Ole Miss: Clash Of Cultures Brings Violence To The South

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The recent entry of James Meredith into the University of Mississippi and the resulting holocaust have been the subject of countless articles and editorials during the past three weeks.

The actions of Governor Barnett and the support given to him by the people of Mississippi have been hard for many Americans to understand. Yet for one familiar with the conditions in Mississippi, especially the current political situation, the crisis is not surprising. This article will not attempt to defend the position of Barnett, but to point out some factors which are essential to understanding the problem.

MISSISSIPPI, more than any other state, has been left behind. In the first place, agriculture has almost totally dominated the state's economy, yet it has been a type of agriculture distinct from that of the Middle West and West. Only in the past fifteen years have chemicals, flame-throwers, and cotton pickers been perfected so as to reduce the time and labor needed to produce cotton—Mississippi's basic crop.

When agriculture in the grain producing areas was revolutionized more than a century ago by the introduction of reapers, mowers, and combines, the traditional scene in Mississippi still consisted of rows of cotton choppers at work from May until early August, followed by gangs of cotton pickers from late August into October. It is a state of small towns; Jackson, the largest city, has a population of 145,000.

IN GENERAL industry did not begin to develop—even on a small scale—until the late 1930's. Since then chemical plants, garment factories, oil refineries, and a host of other enterprises have begun to appear in former cotton fields. Still all of these ventures seem small when compared to similar ones in other parts of the country.

Mississippi's white population is almost entirely of British descent; lack of opportunity caused later immigrant groups to settle in more prosperous areas. Since the remainder of the population is Negro, the percentage of colored to white is more closely equal than in any other state.

The religious composition is overwhelmingly Protestant with fundamentalist sects in the majority. The dominance of the fundamentalists is attested to by the fact that Mississippi is the only state in the union where prohibition is still the law and supposedly is enforced.

Because Mississippi has not shared in the economic and social development that have so largely shaped twentieth-century America and because of its agrarian foundation and its racial and religious make-up, it has maintained a homogenous culture that has sharply set it off in many respects from its sister states in the North and West.

A strong case can be made that it has been the clash between this homogenous culture and that of modern America which has been one of the chief sources for the works of such Mississippi writers as Truman Capote, Eudora Welty, Tennessee Williams, and William Faulkner.

Turning to the political scene it should be noted that Mississippi is a one party state following in the tradition of the "solid South." Political fights have sometimes centered along sectional lines within the state, such as the traditional rivalry between the delta planters and the "red neck" hill farmers. Frequently, however, there have been no real issues with the result being a series of in-fights between various factions and personalities.

THE 1954 Supreme Court decision on desegregation jolted the political scene in Mississippi more strongly than in any other Southern state. Because of the large colored population, white Mississippians strove to organize their opposition as thoroughly and effectively as possible. The principal organ of resistance appeared in the White Citizens' Council, a white supremacy organization dedicated to maintaining segregation. Although the council varies slightly from town to town, it has a basic pattern. The Citizens Council in Mississippi is not made-up of the hooded figure type who constituted the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920's. Membership drives are open to the public and are advertised in newspapers and on radio.

The local president is almost always a prominent citizen, and the board of directors is drawn largely from the community's Who's Who. Not withstanding the fact that its goals are dubious and its methods repugnant, the council's aims are not couched in violent language but in the traditional appeal of state rights and constitutionalism. In

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fact, when the council was first founded one of the primary purposes was to retain control of resistance to desegregation in the hands of the “better people.” Today membership in the council is almost similar to membership in the Rotary or Lions Club.

NO VIOLENCE has been directly attributed to the council. The organization’s chief tools are economic and social pressure. If a person—whether white or colored—expresses views which are considered dangerous by the council, he is isolated socially and economically, so that he is eventually forced to go out of business and leave the state or to comply with the council. Because of the absence of large cities, a dissenter can find few allies.

The Citizens’ Council became a major political factor in the gubernatorial election of 1959 when Ross Barnett was a landslide victory in the Democratic primary. Barnett’s election was particularly significant in view of the fact that he did this against the opposition of Mississippi’s two living ex-Governors and with all but one of the state’s daily newspapers against him.

DURING THE campaign one of Barnett’s opponents advocated the repeal of prohibition, demanded a reapportionment of the state legislature, and questioned Mississippi’s sacred ties with the Democratic Party. This was indeed a liberal stand for Mississippi! Barnett, however, based his campaign chiefly on the maintenance of segregation; he also declared himself a strong supporter of local self-government, by which he meant that he would maintain the status quo. The Citizens’ Council backed Barnett and with his election became the dominant power bloc in Mississippi politics.

Since that time the council has practically completed a political machine whose power is publicly unchallenged by any major state official. One of its most dramatic accomplishments was in casting Mississippi’s electoral votes in favor of Senator Harry Byrd in the Presidential election of 1960.

EVEN MORE important for the council’s purposes was the decision by the State Sovereignty Commission in 1960 to donate $5,000 a month from state tax money to support the council’s radio and television program, Citizens’ Council Forum. This commission was founded in 1956 to protect the sovereignty of the state of Mississippi, and its members are, nearly to the man, council members. This grant, combined with a lump-sum donation of $20,000, has brought the council nearly $100,000 from the public treasury.

Barnett’s election clearly indicated what could be expected during the next four years. James Meredith’s entrance into Ole Miss and Barnett’s reaction is at least more understandable in light of the state’s political situation. In fact, I believe it would have been amazing if Barnett had adopted a course of action different from the one he followed.

Perhaps one of the most tragic aspects of the Meredith case is the fact that the many responsible citizens who had allied themselves with the council have now ended up on the side of the lawbreakers. As a result they have abdicated their role of leadership to the racist and fascist elements; and at this time it is enlightened and responsible leaders which Mississippi so desperately needs.