Reverend Edwin King, the chaplain at Tougaloo College, believed the state's newspapers avoided the truth.

We used to think, if we could just tell the truth to America, it would be different. And then we discovered it's very hard to tell the truth when the organs through which the truth is supposed to be told are citizens of that America who don't believe it.

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21 Nossiter, Of Long Memory, 83.

22 Emmerich, interview with author.


24 Silver, Closed Society, 30.

The Carters of Greenville

Despite the Hederman's domination of the print medium in Mississippi, a few brave editors questioned the orthodoxy. The Greenville Delta Democrat-Times earned a reputation for its progressive editorial page. Columbia University awarded Hodding Carter Jr., affectionately known as "Big Hod" because of his size, the Pulitzer Prize in 1946 for editorial writing.

Wilson F. "Bill" Minor believed Carter's newspaper reported fairly the civil rights news in Greenville and in the state.\(^{26}\) Considered a moderate, the Carter family newspaper upset its readers. According to Governor Theodore G. Bilbo, "No self-respecting Southern white man would accept a prize given by a bunch of nigger-loving Yankeeified Communists for editorials advocating the mongrelization of the race."\(^{27}\) The Carter newspaper wielded the moderate position more strongly than any other daily newspaper.\(^{28}\)


Born in 1907, Hodding Carter grew up in the Tangipahoa Parish near Hammond, Louisiana. An aggressive editor at the Hammond Daily Courier, Carter challenged the popular Huey Long. The Kingfish won most of the battles. With the backing of businessmen and local writers, Carter started a newspaper in Greenville, a town of 30,000 on the Mississippi River. William Percy recruited Carter. Shortly after starting the Greenville newspaper, the Carters purchased the competition to form the Delta Democrat-Times.  

The times bounded Carter's moderation. As publisher, he drew the ire of civil rights antagonists. The Reverend Edwin King described the Carters as representative of a "moderately right-wing conservative newspaper" who "bitterly fought" the civil rights movement. The state legislature condemned the Carters as liberals. In his newspaper, Carter provoked debate, and enjoyed the letters from readers. "What I have tried to do...is show my fellow Southerners what is still wrong about us and tells our fellow Americans elsewhere what is right about us."  

Civil rights participants found an ally in Carter. Carter wrote hundreds of mass circulation magazine articles

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29Dittmer, Local People, 66-67.  
31King, interview with author.
and numerous books that appeared in The New York Times, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Look magazine, Reader's Digest, Outdoor Life and the New Republic. By 1963, Carter had written ten books and either contributed or collaborated on five more. More familiar to subscribers of Reader's Digest than to most Mississippians, Carter's published articles provided Americans with a glimpse of the state. Ralph McGill's foreword in the 1966 paperback edition of Carter's Southern Legacy praised Carter for his courageous stands on race relations.  

The Carter newspaper had little influence—or circulation—outside the lower Delta region. In a 1961 article, Carter admitted, "Our circulation is small and our range of influence is narrow. Our political and other comments are effective only within a limited area." He was too modest.

Hodding Carter opposed lynching, but he objected to federal anti-lynching laws. He opposed economic discrimination but opposed President Truman's Fair Employment Practices Commission. Editorially, he opposed desegregating

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schools and he criticized the NAACP for its divisive rhetoric. Carter, the Mississippi moderate, was a “fair play segregationist.” Big Hod did not oppose the 1896 Supreme Court decision of Plessy v. Ferguson, which upheld the “separate but equal” doctrine. Carter believed equality possible even if the races remained segregated. The majority of Mississippians believed in the “separate” portion of the doctrine, but not the possibility of equality. Carter disagreed with Justice John Marshall Harlan’s dissenting opinion in the Plessy case.

“The arbitrary separation of citizens, on the basis of race...is a badge of servitude wholly inconsistent with civil freedom” Harlan wrote. With white parents in control of the school boards and African-Americans in low-income jobs, whites believed a disproportionate amount of the tax revenue should go to white children, he opined in 1959. The post-war industrial and agricultural booms contributed to less racism. The boom, however, bypassed Mississippi. More efficient agricultural machinery eliminated the crop-lien and sharecropping systems. Cartersupported individual rights. He believed the government should not mandate where children attended school.

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34Dittmer, Local People, 66-68.

Government intervention bothered Carter. He did not defend segregation on moral grounds.

Hodding Carter believed that reportorial detachment in Greenville usurped his rights and responsibilities as a citizen. Carter the citizen could be more effective in the community than Carter the detached, objective editor. At community newspapers, the editor/publisher becomes a news source, especially since that person may serve as president of a non-profit organization or serve on governmental committees. Editors in small towns serve as leaders in the community, creating a blurred line between citizen involvement and the detached journalist. Carter's position was not unusual.

Hodding Carter III echoed his father's observations. Southern newspapers in the mid-twentieth century operated in rural, poor communities with small editorial staffs and low wages. The newspapers simply reflected the sentiments and values of the community. Without acting as an apologist, the younger Carter called the segregated newspapers "a natural thing." The businesses that advertised in the town newspaper also sat elbow-to-elbow with the Hodding Carters at the chamber of commerce meetings. Small town newspapers have

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36 Hodding Carter, "The Editor as Citizen," 244-245.
fewer advertising customers. Disgruntled advertisers spell disaster in rural communities.

Economic pressure came from different areas for publishers. In Greenville, the Citizens’ Council objected to a scheduled baseball game between a touring African-American team and a white team. The day before the game, an airplane scattered handbills over the city, asking “Are You Proud of Greenville?” The Council threatened the city with economic reprisals. The game’s promoter decided the publicity would hurt the team. Instead, the sponsor scheduled two African-American teams. The Council won, but not before Carter criticized the group for its coercive practices.

Against the backdrop of the Brown decision, the Citizens’ Council emerged. In July 1954, Robert Patterson of Indianola mapped out a plan to oppose integration. The Ku Klux Klan did not interest Patterson. He preferred to avoid that group’s violent heritage, and planned a public meeting. About seventy-five Indianola residents attended. By October, the group numbered more than 25,000. The lower courts wrestled with the Brown decision while the council planned economic intimidation for the African-Americans involved in the NAACP.38

Carter opposed the council. The Mississippi Legislature passed a resolution of censure against Carter for “selling

38Dittmer, Local People, 45.
out the state for Yankee gold" in reference to his payment for the article. The 89-19 vote on the resolution declared that Carter lied about the state and the council’s activities. In an editorial the next day, Carter said the eighty-nine who voted for the censure could "go to hell and wait there for me to back down." Council members approached merchants to say they would boycott businesses that advertised in the Delta Democrat-Times. The newspaper temporarily lost advertising and subscriptions.

Representative Joel Blass of Stone County, who voted against the measure, claimed the council had a different purpose. Blass opposed a state constitutional amendment defending segregation. The circulars linked him, Carter, and J. Oliver Emmerich of the McComb Enterprise-Journal with the NAACP in opposing the amendment.39

J. Oliver Emmerich of McComb

J. Oliver Emmerich worked as a county farm agent with the Mississippi Agricultural Extension Service before starting in the newspaper business. His agricultural work proved that "the poor grew poorer and the rich grew richer."40 Emmerich’s newspaper extended courtesy titles to African-American newsmakers in the McComb community. The changes for Emmerich did not occur overnight, but evolved over a half century.


40Ibid., 4-5.
When people are objective, they can recognize impending challenges. When they are emotional, however, they cannot always recognize truth. Not to be forgotten is the unquestioned fact that challenges are inevitable. They come with time and change. Thus one face of Janus looks inward at the emotions of people, while the other peers outward hopefully, perhaps, in the direction of objectivity.\footnote{Emmerich, Two Faces of Janus, 120.}

Emmerich bought the McComb newspaper in 1923. Emmerich cited the Roman mythological god to describe the contradictory conscience of the Southern heritage: African-American versus white, saint versus sinner, freedom versus slavery, those who look back to the past versus those who look forward to the future. Emmerich struggled with these contradictions.\footnote{Ibid., vii-viii.}

In 1954 and 1970, Emmerich earned the Freedom Foundation's George Washington gold medal for distinguished editorial writing. The national journalism society Sigma Delta Chi recognized Emmerich's work in 1964. Emmerich and Carter held similar values. He supported states' rights, the "separate but equal" theory, the Dixiecrat Party in 1948, and he opposed federal intervention in the Brown decision.

As a delegate to the 1948 Democratic convention in Chicago, Emmerich, the Mississippi delegates and half of the Alabama delegates walked out in protest. The issue, according to Southerners, involved states' rights. The real issue, however, involved President Harry Truman's four-point plan,
which included a federal anti-lynching law, minority voting rights, a fair employment act, and elimination of discrimination in the armed forces. Emmerich believed the federal government overstepped its bounds.\textsuperscript{43} The elder Emmerich's experience in Chicago turned him to the Republican party. He introduced Vice President Richard Nixon to a Jackson audience during the 1960 presidential campaign.

Federal injunctions and organized protests changed Emmerich. "He's much more respected now that he's dead than he was when he was alive. I mean, that's the way it always is."\textsuperscript{44} Emmerich made a "remarkable conversion, and he was putting out a very progressive paper, and he had a very progressive editorial policy." The McComb newspaper was in the heart of Ku Klux Klan country. From the early 1950s until the late 1960s, the elder Emmerich's editorials pushed McComb toward a more tolerant community. "I think he deserved the Pulitzer Prize more than anyone because he got results. I mean, he brought about change in that community."\textsuperscript{45}

By the late 1950s, Emmerich realized African-Americans deserved civil rights and fair treatment. He defended the southern viewpoint on race in panel discussions. On separate occasions, he debated Roy Wilkins, head of the NAACP, and

\textsuperscript{43}Ibid., 87-88.
\textsuperscript{44}Emmerich, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{45}Minor, interview with author.
Thurgood Marshall, NAACP's Legal Defense Fund attorney. He saw the dilapidated African-American schools in McComb, but the basketball team at the white school sported new uniforms. For Emmerich, the civil rights movement evolved over two decades, and he decided to extend courtesy titles to African-Americans. The newspaper referred to married African-American women as Mrs. and single women as Miss. Whites violently disagreed. One reader marched into the office and asked: "Our niggers are already uppity enough. Are you trying to make them more uppity?" Emmerich explained that courtesy titles required neither government nor private funds, and that the "recognition of human dignity is nothing short of common courtesy." 46

Emmerich's moderate approach clashed with the segregationists. He criticized Governor Ross Barnett's attempt to block James Meredith from attending the University of Mississippi. The university rejected Meredith's application in 1962. The 29-year-old Air Force veteran appealed. Federal District Judge Sidney C. Mize said the university did not discriminate against Meredith, and he dismissed the case. Evers counseled Meredith. The NAACP supported Meredith. The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals reversed the lower court. After more litigation, the courts cleared the way for Meredith, but Barnett denounced the

46Emmerich, Two Faces of Janus, 117.
federal court decision. Emmerich took the cautious approach in criticizing Barnett. Interference with the court directive could effect accreditation at Ole Miss, which would damage higher education. Also, the publicity damaged the state’s already tarnished image.⁴⁷

The readers revolted. An organized circulation boycott began. Each caller used identical language: "I want to cancel my subscription to the Enterprise-Journal, and I want you to know that it is part of an organized campaign." The committee sought an advertising boycott. In reality, however, advertisers have an interdependent relationship with the mass media. Advertisers need to sell merchandise. Circulation dropped five percent in two months, but rebounded to the pre-boycott figures within two months. The newspaper reported increased circulation six months later.⁴⁸

Emmerich faced another hurdle when the Freedom Riders arrived in McComb. Mississippians resented "outsiders" telling them how to live. Thugs attacked five visiting journalists outside the Enterprise-Journal offices. Another man assaulted Emmerich. The man asked whether Emmerich owned the newspaper before punching him in the face. A jury acquitted the man. Nonconformity meant danger in the closed society.

⁴⁷Ibid., 121-127.
⁴⁸Ibid., 127-128.
George McLean's Tupelo Journal also supported moderation. "In education, politics, race relations...McLean was about twenty years ahead of everybody else. He never breathed a hypocritical breath or thought a hypocritical thought." Tupelo was in the least populated area of the state and did not experience the civil rights activities that occurred in the southern and western regions. The northeast corner has more hills and is less attractive to farmers. Since eighty percent of African-American men worked in agricultural jobs, fewer African-Americans lived in the northeast region. That did not stop George Yarborough, a state legislator and Citizens' Council member from admonishing African-Americans. As owner of a weekly newspaper in Holly Springs near Tupelo, Yarborough supported Barnett during the Ole Miss crisis.

The Vicksburg Evening Post represented the sentiments of the average newspaper in Mississippi. Myrlie Evers and the Reverend Edwin King were born and reared in Vicksburg. The Cashman family published the first Evening Post on 5 May 1883. Families owned the majority of the state's newspapers.

Unlike most newspaper towns, however, Natchez residents benefited from competition. The Natchez Democrat was a morning newspaper. The Blanchard family operated the Natchez...

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Erle Johnston, Mississippi's Defiant Years, 1953-1973 (Forest, Miss.: Lake Harbor, 1990), 396.

Minor, interview with author.
Times, an afternoon newspaper that subscribed to United Press International and boasted of a circulation of 8,447; the Democrat printed 6,629 papers a day, except on Mondays when it did not publish. The majority of newspapers in Mississippi delivered the news in the afternoon or early evening (PM newspapers). Jackson, Natchez, and Tupelo published AM newspapers. Most Mississippi newspapers published in the afternoons on Monday through Friday, and published morning editions on Saturdays or Sundays. Most, however, published strictly Monday through Friday afternoons. The Vicksburg and Natchez newspapers favored the "separate but equal" doctrine to counterbalance the Greenville and McComb newspapers. Single-family ownerships controlled the Natchez and Vicksburg newspapers for several generations, assuring that both reflected community values and mores.

Weekly Newspapers


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51 Editor and Publisher International Yearbook, 1960 (New York: Editor and Publisher, 1960). The yearbook is published annually and lists circulation figures, census data for each newspaper’s town and county, and a list of editorial, advertising, and business executives for each newspaper. The circulation figures are supplied by the Audit Bureau of Circulation, and not the newspaper.
Johnston, who owned and operated the *Scott County Times* from 1941 to 1983, cited Harkey, Smith, and East as editors who openly defied the Citizens' Council at the risk of economic ruin. The list of weekly editors who occasionally defied the closed society also included Paul Pittman of the Tylertown *Times*, Hunt Howell of the Batesville *Panolian*, Phil Mullen of the *Madison County Herald*, and Hal Decell of the *Deer Creek Pilot* in Rolling Fork.\(^5^2\)

Anonymous callers threatened to kill Ira Harkey, but he counter-attacked with front-page editorials. He often criticized Governor Ross Barnett's anti-government oratory. He softened his editorial stance only "to save my own skin."\(^5^3\) Few people in Pascagoula agreed with Harkey. The African-American boycott of businesses in Biloxi, and federal intervention in voter registration angered Gulf Coast residents. In Jackson County, Harkey had two friends—Claude Ramsay of the AFL-CIO and Saul Peterzell, a furniture store owner.

Harkey left Pascagoula in 1963. In his last year as editor and publisher, Harkey lived in hotels with hired body guards. "I was a pariah, and it wasn't a comfortable thing....I wanted to go somewhere and look at a mountain for

\(^{52}\)Johnston, *Mississippi's Defiant Years*, 397-398.

\(^{53}\)Ira Harkey, interview with author, Kerrville, Texas, 5 August 1993.
a while, and that's what I did." Harkey's newspaper turned a profit in 1963 and he sold it.

Holmes County residents loathed Hazel Brannon Smith. They bombed her offices. In 1954, Sheriff Richard F. Byrd and three other officers accused an African-American man of hollering outside a restaurant. The sheriff walked outside, where the man denied the accusation. The sheriff told the man to run and then shot him in the thigh. Smith wrote a front-page editorial denouncing the sheriff's actions. The sheriff filed a libel suit for $57,500 in punitive and actual damages. A jury awarded the sheriff $10,000, but Smith appealed to the Mississippi Supreme Court, which reversed the jury's decision. The Holmes County grand jury declined to indict the sheriff on criminal charges.55

"I fight not because I'm for integration, per se, but because I'm for freedom for every person, regardless of skin color." Smith's views represented the laissez-faire economic philosophy more than a social philosophy. She believed the government should not regulate individuals. Walter D. Smith, her husband, lost his job as administrator of the Holmes County Hospital despite the medical staff's resolution asking that he be retained.56

54 Ibid.

55 Johnston, Mississippi's Defiant Years, 398-399.

56 Ibid., 400.
The Citizens' Council continued attacking Smith. The Council and thirty-five businessmen and farmers started a newspaper to compete with Smith's Advertiser. The group raised $15,000 of the $30,000 needed for start-up, and hired Chester Marshall as general manager. Marshall left his job as general manager of the Advertiser. "The thirty pieces of silver have become thirty thousand dollars by today's inflation." Smith's newspaper lost advertisers for eighteen months. The Council funded new competition, The Holmes County Herald.

Legal notices and bids for government contract have historically provided a large percentage of revenue for weekly newspapers. Holmes County was no different. In an attempt to break Smith, the state legislature passed a reprisal law allowing counties to publish legal notices outside the municipality. The law applied only to Holmes County. The chairman of the legislative committee remarked that "a woman editor has been writing things which don't go along with the feelings in the community."

The Council boycott damaged circulation at Smith's newspapers. The fact-based reporting she demanded met the needs, but the opinion page caused friction in Durant and

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57Ibid., 399; Hodding Carter III, The South Strikes Back, 154.

58Ibid., 154-155.

Lexington. In October 1964, a bomb exploded in her office. No injuries occurred. The pressures from those years and the long hours of publishing a weekly newspaper eventually eroded Smith's "mind and spirit." Unable to pay the bills, auctioneers sold her home, land and furniture. The Lexington Advertiser published its last issue 18 September 1985. 

P. D. East, publisher of The Petal Paper, attacked segregation with a vengeance. With only 2,000 subscribers, the paper did not last. East's eccentric, sarcastic, aggressive style reflected his distaste for the Citizens' Council, which he labeled "Bigger and Better Bigots Bureau." In his "East Side" column of 15 March 1956, he wrote: "Like prostitution, bigotry and intolerance must be a high profit business--else there wouldn't be so much of it." East's newspaper burned like a meteor. It burned brightly in the 1950s and faded just as quickly when the tension of sit-ins and protests made his newspaper a target of criticism and threats. The Citizens' Council pressured advertisers to abandon East. His acerbic nature created enemies even among those who supported his progressive editorials.

The attitudes of editors and publishers reflected the values and sentiments of most citizens. East and Smith were the exceptions. Hodding Carter and J. Oliver Emmerich

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60. Johnston, Mississippi's Defiant Years, 399-400.
understood their responsibilities as citizens, and as pragmatists who understood their responsibilities as businessmen. Journalism historians labeled the Carters and Emmerichs as moderates although both held provincial attitudes, even by the standards of the 1950s. The Carters and Emmerichs believed individuals deserved fair treatment. Both, however, continued to adhere to conservative economic and constitutional attitudes. In the small communities, publishers also served as community leaders more associated with local power elites than with the journalism profession. Smaller newspapers, which comprise the bulk of the research in this paper and their editors/publishers lacked the detachment necessary to maintain objectivity. Without that objectivity, newspapers became pro bono advocates for slanted reporting.

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CHAPTER 5
OUTSIDE AGITATORS

Segregationists labeled reporters who covered the sit-ins and demonstrations for non-Mississippi newspapers "outside agitators." They did not appreciate the picture the mass media painted. Mississippians blamed the NAACP, the demonstrators, and the media for poor race relations. For the most part, however, reporters who covered the civil rights activity had roots in the South. The term "outside agitators" incorrectly defined their lineage.

Minor and the Times-Picayune

Born in Hammond, Louisiana, in 1922, Wilson F. "Bill" Minor worked for the New Orleans Times-Picayune at its Jackson, Mississippi, bureau. Although considered one of the outside agitators, Minor was born and reared in Louisiana and south Mississippi. His father, a linotype operator, worked for newspapers in Louisiana and Mississippi along the Highway 51 corridor that runs from Memphis to New Orleans.

Minor managed the Jackson bureau from 1947 until the Times-Picayune decided to close it in 1976. National correspondents in Mississippi sought Minor's advice on the social and economic nuances. Minor helped reporters with advice on where to go and who would talk. Minor was the "only good reporter in Mississippi during those crucial, historic
years of the civil rights struggle." Newspapers traditionally place a staff reporter's name before the first paragraph in a story because the editors know the person. Newspaper editors often removed the name of a wire service reporter from the story, opting to give credit to the Associated Press or United Press International instead. Therefore, wire service reporters often worked anonymously. The reporters assigned to Mississippi bureaus, however, covered the civil rights movement as well as Minor.

Visiting reporters and Mississippi's moderate publishers respected wire service reporters Cliff Sessions and John Herbers and Kenneth Toier of the Memphis, Tennessee, Commercial Appeal. Wire service reporters maintained an awkward relationship with Mississippi journalists. Minor befriended Jackson Daily News photographer Jimmy Ward. In the early 1950s, Minor paid Ward to shoot part-time for the Times-Picayune. Ward earned a substantial second income. As the tension built after the Brown decision, Minor's "Eyes on Mississippi" column generated criticism from readers and journalists. As a columnist for the Daily News in the mid-1950s, Ward called Minor "soft" on segregation, meaning any overt gesture of fairness toward Evers and the NAACP. The

term "soft" originated from congressmen who questioned the loyalty of citizens with any ties to the communist party. Minor and Ward parted company.\(^2\)

The *Times-Picayune* opened the Jackson bureau to boost circulation in the southern regions of Mississippi. The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* circulated in the Delta and northeast regions of Mississippi. The Hederman newspapers competed with the Memphis and New Orleans newspapers for readership in the rural areas.

The Reverend Edwin King believed Medgar Evers trusted Minor "and had an enormous respect for him."\(^3\) Minor's weekly column challenged the status quo. He fairly and accurately reported stories that Mississippians disliked. Minor and Ken Toler of the *Commercial Appeal* provided the most objective and fair reporting of practicing journalists in Mississippi.\(^4\)

Minor first met Evers in 1958. The two developed a journalist-source relationship a year later. Minor immediately liked Evers and the two visited often at the

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\(^3\)Reverend Edwin King, interview with author, Jackson, Mississippi, 18 August 1992.

NAACP offices. "He was a very reliable source, and you could depend on what he said...of course he was hoping to get more attention nationally to his own work." A Jet magazine editor "respected and admired" Evers. "He was a person whose word you could take." A Jet magazine editor "respected and admired" Evers. "He was a person whose word you could take."  

A Jackson Daily News reporter described Evers as "one of the most honorable people in the civil rights movement....I had a great deal of faith in him, and I think he in me, maybe." The reporter worked for the Hedermans. Evers distrusted the Jackson newspapers or anyone remotely associated with the Hedermans. Wire service reporters covered unfolding events without regard to whether advertisers would complain about civil rights news. John Herbers worked for the United Press International bureau from 1951 to 1962 in Jackson and for The New York Times. News about racial prejudice often produced "a total blackout on that subject" in the state's newspapers.

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5Minor, interview with author.


7Shoemaker, University of Mississippi Symposium, 4 April 1987.

8Cumming, "The Lower Truth of Bill Minor." 16.
Minor believed the fear of "Main Street" made cowards of many Mississippi publishers.  

The Memphis, Tennessee, Commercial Appeal staffed bureaus in state capitals and in the smaller towns of Arkansas, Mississippi, and west Tennessee. Kenneth Toler worked in the Jackson bureau. As a morning circulation newspaper, the Commercial Appeal competed with the Clarion-Ledger for "second" newspaper readership throughout the Delta and northeast Mississippi. The newspaper covered the civil rights movement. Editorially, the newspaper "varied from moderate to conservative." The Memphis newspaper’s leadership helped integrate the schools in that city.  

Andy Reese, United Press International bureau chief in Memphis from 1961 to 1963, remembered the Commercial Appeal as a moderate voice on race issues. The Memphis Press Scimitar, the city’s afternoon newspaper, circulated primarily in the city. The Commercial Appeal served a larger audience, and wielded editorial influence.  

Readers recognized Toler’s byline. The Mississippi legislature recognized Toler’s work with commendations.  

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9Minor, interview with author.  


11Andy Reese, interview with author, Jackson, Mississippi, 18 August 1992.  

Minor competed with Toler as a member of the capital press corps. "He liked to think of himself as sort of the Godfather image to a lot of these (Mississippi) state employees and politicians. But, hell, he would never print any of it."

Minor said Toler never converted his source material into completed stories.\(^\text{13}\) The Memphis newspaper promoted progressive policies, including courtesy titles for African-Americans. It hired an African-American sports reporter in the 1950s and African-American reporters and copy editors in the 1950s.\(^\text{14}\)

_The New York Times_

Any experiment needs a control variable to validate the study. By consensus, _The Times_ reflected the best reporting of any daily newspaper in the country. It devoted thousands of column inches to the coverage of the civil rights movement. The paper of record in the United States, _The Times_ served as a barometer of accurate and fair reporting. In three opinion polls taken in 1960 and 1961, editors rated _The Times_ the best daily newspaper. One poll queried 335 editors; a second poll asked 311 publishers to rank the newspapers,


\(^\text{14}\)Baker, _The Memphis Commercial Appeal_, 322. The newspaper would have been considered progressive in the early 1960s although John Dittmer’s 1994 book, _Local People_, does not mention Toler’s contributions.
and a third poll included 125 journalism professors. The New York Times rated first in all three.\textsuperscript{15}

Claude Sitton covered Mississippi for The Times from 1957 to 1964. Born and reared in Atlanta, Georgia, Sitton made the rounds in Mississippi—Jackson, McComb, Oxford and all the smaller towns that earned a dateline in America’s most prominent newspaper. His peers respected Sitton’s “superb” coverage.\textsuperscript{16}

The Times covered the civil rights movement because of its significance as a story. Born and reared in Neshoba County, Mississippi, Turner Catledge served as managing editor at The New York Times from 1951 to 1964, and later executive editor. With a degree from Mississippi State College in 1922, Catledge worked at weekly newspapers in Mississippi and two Memphis newspapers before moving to the Baltimore Sun in 1927 and The New York Times in 1929.\textsuperscript{17}

James Silver, a University of Mississippi history professor, filed stories for the New York newspaper during the riots that followed James Meredith’s admission to campus.


\textsuperscript{16}Gay Talese, The Kingdom and the Power (New York: World Publishing, 1969), 141. The one example of Sitton’s writing that Talese quotes verbatim was of Medgar Evers’s murder. Sitton “infused his reporting with the angry dialogue and grim detail that made it all seem so meaningful, if only for a day.”

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 156-158.
When riots broke out at Ole Miss, the Jackson newspapers did not have a reporter in Oxford. Besides an extensive group of stringers, The Times used the weight of its editorial and op-ed pages to support the civil rights movement. Editorial page editor John Oakes strongly supported the sit-ins and demonstrations.\textsuperscript{18}

**Deadline Every Minute: The Wire Services**


Chicago-based Western Associated Press bought the New York Associated Press in 1900 to create the modern Associated Press. Originally a cooperative agency of upstate New York newspapers, a group of editors in the late 1840s took advantage of Samuel Morse's emerging telegraphic technology in 1844.\textsuperscript{19}

The United Press was the junior member of the press associations. The Associated Press had the greatest number of newspaper subscribers. E. W. Scripps founded his chain of

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 79.

\textsuperscript{19}Emery and Emery, *The Press in America*, 298-304.
newspapers to serve afternoon readers. The formula worked and Scripps needed a wire service for afternoon newspapers to challenge the morning circulation newspapers. The upstart UP received a financial boost with the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Since it served afternoon newspapers, the war news from Europe reached the United States primarily through cables between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. each day. Subscriptions for the UP increased, not just as a supplement to the AP, but as a primary news service.\textsuperscript{20}

Of the nineteen daily newspapers in Mississippi, only the Jackson Clarion-Ledger, the Natchez Democrat, and the Tupelo Journal published morning editions. The rest published afternoon editions. The Associated Press served seven newspapers, the same number as United Press. The two Hederman newspapers, the Greenville Delta Democrat-Times, and the Laurel Leader-Call subscribed to both wire services. The Corinthian, located in the remote northeastern corner of the state, did not subscribe to a wire service.\textsuperscript{21}

The AP and UPI bureaus in Jackson provided the only news accounts of the civil rights movement across the state. Without bureaus in the capital, the state’s daily papers relied on


\textsuperscript{21}Editor and Publisher International Yearbook, 1960 (New York: Editor and Publisher, 1960).
the wire services for reports from Jackson, where the majority of civil rights activities occurred.

Evers died in the first hour of June 12, 1963. All three morning newspapers had finished their press runs when news of the assassination became public. Those three, along with the Memphis and New Orleans newspapers were unable to report the murder. Television and radio broke the story. Afternoon newspapers focused on the police investigation. Wire service reporters went to work immediately.

United Press International employed five journalists in Jackson. The Associated Press employed two. The slogan, "If it's news, somebody needs it right away" dictated how the wire services operated. The AP employed more staffers than UPI in Memphis and New Orleans.22

Sessions did not study journalism in college. Sessions quickly learned of the media's unpopularity on his first assignment in 1957. He affixed a press tag to the front license plate on his way to cover the trial of a white sheriff accused of killing an African-American prisoner. Cold stares and jeers greeted Sessions. After a few of these incidents, Sessions retreated to a more subdued approach: "My southern accent would become more and more pronounced as I met people when I was out to cover a story; and I would try

to mention early that I'm from around here and try to come across as a good ole' boy. "23

A UPI story that described police dogs as "snarling" at protesters was inaccurate, according to one wire service subscriber. The dogs never "snarled" at the protesters. The subscribers often criticized any filed news story of police brutality as inaccurate and unfair. Under the direction of John Herbers, the reporters produced a blend of factual and fair reporting that often did not exist in the daily newspapers of Mississippi. Critics labeled Sessions an "outside agitator." The complaints led him to believe that "we were recognized as being...foreigners working for this national news service."24

Harrison Salisbury of The Times returned from Moscow to cover the civil rights movement in 1960. He visited cities in Alabama, Louisiana, and Tennessee. He compared the South to Moscow under Stalin's rule. The South resembled a foreign land, devoid of democracy in its paranoia of maintaining segregation.25

23Ibid.

24Ibid.

CHAPTER 6

NEW DIRECTION

The New York Times in 1957 carried two brief United Press news releases in the back of the newspaper that mentioned Medgar Evers.\(^1\) By 1960, he was a household name. Three events propelled Evers into the national spotlight: an interview with Ebony magazine, increasing newspaper coverage because of civil rights demonstrations, and the rise of television news. In 1950, only nine percent of the population owned televisions; that number increased to more than sixty-four percent by 1955, and to more than eighty-seven percent by 1960.\(^2\)

From 1955 through 1959, Evers acted the consummate team player, never complaining about the direction of the organization in a state where the membership rolls dwindled each year.\(^3\)

The deaths of Edward Duckworth, the Reverend George Lee, Lamar Smith, and Emmett Till in the 1950s affected Evers. He wanted the state NAACP to replicate the direct action protests like the bus boycott in Montgomery. Officials in the

\(^1\)Adam Nossiter, Of Long Memory: Mississippi and the Murder of Medgar Evers (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1994), 43.


\(^3\)Nossiter, Of Long Memory, 49.
New York office ignored his suggestions. Evers knew that the slow, legalistic pace of the NAACP in the 1950s had not worked in Mississippi. In a field report filed in 1957, Evers believed the NAAP "must get off center if we are to maintain our influence" in Mississippi.⁴

For Mississippi, the Second Reconstruction began in the 1960s.⁵ The Congress on Racial Equality and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee represented a new generation of civil rights activists, the vanguard of the Second Reconstruction. The Birmingham bus boycott attracted the media's attention, not lawsuits. The relatively new medium of television provided the nation with evidence of police brutality in ways the print medium could neither articulate nor communicate.

⁴Ibid., 51.

The NAACP youth councils eschewed involvement until the late 1950s. As a result, the SCLC named Evers an assistant secretary at its organizational meeting in New Orleans in 1957. Evers and state organizer Aaron Henry attended. At the urging of NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins, Evers resigned the SCLC appointment. Wilkins distrusted other organizations. Evers told New York attorney William Kunstler all civil rights groups should work together. Within a year, Evers told his immediate supervisor, Ruby Hurley, that he informed Martin Luther King Jr. to avoid Jackson.

Evers agreed with the non-violent principles of the new groups. Charles Evers believed his younger brother identified more with SNCC, CORE, and SCLC than with the NAACP.

The friction between the NAACP and other groups continued after Evers's death. At the funeral, the NAACP restricted the participation of other civil rights leaders. The Reverend Edwin King said the NAACP did not recognize Martin Luther King Jr. "I sat out in the auditorium in an

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8Nossiter, *Of Long Memory*, 50.

obscure section” with Martin Luther King, who did not participate in the service.\textsuperscript{10}

Vernon Jordan served as field secretary in Atlanta, Georgia, at the same time Evers worked in Mississippi. Evers drove Jordan and Gloster Current to the airport after a meeting. Current lashed out at Evers for the declining membership in the state. After Current departed, Evers cried as much from the lack of emotional support as from embarrassment.\textsuperscript{11} Membership in Mississippi declined because the other civil rights organizations appealed to the younger generation. Charles Evers believed his brother changed from an “NAACP-only” mentality to “whatever works” disposition as the decade of the 1960s opened.

\textbf{Fresh Troops}

CORE, SNCC and the Congress of Federated Organizations threatened the NAACP’s status in Mississippi. Evers worried about his own status. Jet magazine suggested that the NAACP, CORE, SNCC and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference merge to strengthen the civil rights movement. In the early 1960s, the NAACP reported a membership of 400,000 in 45 states and the District of Columbia, and an annual income of

\textsuperscript{10}\textit{The Reverend Edwin King, interview with author, Jackson, Mississippi, 18 August 1992.}

\textsuperscript{11}\textit{Maryanne Vollers, \textit{Ghosts of Mississippi: The Murder of Medgar Evers, the Trials of Byron De La Beckwith, and the Haunting of the New South} (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1995), 88.
almost one million. The NAACP proposed "court suits, educational programs to change public opinion, sit-ins, voter registration drives, picketing, and selective buying campaigns" to end segregation. The headline "Major Organizations Speaking For Negroes Differ In Methods" described the different goals of civil rights groups. Competition worried NAACP leadership.

James Farmer, coordinator of the Congress of Racial Equality, knew first-hand the problems any organization faced in challenging the NAACP. In planning the 1961 Freedom Rides, Farmer asked the NAACP for help. Wilkins told Farmer that Evers rejected the idea. More accurately, Wilkins instructed Evers to thwart the overtures from other groups.

Formed in 1947, CORE practiced "Mahatma Gandhi's passive resistance methods" to achieve "equality of opportunity in all spheres of American life, regardless of race." With offices on Park Row in New York City, the second oldest civil rights group reported a membership of 61,000 and an annual budget of $775,000.

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14Jet magazine, 18 July 1963.
The third organization belonged to the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. With a membership of 350,000 and a budget of $500,000, the SCLC adhered to non-violent protest methods.

Organized at Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1960, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee employed 75 full-time staff in a non-membership organization with a budget of $160,000. The group organized “successful voter registration drives” in Mississippi.\(^\text{15}\)

The Congress of Federated Organizations (COFO) coordinated the activities of protest groups in Mississippi. Dave Dennis, Bob Moses, Aaron Henry and Evers organized the umbrella organization in 1961. The group failed to free the Freedom Riders from the Jackson city jail. The NAACP leadership appeared at the top of the group’s stationery, but the Student Non-Violent Coördinating Committee did the majority of the field work for COFO.\(^\text{16}\)

In Mississippi, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee succeeded where Evers failed. SNCC visited sharecroppers and tenant farmers, much like Evers when he worked for the insurance company in Mound Bayou. The sharecroppers and the youth did not own property. The sharecroppers and youth of the Delta responded to SNCC, which

\(^{15}\text{Ibid.}\)

\(^{16}\text{Emily Stoper, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1968), 61-62.}\)
employed college students. The students often stayed with families in the region, and stayed long enough to earn the trust of the young civil rights workers. They feared reprisal, but not like the African-American middle class. The increasingly unpopular NAACP found it difficult to maintain its middle class members when the sit-ins threatened the delicate caste system. 17

The large, sit-in demonstrations unnerved the NAACP. The younger organizations demonstrated and the NAACP paid the bail money. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee had "no famous leaders, very little money, no inner access to the seats of national authority," but the group was "clearly the front line of the Negro assault on the moral comfort of white America." 18 SNCC leaders appeared on the evening network news. A sharecropper from Ruleville, Anne Moody identified with SNCC's blue-collar image. While the first NAACP branch in Mississippi organized shortly after World War I, Moody attended her first civil rights meeting in 1962. Organized by a local minister, SNCC and CORE taught demonstrators the non-violent sit-in methods. The NAACP "handled all the bail and legal services and public relations, but SNCC and CORE could draw teen-agers into the Movement as no other organizations


could.” Moody credited SNCC—not the NAACP—for the dramatic changes in Mississippi during the 1960s.

Charles Evers believed the NAACP mistreated his brother. "He felt the NAACP was too selfish. He always did say that. They [NAACP] thought they owned" Mississippi. The white power structure prevented the NAACP from winning lawsuits in Mississippi. The younger civil rights groups "came in and started blasting" in the early 1960s. The NAACP failed.

They wanted to do it the old way. He [Medgar] was the new. The old way wouldn't work. The old, slow going. No, they didn't do anything at all. They didn't support him. The NAACP "never gave up on Mississippi" but the organization never "put as much energy into it as you put into places where you get a better response."  

Revolt of the Rednecks: Editors in the 1960s

The dramatic sit-in and lunch counter demonstrations created a bunker mentality among Mississippi editorial and column writers. Their common enemy included integrationists, a fact that obscured any differences in style and tone of reporting.

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20 Evers, interview with author.

21 Dittmer, *Local People*, 77.

The business community fought integration in the 1950s. Federal court decisions, unflattering media coverage, and increased pressure from civil rights groups turned the tide in the 1960s. The business community opted for economic growth over the alternative—white supremacy.\(^{23}\)

The thesis that businesses changed to accommodate the buying power of African-Americans once the sit-ins and merchant boycotts has limited validity. The businesses themselves realized that the combination of federal intervention, changing values, and the tenacity of civil rights workers all contributed to a significant shift in the struggle over segregation. Community leaders in Mississippi changed slowly, and while they did not significantly alter their views on segregation, they changed enough to accommodate the changing social and economic situation.\(^{24}\)

The Citizens' Council

Despite the Council's momentum in the 1950s, moderate governors Hugh White (1952-56) and J. P. Coleman (1956-60) kept their distance.\(^{25}\) That all changed with the election of Ross Barnett in 1960.


\(^{24}\)Ibid., 11.

The Council's birth received help from Tom P. Brady, a Yale-educated Mississippian who believed in white supremacy. Brady wrote "Black Monday," the first doctrine for the infant Citizens' Council.26

Unlike the Ku Klux Klan, the Citizens' Council drew members from business and prominent farmers. The Council's membership roll was a who's who of Mississippi's upper and middle classes. The lower economic and social classes constituted the bulk of Klan membership.27

Mississippi journalists responded with trepidation, knowing that community leaders were quickly rallying around segregation and the Lost Cause. The council operated more openly than the Klan, partly because its membership comprised the established order in the community. Prospective and new members received circulars in the mail, one of which listed publishers of anti-Semitic material. Like the Klan, the organization initially tried to operate secretly, but the overwhelming response rendered secrecy untenable. The organizers quietly increased membership until the group grew enough to earn public acceptance. The tremendous growth and acceptance surprised even the organizers. Hodding Carter


criticized the group for its initial secrecy in a September 6, 1954, editorial.\textsuperscript{28}

The group's publicity outside the Delta came three days after the Carter editorial. The Associated Press reported that state lawmakers met unofficially to discuss the group's intentions. The Citizens' Council also found kindred spirits in the media. The Clarion-Ledger praised the organization.\textsuperscript{29}

The turning point for the council came in 1960 with the election of Ross Barnett as governor. Barnett courted the council during the campaign. Council leader William J. Simmons and Governor Barnett used state funds to underwrite the council's work under the name of the Sovereignty Commission.\textsuperscript{30} Simmons edited the Thunderbolt, the council's monthly broad sheet newspaper. The newspaper included professional writing and design elements. Fringe group newsletters traditionally lacked those qualities. The son of a Jackson banker, Simmons represented the middle and upper class community leaders that comprised the group's membership.

Shortly after Barnett took office, the Citizens' Council offered a list of groups it considered sympathetic to segregation, including the American Red Cross, the Federal

\textsuperscript{28}McMillen, Citizens' Council, 19-24.

\textsuperscript{29}Editorial, Jackson Clarion-Ledger, 13 September 1954.

\textsuperscript{30}Silver, Closed Society, 42-43.
Bureau of Investigation, the Interstate Commerce Commission, and the Young Women’s Christian Association. The council did not include the NAACP on the list.

The Citizens’ Council, however, did not ignore Evers, who believed the council used a heavy hand in the Delta region and in Jackson. Evers told an Associated Press reporter that 126 of the sixteen thousand African-Americans eligible in Humphreys County registered to vote, but the council dissuaded thirty-one.

Registered African-Americans quickly found themselves out of jobs and denied credit. If the economic coercion did not work, council members made “personal” visits. “They’d come and tell them ‘You’ve lived in this community for a long time. If you want to stay here in peace, you’d better get your name off this list’.” The “personal” visits reduced the voter rolls ever further, down to what Evers called the “hard core” number of 35 in Humphreys County. 31

With the NAACP pushing Evers to increase membership, the council counterattacked at every opportunity. To further discourage Evers, African-Americans continued to leave Mississippi for better opportunities. The Bureau of Statistics reported that 916,000 African-Americans lived in the Magnolia State as the new decade unfolded. The figure represented the lowest number of inhabitants since the census

31 McMillen, Citizens’ Council, 216.
of 1900.\(^{32}\) The future looked bleak for Evers and the NAACP in 1960.

Besides recruiting, Evers’s job description required him to investigate civil rights violations. He “filed complaints, issued angry denunciations, literally dragged reporters to the scenes of crimes, fought back with press releases," seeking always to spread word beyond the state, involve the federal government, bring help from the outside.\(^{33}\) Less than a month before Medgar’s death, Myrlie Evers tried to persuade her husband to leave the NAACP. The job had become too dangerous. Her husband, however, was “too dedicated.”\(^{34}\)

The danger started when he moved into his office on Lynch Street. The Citizens’ Council published an advertisement listing the names of parents involved in a school desegregation suit. Evers earned mention in the advertisement because of his involvement in the lawsuit and because he investigated a civil rights violation in the council’s back yard—Humphreys County. Gus Courts registered to vote in the county where he operated a grocery story. The


\(^{34}\)As quoted in Larry Still, “The Astonishing Widow Medgar Evers Left Behind,” Jet, 11 July 1963. (The article totaled nine pages, an astonishing length for a feature story in Jet.)
Humphreys County man refused to remove his name from the voter registration rolls. The man who owned the building raised Courts's rent three hundred percent. Courts moved to another location. Suppliers then refused to extend credit for the purchase of store merchandise. In November, a car pulled alongside Courts car and shot him. A photograph of Evers, standing near Court's hospital bed revealed a special quality.

The young man [Evers] in the picture is studying Courts carefully. His brow is wrinkled, his lips tight. Anyone looking at that photograph could see that was not a man to be toyed with. And anyone looking at that face should have known that no race that produced...Medgar Evers was not going to back down before white bigots.35

Protest Rhetoric Turns to Sit-Ins

The civil rights movement changed in the decade of the 1960s. The political and legal strategies employed during the first half of the century earned token media coverage. The different strategy and the emergence of television propelled the movement into the national spotlight.36

The Supreme Court ruled in Boynton v. Virginia (1960) that segregation of interstate bus terminals violated the provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) quickly organized the Freedom Rides to


integrate interstate bus terminals. Simultaneously, Bob Moses and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) started a voter registration drive in southwest Mississippi. Roy Wilkins sensed what Evers already knew.

As a Mississippian, Evers too distrusted "outside agitators." Combined with his fierce loyalty to the NAACP, he followed the party line in competing with CORE, SCLC, and SNCC for the right to fight segregation in Mississippi. In a report to the NAACP's New York office, Evers said the Freedom Riders were unable to raise money and the SNCC voter registration workers had sullied the movement's reputation by their involvement with "hoodlums." 

Evers, however, served as a pioneer in Mississippi. He made the SNCC and SCLC protests a possibility. His presence in the face of overwhelming odds paved a narrow road for other protest groups to work in the state. Evers and the NAACP achieved limited gains in civil rights, but those gains provided a measure of hope.

Evers's leadership ability alone allowed the NAACP to continue its operation in Mississippi. Personal leadership determined why one community or county achieved social

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progress in the South. Evers recruited the NAACP youth group members for the civil rights movement. He believed the young demonstrators organizing at Tougaloo College and Jackson State University needed money and leadership. Only in his mid-30s, Evers's NAACP association tied him with the older generation of civil rights activists. Evers, however, understood the frustration of younger activists. He successfully recruited teens into the NAACP Youth chapters, and coordinated their activities with the less established civil rights groups.

His most ardent and faithful supporters attended and taught at Tougaloo College, an African-American school on the northern edge of Jackson. Tougaloo's campus rested on the grounds of a former plantation, and it employed a diverse faculty. Under the auspices of the Congregational and Disciples of Christ churches, Tougaloo exercised its right to operate interracially. John R. Salter Jr. taught political science at Tougaloo. He called the campus the "only comparatively 'free' island in the whole, sovereign state of Mississippi." Besides Salter, who would eventually serve as one of a small handful of civil rights strategy leaders in

40 Frank E. Smith, Look Away From Dixie (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 7.

41 Dittmer, Local People, 85.

the Jackson movement, Tougaloo also employed a chaplain and sociology teacher who worked closely with Salter and Evers in organizing the merchant boycotts in Jackson.

The Reverend Edwin King, a Vicksburg native, attended Millsaps College in Jackson from 1954 until graduating in 1958. Millsaps, a Methodist college in Jackson, employed moderate and progressive teachers who "helped open my mind, helped raise questions, the kind of things a good liberal arts college does." Teachers at Millsaps quietly encouraged interracial meetings. King met Evers at an interracial student meeting in 1954 shortly after Evers moved into the field secretary's job in Jackson. The collegial meetings ended in 1958 as racial tension increased. King, however, visited Evers at the NAACP offices. During those visits, Evers presented King "some literature, and we would talk further, and he was a good teacher...." The eighteen-year-old King and the twenty-seven year-old field secretary became friends.44

The first outward demonstrations in Mississippi occurred near Biloxi in 1960. Police arrested African-Americans who attempted to use the whites-only beaches. Police arrested Tougaloo students in 1961 for entering the all-white public library in Jackson. Students from nearby Jackson State


44 Ibid.
College, a state-supported African-American college, publicly demonstrated. With clubs and attack dogs, police arrested the students. The Tougaloo students moved to center stage in the civil rights movement.\footnote{Salter, \textit{Struggle and Schism}, 7-8.}

College students led the first sit-ins at a lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960. The sit-ins, coupled with the successful bus boycott in Birmingham, caught the attention of the national media. The civil rights movement in Mississippi moved toward front-page status when Tougaloo students entered Jackson's public library. The student protests and the white resistance created more problems for Evers and the NAACP. National media coverage increased awareness of the racial divide in Mississippi, but the increased protests also resulted in a violent resistance unparalleled since Reconstruction. Memphis officials desegregated parks and Atlanta officials integrated schools. The Magnolia State rejected the changes. The news media supported the political leaders in denouncing integration.\footnote{Ibid., 21-22.}

Evers achieved name recognition in the 1960s because segregationist editorial writers increased their criticism of the NAACP. Also, the national news media increased coverage of the unfolding events in Mississippi. Correspondents contacted Evers for his side of the story. His face appeared
on television and in the newspapers. The increased publicity angered segregationists. Evers's increased recognition resulted in increased threats of violence. During the height of the merchant boycott, Salter asked Evers how he protected his family. Almost casually, Evers pointed to the bullet-proof window blinds and the German shepherd dog in the back yard. He also kept six guns in the house. He taught his wife and children to lay prostrate on the floor whenever a car stopped or any noise resembled gunfire. He avoided windows. Underneath the driver's seat of his car, he carried a .45-caliber automatic.\textsuperscript{47}

Evers seldom acknowledged the personal attacks in the newspaper columns. Evers knew it was "pointless" because newspapers refused to print his "letters to the editor."\textsuperscript{48} His shy demeanor limited his public relations skills and the segregationist press ignored his message. Evers's name appeared in print only when newspapers wanted to embarrass or criticize the field secretary.

Evers founded the Mississippi Free Press "because the normal means of communication had failed. The normal dialogue had failed."\textsuperscript{49} Events, however, transpired to give Evers and

\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., 24.

\textsuperscript{48}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49}King, interview with author.
the NAACP a much-needed spotlight on the segregated system of the Magnolia State.

James Meredith and the University of Mississippi

While the local and state press ignored Evers, James Meredith applied for admission to the University of Mississippi. Evers and the NAACP's Legal Defense fund filed suit in 1961 to have Meredith admitted to the school. The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ordered Mississippi to admit Meredith. 50

Evers attended the Fifth Circuit court hearings in New Orleans, but decided to come home the weekend before the court rendered its decision. The legal maneuvering had Mississippian on edge—both African-American and white.

When the Salters knocked on the door, no one answered. They heard noises in the house. In a few minutes, Evers opened the door only slightly to survey the visitors: "We were halfway expecting the wrong kind of people." The inside of the house resembled the bunker, dug-out hills of Vicksburg during the Civil War. Stacks of furniture blocked the windows, guns were visible, and the skittish residents, so often bombarded during the siege, had hunkered down for the onslaught. The threatening telephone calls and letters reached a new level as the litigants and courts debated the future of Meredith and of Mississippi. Unlike the residents

50 Silver, Closed Society, 114-117.
of Vicksburg during the siege, Evers believed a breakthrough was imminent. "We're going to get him in there," Evers told Salter. "They can rant and rave all they like, but we're going to get him in there." 51

United States marshals shuttled Meredith onto the campus at 5:00 p.m. Sunday, September 30. Word spread that Meredith was indeed on campus. The federal and state marshals maintained decorum despite the gathering of all sorts and conditions of protesters. In the taunting and shoving that followed, federal officials used tear gas. With the approval of President Kennedy, United States Army troops intervened to maintain public order. Federal intervention prevented widespread bloodshed. The segregationists, however, threw bottles, rocks, and obscenities, injuring faculty, soldiers, marshals, and news photographers. Paul Guihard, a correspondent from France, and Ray Gunter, an onlooker, died in the melee.

The rioting focused the nation's attention on Mississippi to a degree not witnessed since the Emmett Till murder trial in 1955. "Several hundred reporters from all news and interpretative media concentrated on the Mississippi campus" to report on the rioting. The reporting was accurate and fair. 52 Meredith's enrollment did change the climate in

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51 Salter, Struggle and Schism, 42-43.

52 Silver, Closed Society, 122-123.
Mississippi. African-Americans could say one of their own attended the most prestigious school in the state, that the federal government kept the peace, and that the court system worked.

Meredith's enrollment strengthened whites resolve to resist federal intervention. Mississippians revived the bloody shirt for the civil rights struggle.

Medgar Evers as a News Source

Late in 1962, movement leaders planned a boycott of downtown Jackson merchants. The New York office of the NAACP sent Henry Moon, the organization's public relations professional, to help Medgar Evers. NAACP president Roy Wilkins knew the problem. He studied journalism at the University of Minnesota and worked for the African-American weekly, the Kansas City Call, before joining the NAACP in 1931 as Walter White's assistant. In addition, he served as editor of The Crisis, the NAACP's official publication for 15 years. Moon, too, had a journalism background. He earned a degree in journalism from Ohio State University and worked as a newspaper reporter before joining the civil rights movement.53

The media overlooked the NAACP, according to Wilkins. In response, the New York office notified field secretaries to aggressively pursue favorable press coverage. "We are not getting credit in numerous news stories across the country for the contribution our NAACP members are making in the civil rights struggle." The memo instructed Evers to prepare a news release before any demonstration. 54

Wilkins believed the NAACP suffered a lack of favorable media coverage. Moon disagreed and sent Wilkins copies of newspaper articles that praised the organization. A story in The New York Times cited how SNCC raised money for voter registration drives. Livid, Wilkins sent Moon a memorandum complaining about the NAACP's "pedantic and dull" press releases. Moon responded with a six-page memorandum defending his work. "I do not need to remind you, of all persons, with your experience and background, that the media are not concerned with sprightliness of news releases nearly so much as with their factual accuracy and clarity." 55 Moon knew that Mississippi's newspapers rejected any press release, regardless of "accuracy and clarity." Moon liked Evers personally and wanted to help Evers gain access to the media in Mississippi.

He never accommodated himself to Southern thinking on racial matters. He always knew that the progress in

54As quoted in Ibid., 12
55As quoted in Ibid., 15-16.
Mississippi was infinitesimal. He had no illusions about quick improvement. But he was a Southern man himself, and he knew where the fight was. He had an internal balance that was rare. He had adjusted himself to the forces of life in Mississippi without compromising. Maybe that was what disturbed his enemies most. He understood them.\textsuperscript{56}

Reporters Cliff Sessions of UPI and Bill Minor of the \textit{New Orleans Times-Picayune} relied on Evers, not NAACP press releases, for accurate information. Both described Evers as an "accurate" news source. While Wilkins and public relations director Moon attempted to outmaneuver the other civil rights organizations, Evers unsuccessfully pitched the group's reform message to publishers and editors. Reporters, however, trusted Evers because he told the truth and did not exaggerate.

Evers's cautious personality contributed to the lack of media coverage. He shied away from press conferences and "playing to the press." Evers spoke at length with the media during the Freedom Rides and James Meredith's enrollment at the University of Mississippi. Evers, however, felt more comfortable working with individual reporters, a trait more indicative of his personality than a failure to communicate effectively the civil rights message. "So the fact that there's not that much national media on him says something about himself and his self-respect."\textsuperscript{57}


\textsuperscript{57}King, interview with author.
Evers avoided inflammatory rhetoric because he "was just a plain, honest, straight-shooting guy, and he would level with you."\textsuperscript{58} Evers trusted Cliff Sessions more than any other reporter.

With the approval of bureau chief John Herbers, Sessions covered an NAACP meeting on a Sunday afternoon in Jackson. Herbers appreciated Evers's resolve despite overwhelming negative publicity. Herbers remembered the field secretary as having an "angelic quality" that made the bureau chief believe he "was in the presence of a saint."\textsuperscript{59} Sessions met Evers at the Sunday meeting. Evers possessed "a lot of nervous energy who was deeply concerned and deep into his job....I had never before dealt with a black person as a social equal, being from Mississippi." The two talked for three to four minutes and became "friends from then on."\textsuperscript{60}

Sessions and his wife invited the Everses over for drinks. The four talked about movies, baseball, and politics, but not about the civil rights movement. For one brief evening, Evers relaxed.

\textsuperscript{58}Minor, interview with author.


\textsuperscript{60}Cliff Sessions, interview with author, Biloxi, Mississippi, 24 July 1992.
Sessions and Evers talked almost daily during 1962 and 1963. For Sessions, the journalist-source relationship accorded him a window into Evers’s strategy as a publicist. Evers dealt with the press “very carefully and very conservatively. He and I got along so well together that he would often ask me about other people in the press.” Evers often called Sessions with a news tip that “I would check it out for my own interests to see if there was news breaking—usually there was.” 61

Sessions realized the danger Evers faced talking to a reporter. Sessions’s byline appeared more frequently as the movement escalated. When a brick came through his living room window, Sessions appreciated the danger Evers lived with daily. Segregationists even made threatening telephone calls to Sessions’s mother. 62

On numerous occasions, the African-American maid who worked for the Sessions served as the initial telephone contact when Evers called. African-American domestic servants sought prospective employers based on their attitude toward the civil rights movement. The lucky ones avoided segregationist employers. The Sessions’s maid belonged to the NAACP. At one meeting, she heard Evers tell the audience, “Cliff Sessions is an okay guy.” The maid relayed the

61Ibid.
62Ibid.
comment, which assured Sessions that Evers trusted the journalist. The merchant boycott tested their relationship, but the signs of stress fatigue appeared moreso on the faces of Mississippians. The hard shell of Mississippi segregation began to crack.
CHAPTER 7

WINTER OF DISCONTENT

With little media support, Medgar Evers relied on the Mississippi Free Press for favorable coverage. The newspaper disputed the negative publicity in the daily Jackson press. None of the printers in Jackson dared work with Evers and his fledgling newspaper. Unable to find a local printer, Hazel Brannon Smith of Holmes County secretly volunteered to print the newspaper that served as "the primary civil rights organ in the early 1960s."¹

The leading African-American newspaper in the state, Percy Greene's Jackson Advocate did not support the NAACP and Evers. Editorially, the newspaper took a "very, very ancient position" in the vein of accommodationist Booker T. Washington.² Greene believed African-Americans should work within the white power structure to make gains. Greene was uncomfortable with court rulings that forced integration. The state-financed Sovereignty Commission paid Greene to spy on the civil rights movement. The payoffs included subscriptions of the Advocate for school libraries, speaking engagements


for Greene, and cash. Evers found opposition in the white and African-American media.

The Freedom Rides and James Meredith's enrollment at the University of Mississippi failed to produce widespread civil rights activity in Jackson. African-Americans applauded the integrated bus terminals and Meredith's admittance to the best state university. They knew, however, that the segregationists would not willingly abandon their struggle to remain segregated.

The NAACP questioned whether Evers converted those gains into increased membership when the state branches gathered in Jackson November 1 for the annual meeting. Two hundred adult and youth delegates attended workshops on community relations, voter registration, desegregation, and fair employment. With the white backlash that accompanied the Ole Miss riots in September, fear dominated the annual meeting.4

John Salter and New York attorney William Kunstler, who conducted legal work for civil rights organizations, met during the annual meeting. Kunstler lectured participants on civil liberties. He also persuaded folk singer Pete Seeger to


perform at Tougaloo that week. Kunstler was a major force at the meeting, having defended the Freedom Riders in Jackson.

Salter sought Kunstler's advise on whether a merchant boycott would work. Kunstler supported the idea of a boycott. Since whites held economic leverage on African-American workers, Salter and Kunstler decided the college students should organize and publicize the boycott for the Christmas holidays. Salter advised the North Jackson Youth Council, the only active NAACP youth organization in 1962. The youth council had its own newspaper, the North Jackson Action and in mid-November the newspaper published a manifesto urging a boycott. Shortly after Thanksgiving, the council printed five thousand leaflets with four demands: equality in hiring, integrated drinking fountains, use of courtesy titles (Mrs., Miss and Mr.), and first-come, first-served treatment in stores. The North Jackson Youth Council, the Tougaloo College NAACP Chapter, and the Jackson NAACP branch sponsored the flyers. Eldri Salter, John's wife, advised the Tougaloo chapter, and Evers worked closely with the Jackson branch to prepare them for the boycott.\(^5\)

The students assumed the national NAACP office would supply bond money. The NAACP youth council planned pickets for December 3, but the New York office did not release the funds. Salter decided to delay the boycott. The Ghandi

\(^5\)Ibid., 56-57.
Society and New York attorney Victor Rabinowitz provided the students with bond money on December 12. The group picketed the Woolworth store. Amid saturation media coverage, police arrested the Salters and four youth council members.

The boycott wasted NAACP funds, according to the national NAACP office.⁶ The local branch criticized Evers for not fully supporting the students. Although he supported the boycott, Evers pulled back to appease the national office. The national office maintained a cool relationship with the leadership of the boycott. Much like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Evers “was pulled this way and that far longer than I can remember. And my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone’s way but my own.”⁷

Salter ignored the national office. He sought results and public awareness. Unflattering criticism on the editorial pages increased publicity. Six pickets attracted more attention than Salter dreamed possible. The first-day story in the *Clarion-Ledger* played down the event, but coupled with Mayor Allen Thompson’s televised speech, the afternoon *Daily News* and the evening news put the story on the front pages.⁸

The media increased its coverage because of the youth council

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protest, along with SNCC registration drive in the Delta, and Meredith’s successful enrollment at the university.

The Salters and Everses met for Christmas dinner and discussed the possibility of a civil rights breakthrough in 1963. Although cautiously optimistic, Evers understood the trouble ahead. “The white man won’t change easily. Some of these people are going to fight hard. And more of our people could get killed."

The state’s newspapers denounced the pickets. With few exceptions, editorial writers supported segregation. News organizations accurately reported the boycott. Accuracy, however, did not translate into fairness.

Editorial pages traditionally provoke, educate and entertain readers with a variety of opinion. Variety rarely existed on the editorial pages. “While there was an active minority which was vocal, most of our newspapers said nothing about the number of events except to take a stand against integration” on the editorial pages.

Tom Ethridge’s “Mississippi Notebook” column in the Clarion-Ledger routinely attacked Evers, the civil rights movement, and editors who did not agree with his arch-segregationist opinion. In a column condemning the Pulitzer

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9As quoted in ibid., 69.

Prize committee for recognizing editors who spoke in favor of civil rights, Ethridge attacked the senior Carter, who served on the Pulitzer Prize committee. The *Delta Democrat-Times* publisher "is something of a fair-haired boy with Columbia bigwigs."

Opening doors for African-Americans, not newspaper support, concerned Evers. With Meredith re-enrolled for the 1963 spring semester, Evers and the NAACP decided to integrate other public colleges. United Press International reported the NAACP's attempt to integrate Mississippi State College for Women in Columbus and Southern Mississippi College in Hattiesburg. The story merited front page coverage in Greenville only. The lawsuit languished in the court system. Evers and the NAACP turned their attention to public schools in Jackson.

The Everses and five other Jackson families filed suit in March 1963 to integrate the city's public schools. The *Delta Democrat-Times* played the story on the front page on March 4, and so did the Jackson newspapers. A follow-up story in the *Clarion-Ledger* reported that three of the nine children, including Darrell Kenyatta Evers and Reene Denise Evers, never attended, or attempted to attend, Jackson public schools. The children attended Church of Christ the King, a Roman Catholic school. The story failed the litmus test for

fairness because the reporter did not quote the Everses. The reporter did not clarify whether he attempted to contact any of the families. The *Delta Democrat-Times* desegregation suit story in March did not broach whether any of the families attempted to enroll their children.\(^\text{12}\) The Jackson newspaper's April account of the federal lawsuit indicated increased scrutiny of Evers.

The Jackson police department also began to closely monitor Evers's activities. His high profile with the merchant boycott and school desegregation lawsuits interested the police.

W. C. "Dub" Shoemaker covered the police department and Evers in the 1960s. He exchanged information with a Federal Bureau of Investigation agent in Mississippi. According to Shoemaker, the FBI agent did not inform his superiors of the telephone exchanges, but neither did Shoemaker inform his editors. "We'd just exchange little secrets. We'd just talk. Whoever got home first would call the other and we'd just talk."\(^\text{13}\)

The lawsuits created news and attracted publicity. The police, Shoemaker, and the local newspapers paid closer


\(^{13}\)W. C. "Dub" Shoemaker, interview with author, Kosciusko, Mississippi, 28 July 1992. When asked the name of the agent, Shoemaker responded, "Unh-unh. I'm not going to do that for you." He assured the author that the agent was alive and living in the Jackson area, but could not be located.
attention to Evers. National and metropolitan newspapers often subscribe to and monitor local dailies for story ideas. The increased local attention persuaded correspondents to visit the Magnolia State. The increase in civil rights activities provoked increased name-calling on the editorial pages. Jackson newspapers denounced the national media for "always reporting the negative about Mississippi."  

           Correspondents flew into Jackson to supply their readers with surface coverage of events with complicated ramifications. The reporters most able to untangle the differences between fact and fiction worked for Mississippi newspapers. Local reporters, however, provided coverage, that often promoted and strengthened the segregationist side of the debate. National correspondents usually did not stay long enough to untangle the economic and social causes of segregation. Instead, correspondents boarded the next plane headed to the next civil rights flash point.  

Wilkins targets Jackson  

Mirroring the national press, the national NAACP office took a distinct interest in Mississippi. With the merchant boycott underway in May 1963, Wilkins studied whether to focus his organization's energy in Jackson. The Birmingham  

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14 Editorial, Jackson Clarion-Ledger, 10 February 1963.  

demonstrations illustrated the force of television. Newspapers reported the events, but video footage created impact. The NAACP wanted to discourage the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from moving to Mississippi. 16 Salter pushed for demonstrations and mass meetings. Until early May, the NAACP ignored the "territorial threat."

As the national NAACP considered whether to commit resources to Mississippi, the local newspapers increased their criticism of Evers. Jackson Daily News editor Jimmy Ward routinely criticized Evers in his page one column, "Covering the Crossroads." The Daily News was Evers's "greatest enemy." 17

Salter and the youth council stepped up their fair hiring practices push in May. On Sunday, May 12, Salter asked the Mississippi NAACP board of directors to support a full-scale boycott. The resolution urged city and community leaders to resolve their differences. Salter mailed identical letters to the governor, the mayor, the city commission, the chamber of commerce, the junior chamber, the downtown association, the bank association, and the Mississippi Economic Council. Salter, Doris Allison, president of the Jackson NAACP adult group, and Evers, all signed the letters.

16 Dittmer, Local People, 160; Salter, Struggle and Schism, 95.

Evers personally sent the letters certified mail the next day, Monday morning.\textsuperscript{18}

In a televised speech, Mayor Thompson rejected any meeting and urged African-Americans to ignore "unlawful demonstrations."\textsuperscript{19}

Ridiculing the NAACP's resolution, the Jackson newspapers applauded Thompson's speech. Evers used television to rebut the mayor's speech. Thompson wanted a bi-racial board created to study the demands. The group did not include an NAACP member. In the next day's \textit{Daily News}, Evers told reporters, "We consider Negroes who would sell out our program as being Uncle Tom's of the first order and we will deal with them economically as we are dealing with those downtown."\textsuperscript{20}

Given the educational and economic level of African-Americans in Jackson as compared to other parts of the state, the Tupelo Journal believed the city a prime target for demonstrations. Indicative of a possible shift in journalistic sentiment, the Tupelo newspaper complimented the college students at Tougaloo and Jackson State. At the same

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\textsuperscript{18}Salter, \textit{Struggle and Schism}, 105-107.
\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., 108-109.
\textsuperscript{20}"NAACP Says Allen Seeking 'Yes-Men'," \textit{Jackson Daily News}, 16 May 1963. In a Page One article May 15, the \textit{Daily News} spelled Medgar Evers' first as "Medger."
\end{flushleft}
time, it addressed why Mississippians—both African-American and white—feared change.21

The Citizens' Council and other segregationist organizations mobilized to impede the youth council’s efforts.22

Ira Harkey’s Pascagoula Chronicle attacked the Council. In April 1963, Sigma Delta Chi honored Harkey for editorials supporting integration. The Delta Democrat-Times was the only daily to mention Harkey’s achievement:

"...Ira Harkey’s battle was and is more than one unpopular journalist’s war with some elements of his society. It is the battle of all free men to preserve their right to be unpopular, to speak the truth as they see it, without their very existence being threatened."23

The FBI and Medgar Evers

Like Ira Harkey, Medgar Evers received death threats continually in 1963 and notified the FBI.24 The FBI documents revealed very little. Evers filed two formal complaints with the FBI before his death in June. He believed someone tapped his telephone lines at home and the NAACP office. Evers reported that an NAACP official visiting Jackson complained that reporters knew of private conversations. The FBI never

22Salter, Struggle and Schism, 72-73.
determined whether the telephone calls originated locally or
long distance. The FBI ordered the telephone company to check
both lines. The found nothing out of the ordinary.25

The "FBI files are so thoroughly censored, even in the
1990s, that it is impossible to determine the value or
timeliness of any information the agents obtained."26 Evers
distrusted the FBI. He preferred to communicate with the
Justice Department. The danger increased once the merchant
boycott started.

Cold War Rhetoric and the Merchant Boycott

On May 28, Tougaloo students Anne Moody and Memphis
Norman, and Pearlena Lewis of the NAACP youth council quietly
entered the downtown Woolworth store and asked for service.
Instead, angry whites poured mustard and ketchup on the
protesters, and beat Norman unconscious. Salter joined the
boycott ninety minutes after it started. Several hundred
Jackson residents yelled obscenities and hurled water laced
with pepper into the protesters' eyes. The police passively
watched. Cliff Sessions of UPI handed Salter wet napkins to
wipe the pepper from his eyes. Journalists watched in horror.


Angry teens and adults called Salter, the first white to join the demonstration, "nigger lover," "communist," and "red." 27

The Jackson newspapers believed the Communist Party U.S.A. supported Evers and the NAACP. The Daily News reprinted the front page of The Worker on its editorial page. The lead editorial, "Communists Using NAACP Here To Embarrass USA" quoted The Worker's front-page story about protests in Jackson. The communist weekly belittled Mississippians and the "NAACP is walking hand-in-hand with the Communists." 28

The Clarion-Ledger matched the red-baiting tactics of its sister publication. The American Veterans Committee raised $477 to defray Evers's bail following his June 1 arrest for participating in the boycott. The newspaper called the AVC a communist sympathizer. The AVC ignored the rebuke and recognized Evers with its Meritorious Achievement Award. The AVC "has been loud for 'civil rights' but silent on the menace of Red Cuba." 29

Other newspapers reported the AVC donation to Evers. The New Orleans Times-Picayune carried a straight news account with a Washington dateline. The story did not mention whether the group supported Fidel Castro in Cuba, but explained why the organization raised the money to help Evers after his

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27Salter, Struggle and Schism, 134-135.
29Column, Jackson Clarion-Ledger, 11 June 1963.
arrest.\textsuperscript{30} The Jackson newspapers "made the civil rights
movement look like a communist conspiracy that was trying to
invade the city, and of course those people didn’t know much
better."\textsuperscript{31}

The Woolworth sit-in merited national press coverage.
For the next three weeks, newspapers played the story on the
front page. From May 23 until late June, the boycott earned
front-page attention in the \textit{Delta Democrat-Times}.

A molotov cocktail landed on the Everses’ porch the
evening the boycott started. Evers did not accompany the trio
on the first day because Salter feared for Evers’s safety,
but segregationists knew the ring leader. The family quickly
extinguished the molotov cocktail. The incident shocked youth
and adult NAACP members, who underestimated the tenacity of
segregationist forces and their hatred of Evers.

\textit{The New York Times} profiled Evers in its "Man in the
News" feature. "He talks quietly and attends to small
details. But his strong feelings, like his unexpected smile,
are never fully submerged by his methodical manner."\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30}"AVC Gives $477 To NAACP Man", \textit{New Orleans Times-
Picayune}, 3 June 1963.

\textsuperscript{31}Wilson F. "Bill" Minor, interview with author, Jackson,

\textsuperscript{32}Anthony Lewis, \textit{Portrait of a Decade: The Second
American Revolution} (New York: Random House, 1964), 224;
assessed the mood of African-Americans in Jackson with the quip, “Let’s march.”

The Clarion-Ledger accused Evers of cowardice. Its headline, “Racial Agitator Leads As Children Go To Jail” blamed Evers for the arrest of teenagers involved in the boycott. Roy Wilkins and other top NAACP agreed to fill the jail cells with demonstrators of all ages.

At the height of the demonstrations, the Mississippi Press Association met in Biloxi for its annual meeting. The group elected Tom M. Hederman Jr. as president. In his acceptance speech, Hederman said forced integration made the country mediocre. Outgoing MPA president Norman A. Mott Jr. of the Yazoo City Herald echoed Hederman’s sentiments.

Besides blaming the communists and the federal government, the Daily News saved its harshest criticism for the NAACP. In an editorial with the headline “Freedom From Pigeon Drops,” the newspaper blamed the NAACP for misleading “the nation and the gullible world wishing to believe the Negro is held in bondage, barbed wire concentration camps and under strict confinement by armed guards and snarling dogs.”

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33Newsweek, 10 June 1963, 29.


The newspaper also reprinted "A Visiting Newsman’s Guide" from the Charleston (South Carolina) News and Courier, which instructed reporters on the difference in coverage afforded whites and African-Americans. "Negro mobs will be described as ‘orderly, law-abiding, purposeful, non-violent.’ White mobs consist of ‘howling rednecks, their faces contorted with hate.’" The Daily News introduced the guide:

For the next few days Jackson will be a headline in the national news. A few visiting reporters and cameramen are in town but the present hate campaign by agitators isn’t claiming nearly so many newsmen as the ill-fated ‘freedom riders’ did a couple of years ago when prostitutes, auto thieves, dope addicts and even ‘registered’ Los Angeles homosexuals came down to plant ‘culture’ in the Deep South.\footnote{A Visiting Newsman’s Guide", Jackson Daily News, 30 May 1963.}

Press visitors to Jackson included reporters from Mississippi newspapers. The Vicksburg Evening Post sent reporter Roy Bailey. He described the Reverend Edwin King’s arrest at a downtown federal building. Protesters prayed before police ordered them arrested. "Only King remained on the steps. As people closed in around the lone figure in a gray suit and white collar, he dropped to his knees and continued praying." Bailey photographed jail trustees carrying King to the police wagon. In both the front-page article and cutline for the photograph, the reporter failed to mention that King was born and reared in Vicksburg, where
most of his family still lived. The reporter and editors missed an important story angle.\textsuperscript{38}

Despite increased tension and scores of reporters to record every picket and march, the movement lost momentum in the second week of June. As Washington Post reporter Wallace Terry observed, "The city fathers were making no concessions."\textsuperscript{39}

Resistance and a shrinking supply of bail money caused the NAACP national office to reconsider its support of the boycott. Despite the NAACP's doubts, Mississippi activists believed strongly that Evers's star never burned brighter. The NAACP committed funds to Mississippi for two reasons. The organization wanted to prevent other civil rights groups from grabbing the spotlight in Mississippi and they quietly hoped Evers would challenge King for national recognition. "They were well on their way to achieving that, too," when an assassin's bullet cut short plans to change Mississippi.\textsuperscript{40}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{38}"It's Simply Routine For Jackson Police", Vicksburg Evening Post, 31 May 1963. The photograph showed trustees carrying Edwin King to the police wagon.
\item \textsuperscript{39}Covering the South: A National Symposium on the Media and the Civil Rights Movement, "The Mass Movement: 1960-1964" 4 April 1987 (3-5 April 1987, Oxford: University of Mississippi). Typed transcript material from Baylor University's Institute for Oral History.
\item \textsuperscript{40}Anne Moody, \textit{Coming of Age in Mississippi} (New York: Dell, 1968), 276.
\end{itemize}
CHAPTER 8

"SOME SON OF A BITCH HAS KILLED MEDGAR"

After a rally on June 11, Jackson Daily News reporter W. C. "Dub" Shoemaker stood outside smoking cigarettes and talking to Medgar Evers. The poorly attended rally puzzled Shoemaker, who drove home wondering how to peg his story for the next afternoon's edition. The meeting failed to produce any information that warranted a news story. At home, he telephoned an FBI agent to exchange information, a practice that would occasionally lead to news stories. At 1:00 a.m. June 12, his telephone rang. Chief of detectives of the Jackson police, M. B. Pierce, curtly remarked, "Dub, come out to University Hospital. Some son-of-a-bitch has killed Medgar."¹

After the rally, Evers attended a strategy session with NAACP attorneys to discuss how to reinvigorate the boycott. Roy Wilkins and Gloster Current flew to Jackson and seized control of strategy sessions, thus alienating local activists. Wilkins and Current withheld bail money to gain leverage and control. Wilkins reminded organizers that the NAACP provided $64,000 in bail money. The annual budgets of

other civil rights barely surpassed the bail money appropriated for the boycott.

Wilkins distrusted John Salter, whose independence and respect among the youth council worried the NAACP leadership. Top NAACP officials met without notifying Salter, who served as co-chair of the boycott. Current argued to include conservative African-American community leaders on the boycott committee. Wilkins and Current decided to rotate the committee chair to dilute Salter’s power.

Salter declined to defend his position because “it was obvious that whoever controlled the financial resources of the Jackson movement in the end controlled its basic drift.”

Citing the costly bail bonds, and the organization’s historical reliance on the legal system and not direct action, the NAACP’s top executives ended the demonstrations, and instead urged a voter registration drive.

Evers avoided the meetings if possible but not on June 11. He debated whether to side with the people who signed his check in New York or the local activists. Evers admired the courage and conviction of Salter and the youth council. He tried to placate both groups. James Meredith knew Evers

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“supported it [the NAACP] as eagerly when he differed with it as he did when he agreed with it.”

The lack of progress, however, frustrated Evers. When the Reverend Edwin King attended the rally the night of June 11, he and Evers discussed the problems. Evers feared Jackson would become another Birmingham, replete with attack dogs and fire hoses. Evers pondered whether that type of brutality could force the architects of segregation to the bargaining table. King remembered the “emotional hell” Evers “went through--that pull and tear a full year before his death” as the various civil rights organizations jockeyed for position.4

The continuous death threats only magnified his problems. Less than twelve hours before his murder, Evers notified the FBI of an attempt on his life. As he walked east near his office on Lynch Street and started to cross Franklin Street, a city police car with two officers veered into his path. He jumped back to the curb to avoid the police car. Evers told the FBI the officers laughed before driving away. He reported the license plate number on the car. The FBI forwarded the report to the Civil Rights Division of the U. S. Department of Justice. With most of the information deleted, it is unclear whether the FBI investigated the complaint. The report did not mention whether the FBI

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notified the Jackson police department. The assassination overshadowed Evers's complaint.

He arrived home shortly after midnight. As he stepped toward the lighted porch, an assassin’s bullet struck Evers in the back. Neighbors rushed Evers to University Hospital where he died.

Police allowed Shoemaker to view Evers's body on a gurney. The exit wound left a hole in his chest “as big as your fist.” The hospital retrieved $1.12 in change from his pockets, and a blood-stained five dollar bill inside a folded receipt with the name of a new member.

The night before, Washington Post reporter Wallace Terry dined with Evers, who invited the young reporter home for a cup of coffee. Evers asked how to resurrect the movement. “And I said, ‘Medgar, I think it’s going to take a hundred big funerals’.” Terry returned to his hotel room and drove to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the next morning, where Governor George Wallace denied entrance to African-American students. Terry’s grim prediction came true, but like other national

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correspondents, he left to cover the next unfolding civil rights story. 

A Murder Story

United Press International reporter Cliff Sessions spent the evening of the assassination at a Jackson nightclub. Dressed in his new white sportscoat, Sessions and his wife entertained former Jackson residents back in town on vacation. After neighbors drove Evers to the hospital, Mrs. Evers tried to contact Sessions. The maid answered the telephone. At the time, Mrs. Evers did not know the extent of husband's wounds. The maid called Sessions at the club and told him Evers was injured in a shooting. Sessions immediately left for the police station, where he learned that his friend was already dead.

UPI reporter Dave Mattox also spent the evening at the club, and left to open the bureau as Sessions headed downtown. Sessions spent sixteen hours on the story before returning home for a shower and a quick nap. He broke down in tears, both from the fatigue of reporting an unfolding story and the anger of losing a friend.

Journalists scrambled to report the biggest civil rights story ever. Television and radio reports interrupted programming. Reporters for afternoon newspapers visited the

[Covering the South.]

[Cliff Sessions, interview with author, Biloxi, Mississippi, 24 July 1992.]
crime scene. Metropolitan newspapers across the country bombarded the wire services with queries about the assassination and investigation.

In Oxford, James Meredith addressed the media at a press conference early that morning. "May God bless this land with peace. But if we must die for what is right, then let us go like Medgar Evers in 'honor.' Remember the words of Patrick Henry, 'Give me liberty, or give me death.'"  

Shoemaker visited the murder scene at 2332 Guynes Street. Detectives found the murder weapon in a honeysuckle vine patch about 11:00 a.m. The discovery of the murder weapon provided afternoon newspaper reporters with the hook to build a news story.  

The wire services included stories with President Kennedy's reaction. The Daily News offered a $1,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of "the party or parties who shot and killed Medgar Evers."

The Associated Press provided the Vicksburg Evening Post with three front-page stories. The Delta Democrat-Times carried UPI stories on page one. Unlike other newspapers, the UPI stories in the Delta Democrat-Times focused on the

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9James Meredith, Three Years in Mississippi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 306.

murder. Sidebars emphasized the police investigation and the rifle found in the honeysuckle bush.\textsuperscript{11}

Editorial Response

Despite the front-page coverage June 12, editorial writers at afternoon newspapers state-wide delayed comment on the assassination until June 13, almost thirty-six hours after Evers died. Hodding Carter III believed the murder symbolized the most desperate attempt to defend segregation. "Murder is a last resort"\textsuperscript{12} Most newspapers condemned the murder.

The \textit{Memphis Commercial-Appeal}, a morning publication, planned to assess President Kennedy's address to the nation delivered just hours before the murder. Instead, the editorial insisted the assassination damaged white and African-American moderates.\textsuperscript{13} Besides Ken Toler's front-page story, the newspaper published four wire service articles, a mug shot of Evers, and an Associated Press photograph of a Jackson detective standing in front of the Everses home.

Editorially, the \textit{Natchez Democrat} awkwardly condemned the murder, "While the right-thinking people...are conscientiously opposed to all that Medgar Evers stood for and advocated, they nevertheless cannot condone lawlessness


and murder."\textsuperscript{14} The Tupelo Journal believed the murder damaged moderates on both sides. Only the extremists benefited.\textsuperscript{15}

The Vicksburg Evening Post believed the assassination "could conceivably be part of the overall plan... and it must be remembered that martyrdom is always sure to play on the sympathy of the people."\textsuperscript{16}

The Daily News blamed "outside agitators," "visiting agitators," and "professional agitators." The writers did not define the different "agitators." Reprinting portions of a month-old editorial, the Daily News predicted the "professional agitators would proceed somewhere to follow their pattern" of destroying the image of another Southern town.\textsuperscript{17} The editorial artwork featured a book titled "Jackson's Record of Racial Harmony." Drops of blood formed a pool on the book cover with the words "EVERS MURDER" in reverse type. Bob Howie labeled his cartoon "STAINED," referring to the city's tarnished image. Columnist Tom Ethridge believed "desperately ruthless forces may have used him as a sacrificial offering, to rekindle the flames of unrest...."\textsuperscript{18} Segregationists believed activists assassinated

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14}Editorial, \textit{Natchez Democrat}, 14 June 1963.
\item \textsuperscript{15}Editorial, \textit{Tupelo Journal}, 13 June 1963.
\item \textsuperscript{16}Editorial, \textit{Vicksburg Evening Post}, 13 June 1963.
\item \textsuperscript{17}Editorial, \textit{Jackson Daily News}, 13 June 1963.
\item \textsuperscript{18}Column, \textit{Jackson Clarion-Ledger}, 14 June 1963.
\end{itemize}
Evers to force federal intervention. In a conspiratorial
craziness, newspaper editorial writers in Jackson and Natchez
believed civil rights organizers killed Evers to create a
martyr.

"Outside agitators" did not lead the boycott. Because of
an initially cool response from the national NAACP office,
Evers relinquished the Jackson demonstration to local
leadership. Bill Minor's story for the New Orleans Times-
Picayune praised Evers because he "had sought to run the
protests with local Negro leadership, rather than bringing in
well-known Negro leaders from outside to direct the drive."

Minor knew that only Evers could attract the numbers
necessary to successfully boycott the merchants. Although
Evers did not star in the boycott, Minor assumed correctly
that Evers directed the show.

Racial unrest erupted as news of Evers's death spread.
Before the assassination, participation at rallies waned.

The Jackson police outwitted organizers when it
converted the Fairgrounds into a holding pen. Filling the
jails became impossible. The NAACP underestimated the resolve
of segregationists. The strong resolve of the mayor and
business community also deflated enthusiasm for the rallies.

19"Killing Stirs Shock Wave," New Orleans Times-Picayune,
13 June 1963. Bill Minor's story started on the front page,
but jumped to page 29, from where the quoted material was
used.
Salter never wavered in his goal to integrate Mississippi. After the small turnout at the June 11 rally, a disappointed Salter went home. Tougaloo business manager George Owen awakened Salter with the bad news. The assassination did not shock Salter. The non-violent Salter countered with plans to lead a demonstration.  

The *Memphis Commercial-Appeal* editorial of June 14 anticipated the reaction of activists. The editorial cited the Bible for instructions on how God vindicated the oppressed. Murder was not the answer. The Evers murder “has roused searing emotions, fears, and hatreds.” Many African-Americans and a few whites ignored the plea. Jackson police arrested eighty-two protesters.

**Protests and a Funeral**

Salter and strategy leaders drove to the NAACP offices the morning of June 12. The television images of the Everses home, the pool of blood still visible in the driveway, and the sobbing widow incited protests. Anne Moody watched those images. Moody and her friends watched in disbelief. Without much discussion, the schoolmates skipped breakfast to visit the NAACP offices.

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For a few days in the middle of June the intensity that initially marked the demonstrations in late May returned. City officials believed the funeral scheduled for June 15 would ignite riots. Charles Evers dressed his brother's body in a dark gray suit, white shirt and an NAACP tie imprinted with the scales of justice.

The youth council planned to march June 12, and the African-American ministerial alliance, previously lukewarm to any direct action, joined the protest. Two blocks into the march, police arrested the ministers. Later that morning, Salter and two hundred protesters marched downtown. The NAACP canceled a third march because Mrs. Evers decided to address mourners at a mass rally that same evening. Sobbing, Mrs. Evers urged the audience to continue fighting for civil rights. The crowd sang "We Shall Overcome" and most of the press joined hands and sang along, except for the local reporters. Local reporters respected Evers, but joining hands to mourn a civil rights leader was incomprehensible in 1960s Mississippi.²³

Marchers gathered the morning of June 13 at the Pearl Street African Methodist Episcopal church. About one hundred marched without incident until the police spotted Salter. Police pushed Salter, and struck him in the head with clubs.

The impact "sounded like Mickey Mantle knocking a home run...." 24

Police transported Salter to a holding pen at the Fairgrounds before transferring him to University Hospital. Attendants stitched the wounds in the same emergency room where Evers died. That day, the Daily News discontinued the arrest scoreboard that it used during the first few weeks of mass marches and rallies. 25

As the number of arrests increased, the NAACP reconsidered its efforts in Jackson. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and New York attorney William Kunstler offered bail money for protesters in Jackson. The SCLC and Kunstler wanted Evers's name attached to a bail fund. The NAACP declined the offer. Salter wanted the SCLC funds to sustain more protests. Meanwhile, African-American ministers met with Mayor Allen Thompson on Friday to see whether the two sides could agree on the changes the youth council first articulated in November 1962.

The next day, about four thousand crowded into and around the Masonic Temple for the funeral (three thousand inside and one thousand outside) on Saturday. After a ninety-minute service, mourners marched quietly behind the hearse


25 Ibid., 198.
back to the Collins Funeral Home.\textsuperscript{26} The \textit{New York Times} played the story on the front page with quotes from Wilkins.

The bullet that tore away his life four days ago, tore away at the system and helped to signal it in. Oh, they can fiddle and they can throw a few more victims to the lions of repression and persecution, but Rome is burning and a new day is just over yonder.\textsuperscript{27}

On Sundays, the \textit{Daily News} and \textit{Clarion-Ledger} published a consolidated issue, which circulated to every corner of the state. Most of the state’s dailies did not publish on Sundays, leaving the Hedermans a larger audience for its combined edition.\textsuperscript{28} Coverage of the funeral cited "outside agitators" as the culprit in the assassination. The "4,000 Negroes sprinkled with two dozen or so whites attended the Saturday service and, of those marching in the procession, about three-fourths were actually Jackson residents."\textsuperscript{29} Editorially, the \textit{Memphis Commercial-Appeal} asked for peace.\textsuperscript{30}

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\textsuperscript{26}Vollers, \textit{Ghosts of Mississippi}, 138-140.


\textsuperscript{28}Editor and Publisher Yearbook, 1960. Only three daily newspapers published morning (AM) newspapers---the \textit{Clarion-Ledger}, the \textit{Natchez Democrat} (the city had another daily, which published in the afternoons), and the \textit{Tupelo Journal}. Daily newspapers in Biloxi, Clarksdale, Corinth, Greenwood, Grenada, and Laurel did not publish newspapers on Sunday, leaving an information gap that the Hedermans tried to fill.

\textsuperscript{29}Jackson \textit{Clarion Ledger} and \textit{Jackson Daily News}, 16 June 1963.

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Years earlier, Evers instructed his wife to bury him in Arlington National Cemetery. After Saturday’s service in Jackson, a train filled with NAACP officials and the Evers family traveled to Washington. The train arrived Monday, where five hundred mourners marched from Union Station to the funeral home. More than two thousand onlookers lined the street near the funeral home.

Two thousand, including secretary of the interior Stewart L. Udall, attended the service at Arlington National Cemetery service. Stephen Gill Spottswood, bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal church and chair of the NAACP board of directors, delivered the eulogy. "I hope Medgar Evers is the last black American to give his life in the struggle to make the Constitution come alive."31

When Charles Evers moved to Chicago in 1956, he promised his brother to return to Mississippi if needed. The NAACP needed a field secretary for Mississippi. Charles Evers volunteered. The NAACP approved the appointment.32

Charles Evers talked to his brother the Sunday before the assassination.33 “You’re down there turning the other cheek. I’m afraid the bastards [Ku Klux Klan] will kill you


32Sidebar, The New York Times, 17 June 1963. A sidebar consists of information not necessarily pertinent to the primary story. The article is, however, relevant to the topic being discussed in the primary article. The sidebar also used a photo of Charles Evers.

and think nothing about it." Less than 72 hours later, Charles boarded a plane for Jackson.

Fertilizer Salesman From California

Within hours of the murder, police recovered a hunting rifle in a honeysuckle bush on Guynes Street. Police lifted a complete impression of a right index finger from the rifle. The Federal Bureau of Investigation assigned seventy agents to scour the country for the killer. A Japanese-made Goldenhawk sight affixed to the rifle prompted investigators to trace its origins. Imported through Chicago, the Japanese shipped more than fifteen thousand to two hundred United States dealers. The Chicago importer shipped sixty sights to Mississippi, including five to a dealer in Grenada. The FBI tracked the sights to the original owners. Byron De La Beckwith, a fertilizer salesman in Greenwood, traded for one of the scopes.35

On Saturday, June 22, the FBI arrested the 42-year-old Beckwith, an avid segregationist whose grandmother had known Confederate president Jefferson Davis. The Davis family willed their china to Beckwith's maternal relatives. Born in California, the five-year-old Beckwith and his mother


returned to Mississippi after his father died. The combined Sunday edition of the Clarion-Ledger and Daily News reported that “FBI Nabs Greenwood Man in Evers Murder.” On Monday, the Clarion-Ledger reported, “Californian Is Charged With Murder of Evers,” an example of misleading information. Veteran journalist Bill Minor called the “Californian is Charged...” headline an example of how Mississippi newspapers twisted the truth.

Minor’s lead paragraph more accurately summarized the arrest. “Byron De La Beckwith, a dapper 42-year-old Greenwood white man with old Mississippi family ties, Sunday was charged with the murder of....” In a front-page headline, Delta Democrat-Times editors labeled Beckwith an “ardent segregationist.” Hodding Carter III reminded readers not to assume automatically Beckwith’s guilt because “it would be a disservice to both the suspect and the memory of the victim.” In making that statement, Carter’s editorial saved its

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37“Californian Is Charged With Murder of Evers”, Jackson Clarion-Ledger, 24 June 1963. The story described Beckwith as “a 42-year-old salesman from the Mississippi Delta city of Greenwood and a native Californian...”


harshest criticism for the “Californian Is Charged…” headline in the Clarion-Ledger:

Such a journalistic atrocity as that committed by the Jackson morning publication is a shocking example of the bitterness decent people do not hold and most others wouldn’t tolerate. In a front page headline which is sure to become an example in journalism schools for slanted writing of the worst and most ludicrous kind, the publications said: ‘Californian Is Charged With Murder of Evers.’

Eudora Welty, the state’s Pulitzer Prize winning short story writer and poet, crafted a short story that described how the Hederman newspapers promoted violence against Evers and other civil rights activists. In “Where Is The Voice Coming From,” Welty’s dialogue between the assassin and his wife revolve around why the man shot the agitator. The wife approved, “Didn’t the fella keep drumming it in, what a good idea? The one that writes a column ever’ day?” She wrote the story within hours of the murder because “I knew what kind of mind did it. I knew what kind of person did it. We all knew it.”

All-white, all-male juries acquitted Beckwith in two separate trials in 1964. The Hinds County district attorney’s office decided to indict Beckwith in December 1990 because of old and new evidence. A Clarion-Ledger reporter and the

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42 “State’s contrasts reach to its soul”, Jackson Clarion-Ledger, 14 February 1994.
district attorney's office found witnesses who declined to reveal information in 1964. Those witnesses no longer feared retribution. In mid-1989, investigators discovered that Sovereignty Commission members influenced the previous two juries. With state funding, the commission served as an arm of the Citizens' Council. The reindictment prompted three years of legal maneuvering. A jury of eight African-Americans and four whites, which included seven women, convicted the 73-year-old Beckwith of murder in February 1994. The Gannett-owned Clarion-Ledger applauded the verdict. The editorial failed to mention the newspaper's own racist history. It, like the rest of the state, debated the ramifications of the verdict, and then rejoined the rest of the world to participate in the late twentieth century.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION: SOME THOUGHTS ON HISTORY AND MEMORY

Scholarship on the practice of journalism in the state has historically relied on oral histories, largely ignoring the quantitative methods under the assumption that publishers, editors and reporters supported orthodox racism.

Scientific investigation can answer the "how" of history, but its measurements often fail to answer the "why." The books of Hodding Carter, J. Oliver Emmerich and Ira Harkey best tell the story of Mississippi journalism. The death threats and rebukes from colleagues reinforce their thesis of an industry that supported the infrastructure of segregation.

Recent scholarship highlighted the social changes more than the role of journalists. Adam Nossiter's Of Long Memory (1994) and Maryanne Vollers's Ghosts of Mississippi (1995) revisit the civil rights struggles. Medgar Evers co-stars with Beckwith, but the governors, the prosecutors, and defense attorneys all have speaking roles. The recent books weave biography and history. The former elevates the role of the individual and the latter investigates how society shapes the individual. In the days before his death, journalists and civil rights activists realized Evers's tremendous contribution to the movement.
Journalists earn only cursory notice in both books. They label the Carters of Greenville as moderates and the Hedermans as racists. Participants in the movement have generally focused on civil rights readers. The list includes journalists Hodding Carter, Hodding Carter III, Ira Harkey, J. Oliver Emmerich, Anthony Lewis and Pat Watters, and educators James Silver, Neil McMillen, the Reverend Edwin King, Neil R. Pierce and John Dittmer. The authors published their books within one to five years of the events.

The lack of historical perspective raises questions about the distance necessary to evaluate fairly the civil rights movement in Mississippi.

Participants who let the material age before committing to paper not surprisingly wrote the best accounts. McMillen's *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* won the Bancroft Prize covers Mississippi's early twentieth century history. Dittmer's *Local People* is perhaps the most thorough account of the grassroots movement in Mississippi, although Evers plays but a cameo role.

This dissertation studied Medgar Evers and the role of journalism during his tenure as NAACP field secretary. No other civil rights movement figure played a more important role in Mississippi than Evers, and unlike Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, no comprehensive biography exists. A scholarly study of newspaper journalists and their relationship to Evers does not exist.
Why have historians neglected these two areas? The reasons are complex and indefensible. Evers lacked the charisma of Martin Luther King Jr. and the fiery oratory of Malcolm X. Furthermore, few people outside Mississippi or the civil rights movement knew Evers.

Mississippi journalists virtually ignored Evers, creating an information blockade. Until the merchant boycott received national press coverage, the average Mississippian would not have recognized Evers walking down the street. A majority of the state’s newspapers operated in a time warp that proved “how removed from history their pages seem.”

Newspapers, however, are only a reflection of the culture in which they operate. The slanted news or news blackout reflected public mores as well.

Furthermore, the African-American establishment spurned Evers because it feared economic reprisal. Economic independence linked the bulk of high profile NAACP members. In Mississippi during the 1950s and 1960s, that number comprised only a handful. The African-American press in the state, which reflected the accommodationist theory of survival, either ignored Evers or scolded him for upsetting the delicate balance of accommodation. In many cases, middle-


class African-Americans earned economic independence with help from whites, or relied on whites to buy their products or services. If the protests upset the balance, those in the middle class might lose their economic and social status.

Evers died before the world fully knew him. To journalists, Evers represented a regional leader in the shadow of King. With competition from the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the NAACP national office, Evers retreated from the spotlight at the height of the boycott. Instead of elbowing his way to center stage, he quietly withdrew to avoid the conflict between the NAACP’s New York office and the unofficial boycott leadership. His opportunity quickly evaporated.

In a national television address, President Kennedy delivered a blistering attack on the Southern white establishment only hours before the assassination. Less than twelve hours later, Alabama Governor George Wallace stubbornly admitted African-American students to the state university. In other words, Evers died on a busy news day, competing for front-page placement with the president and a southern governor.

After the march on Washington in fall 1963, King emerged as the prime spokesman of the civil rights movement. Evers, the fallen foot soldier, quickly faded in American memory. Evers earned footnote status in the books published in the
1960s. Jack Mendelsohn’s *The Martyrs* (1966) devoted a chapter to Evers, the exception rather than the rule.

When veteran reporters converged on Oxford, Mississippi, in 1987, seminar participants offered glowing reviews of Evers as a person and a news source. The roundtable discussions produced what sociologists define as collective remembering—and forgetting. The national press corps praised Evers. Mississippi journalists praised Evers, but defended their reporting. National correspondents outnumbered Mississippi journalists at the symposium, an indication that many of the state’s journalists had either died or opted not to recount their journalistic practices of an earlier period.

Charles Dunagin, who worked for the short-lived *Jackson State-Times* and later for J. Oliver Emmerich in McComb, attended. He believed most reporters “did an adequate job” of covering the news.3 "Adequate" defended his journalistic reputation and rejected the southern value system of the 1950s and 1960s. Another Mississippi journalist, W.C. “Dub” Shoemaker, praised Evers more than he discussed his employers—the Hedermans. "Uh, I think one of the most honorable people...in the civil rights movement whom I dealt with was Medgar Evers. I (pause) I had a great deal of faith

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in him, and I think he in me, maybe." The word "maybe" reflected Shoemaker's awkward position as a Hederman employee and his journalist-source relationship with Evers.4

Dunagin and Shoemaker excelled as reporters, unlike the editorial writers who unfairly lampooned Evers at every opportunity.

From his death in 1963 to the symposium in 1987, society's treatment of African-Americans greatly changed. The Hederman newspapers of 1963 represented a position not defensible in the 1980s. Not one of the Hedermans attended the symposium.5

Oral history interviews present reliability problems. What the interviewee recalls more than two decades after an event about the faces and facts are important, but how they remember the event in the context of changing social attitudes, particularly civil rights, creates a new dynamic.

At the symposium, participants reconstructed the past with a full view of the present. Individual interviews five years after the symposium uncovered minor discrepancies with what reporters said in the context of a group in 1987. Stories and values evolve. What was once acceptable is today untenable. Embellishment of facts or conveniently forgetting

4Ibid.

5The author contacted members of the Hederman family in the summers of 1992 and 1993, but they respectfully declined to be interviewed.
the details of whether a story fairly presented both sides of the movement occur in oral histories.

The defenders of racial orthodoxy in Mississippi are conspicuously absent in books that heavily rely on oral histories. The symposium of 1987 attests to that theory.

Nossiter and Vollers commemorated rather than reconstructed the past. Commemoration results primarily in the collective remembrance of past events. Symposium participants believed their accounts. As participants trained in fact-based and fair reporting, any false reconstruction violated their professional ethics codes.

The journalists had long since satisfied their questions of whether they had accurately reported the events, but met to commemorate and exchange anecdotes of the civil rights era, and particularly Evers. Washington Post reporter Dorothy Gilliam recalled her trips to Mississippi and her impressions of Evers. She admired his courage, admitting that “if we start erecting statues, I certainly think that Medgar Evers should have one.” 6 Claude Sitton of The New York Times and wire service reporter John Herbers agreed. Herbers called Evers a “saint.” 7

More than thirty years after the assassination, Evers re-emerged as a cult figure in the academic and popular

6Covering the South.

7Nossiter, Of Long Memory, 55.

When an assassin ended Abraham Lincoln’s life on 15 April 1865, the nation mourned an unpopular president. Only six months earlier, most doubted his re-election. Despised by Southerners and increasingly unpopular in the North, Lincoln’s popularity evolved more than thirty years after his death, according to historian Stephen B. Oates. Much like Evers, Lincoln was the imperfect martyr, and a commoner. Americans have consistently celebrated heroes with more aristocratic backgrounds—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton. Lincoln the commoner achieved universal acceptance as a national hero.

Evers represents the commoner in the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King Jr. represents the aristocrat, whose background and mastery of rhetoric propelled his ascension to cult status in life and hero status in death.

The Civil War overshadowed Lincoln. His role is part of a script with many heroes. King, Malcolm X, George Wallace and President Kennedy overshadowed Evers. Like Lincoln, Evers never sought public adulation. Like Lincoln, he avoided confrontation unless absolutely necessary.

Lincoln’s status as a national hero developed because people viewed themselves differently. Federal legislation and the rise of unions in the Progressive Era elevated the common
The income tax leveled the economic playing field to create a larger middle class.\textsuperscript{8}

The image of Lincoln as man of the people fit the Evers persona. Lincoln believed national interests superseded sectional or state interests, and that democracy required just treatment for all citizens.\textsuperscript{9} Evers, too, believed the federal government could reorder society. He, too, believed in civil rights for all. Through the mid-twentieth century, African-Americans viewed Lincoln as the Great Emancipator or a white Moses. The Second Reconstruction, however, ushered in an African-American Moses, Martin Luther King Jr. Lincoln and King, however, shared only the bond of leadership in a time of crisis. The similarities between the two are less congruous than between Lincoln and Evers—the self-made man image and their two-tiered legacies of justice provide better comparative fodder. Americans did not embrace Lincoln as a national hero because of a discovery of new facts, but because they themselves had changed. America, too, rediscovered Evers.

Historians and the people of Mississippi embrace Evers as the commoner worthy of hero status. New information has


\textsuperscript{9}Merrill D. Peterson, Lincoln in American Memory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 156.
not emerged in the last quarter century, but Americans views of the civil rights movement changed.

In the 1960s and 1970s, historians studied the leaders of the movement. Today, John Dittmer's *Local People* (1994) chronicles the role of the foot soldier. It would be a stretch to compare the working class movement of the Progressive Era to the civil rights movement of the past thirty years. Mississippi has changed. Ira Harkey, the editor of the *Pascagoula Chronicle* in the early 1960s, revisited the state in the late 1980s. The change "makes my hair stand on end. It's like the twilight zone. It's unbelievable to an old fogey like me to see these things." Mississippians embraced Evers before the 1994 Beckwith trial.

The differences between Evers and Lincoln are numerous, but so are the similarities. Both represented the best of participatory democracy.

Journalists who defined Evers as "saintly" during the 1987 symposium may have reconstructed a reality that existed in 1963. The "first-draft" historians at the 1987 symposium shared in an equal rights belief system.

Their value system did not change from 1963 to 1996. The pervasive orthodoxy of racism may have squashed their discussion of those beliefs, but they quietly worked to

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10Ira Harkey, interview with author, Kerrville, Texas, 5 August 1993.
change the system as adherents of the social responsibility theory.

Participants in commemorations attempt to reconstruct events as viewed through the prism of personal experience. Participants share value systems. Their positions in 1963 were tenuous at best, and would be considered anathema today. The symposium focused more on Evers than the orthodox newspapers.

Dittmer assesses accurately and fairly where Evers fits in the civil rights history canon.

Both the inner turmoil of Evers’s final days and the tragedy of his martyrdom are eloquent testimony to the courage and dedication of a leader who deserved—in his lifetime—the respect and the support of the powerful people who later publicly identified themselves so closely with this man and his cause.¹¹

Key civil rights leaders abandoned Evers when he most needed their help. The phrase “powerful people who later publicly identified themselves so closely” with Evers rightfully slights those who capitalized on his name long after his singular fight against the power structure faded from memory. According to Dittmer, many said they knew Evers although few stood with him during the tenuous period of 1950s Mississippi.

Medgar Evers did not change. We changed, and in the process, elevated Evers to a status that rightfully pays tribute to his accomplishments.
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