# *PARTING THE WATERS*

## AMERICA IN THE KING YEARS 1954–63

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was a success. Negro voter registration had more than doubled there in 1962, King told his audience in Birmingham, and had risen by some 30,000 in all of Georgia. One result, he declared, was the victory of the racial moderate Carl Sanders in the recent governor's race. He said the movement already had won over Pritchett and other leading whites of Albany, who were going through the motions of defending a system they believed was, and ought to be, doomed. Fundamental issues were laid bare, hearts changed, backs straightened.

Having strained to put a positive face on Albany (Pritchett was obliged to deny that moderation had crossed his mind), King retired to analyze shortcomings of the Albany Movement by his own lights. Much of his appraisal was implicit in his conception of the next campaign. In strategy sessions, he said he wanted the SCLC in "on the ground floor." Having learned that it took time to seize the attention of the outside world, he wanted to control the timing and rhythm of the next campaign. In Albany he had been a latecomer, arriving after the mass arrests had peaked, but he was drawing most of the criticism anyway. Nobody was calling Albany a tactical failure for SNCC or the NAACP.

From the bus boycott through the Freedom Rides and on into Albany, King always had entered popular movements more or less haphazardly. Now, since his public stature made anything he did a referendum on his principles, pragmatism demanded that he design his own test. He needed advance planning, training, and mobilization on a specific rather than a general target area. In short, he needed control of a concentrated effort, maximizing both his risk and his chances for spectacular success. To his staff, King announced his resolve to swear off spontaneous rescue missions. "I don't want to be a fireman anymore."

## SEVENTEEN

# THE FALL OF OLE MISS

New spasms of violence plagued the registration campaign as Moses began his second year in Mississippi, and by uncanny coincidence each periodic incident was echoed by an outburst around Albany, more than three hundred miles to the east. On the Saturday of the false victory in Albany, when the city was closing the tennis courts and swimming pools, Moses and Sam Block took their first large group of would-be registrants to the courthouse in Greenwood, Mississippi—twenty-five of them. This was an unprecedented event in LeFlore County, made all the more shocking by the presence of a CBS film crew and a number of reporters. On the following Monday, three angry white men grabbed Block as he stepped from Moses' car in the downtown business district and beat him severely.

Tension thickened in Greenwood, becoming so dense that when two young volunteer teachers arrived on Wednesday, August 14—the day Shady Grove Baptist Church was burning in Georgia—they found the shades drawn at the SNCC office off Broad Street. Inside, the few Negroes who arrived for classes chose their places carefully, whispering of sniper angles. Moses left for a registration drive in nearby Bolivar County, but the following midnight Sam Block called him there in hushed panic, to report that several carloads of armed men were staking out the office. What coiled the fear most tightly was the stark awareness that it was

absurd to hope for police protection—Block had seen police cars pull out just ahead of the posse. Hushed emergency calls followed—to the FBI's local resident agent, to John Doar and Burke Marshall at their homes in Washington. After the next call from Block, who said the men were getting out of their cars, some holding guns and others swinging chains, Moses set off in the night for Greenwood. Arriving before dawn, he found the door broken open and the office ransacked. He had no way of finding out that Block and the two new volunteers had escaped through a window leading across the roofs of adjacent buildings, then had shinnied down a television antenna to a back alley. They crept back the next morning to discover Moses asleep. To Moses it had been a natural choice —he was tired, with nowhere to go and no way to find his missing coworkers—but to others his presence at the site of the terror added to the legend of his nonviolent composure. "I just didn't understand what kind of guy this Bob Moses is, that could walk into a place where a lynch mob had just left and make up a bed and prepare to go to sleep, as if the situation was normal," wrote one of the new SNCC workers. "So I guess I was learning." Block and the two volunteers stayed on in Greenwood, but fear cost them their office. It took them five months to find another one.

Since the spring of that year, Moses had labored to implant tiny registration projects in the core counties of the Mississippi Delta, north of Jackson. It was plantation country, where most of the potential Negro voters lived on scattered farms amid unspeakable poverty and illiteracy, in a state of semifeudal dependence on the white planters. In June, he had taken his colleagues to Highlander Folk School for an intensive workshop tailored to the challenge of nonviolent registration work in remote places. Since then the volunteers had struggled to hold classes in six Delta counties, while Moses searched for support money. The SCLC's voter registration director, Jack O'Dell, whom Moses had met in New York through Bayard Rustin, was offering to bring Mississippi recruits by bus all the way across the Black Belt to Septima Clark's citizenship classes at Dorchester, and he was flooding Mississippi with SCLC registration pamphlets—"Crusade for the South: Vote," "Why Vote?"—and literacy materials. "We are using the Workshop Booklets, and the old people think the world of them," wrote Sam Block to the SCLC that July. "They tell the others, 'this is my school book.' " To help with Moses' registration campaign, O'Dell urged James Bevel to return to Mississippi from Albany, with his wife Diane and their new daughter.

Shortly after the raid on the Greenwood SNCC office, a summit meeting was convened on the issue of registration funds for Mississippi. VEP director Wiley Branton came in from Atlanta. James Bevel represented the SCLC. David Dennis represented CORE. Aaron Henry, Amzie Moore, and others represented the Mississippi NAACP. James Forman represented the national office of SNCC, and Moses brought his handful of Mississippi organizers. They all gathered in a church basement at Clarksdale, about an hour's drive northwest of Greenwood, and Branton candidly outlined his political dilemma. As director of the VEP, he was responsible to the foundation donors of the money, who were closely associated with the Kennedy Administration. He was also responsible to the heads of the major civil rights organizations, each of whom owned what amounted to a veto over the operations of the politically delicate, legally vulnerable VEP. Many of those people did not favor spending registration money in Mississippi at all. Aside from that, Roy Wilkins did not want to spend money through SNCC, which he considered irresponsible, and certainly not through SNCC in Mississippi, which he considered an NAACP state.



These obstacles easily would have eliminated registration funds for Mississippi had not Wiley Branton emerged as a most unusual bureaucrat. He and everyone else in the church basement knew that to mount anything more than a ceremonial registration campaign, the VEP would have to support the students who were daring to recruit and train pioneer voters. Most of them worked for SNCC, through Moses. To circumvent the opposition of the NAACP, Branton agreed to channel funds through a new smokescreen organization, in the tradition of the MIA and the Albany Movement. It would allow those in the church to act on their mutual trust while protecting them from political rivalries among distant national leaders. That night in Clarksdale, they founded COFO—the Council of Federated Organizations. They wrote rules, drew territories, allotted future funds. The NAACP's Aaron Henry was elected president, an honor that was intended to help soften any opposition from Wilkins. Moses became director of voter registration.

It was a sophisticated piece of political work, but then they stepped into the night air of Mississippi. No such number of strange Negroes could come into a Delta town without attracting notice, especially since the registration projects had raised tension to the threshold of violence. A sheriff's deputy stopped Forman's car outside of town, but let him off with an order to leave the county. One police patrol arrested David Dennis for a traffic violation. Another arrested Sam Block and five others for loitering. Wiley Branton, who had made it out of town unmolested, was obliged to return to Clarksdale the next day to convince the authorities that it was frivolous to charge anyone with loitering in a moving automobile, whereupon he was presented a grossly inflated bill for towing the car from the scene of the arrest. Resigned, Branton paid the bill out

of VEP funds. That same day, on his way to the Jackson airport, Branton learned that Block had been rearrested in Sunflower County with Moses and three other SNCC workers. They went to jail on a criminal charge of distributing literature (a leaflet announcing a voter registration meeting) without a permit. This arrest, while legally indefensible, was not quite flimsy enough for a lawyer like Branton to beat down with words. James Bevel showed up at the jail to bail them out.

Moses resolved to avoid Sunflower County for a while, but he felt an overriding obligation to the Ruleville Negroes. The first eighteen people from the registration classes around Ruleville, a plantation town in northern Sunflower County, were scheduled to register in Indianola the next day. Most of them were semiliterate sharecroppers, and Moses had thought their courage so important that SNCC had rented a bus from an out-of-county driver. Rather than disappoint them, Moses went along on the bus ride from Ruleville to the county seat at Indianola. All eighteen endured the registration tests without crisis, though none was accepted as a new voter, but on the way back to Ruleville a highway patrolman stopped the bus. Moses was arrested once again. The unsuccessful registrants went on back to Ruleville behind the news of their attempt, which swept through the county. That night, the owner of the Marlowe plantation drove to the house of sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer, a stout woman of forty-four from a family of twenty children, and told her that the Klan and the White Citizens Council were sure to harass him because his field hands had been messing in politics. Sounding as beleaguered as he was angry, the owner told Hamer that she must renounce her registration application or leave his plantation, where she had lived for eighteen years. Hamer fled immediately to the home of a couple who had sheltered teachers for the SNCC registration classes.

This was the last day of August. That same night, vigilantes poured gunshots into four homes in Lee County, Georgia, outside Albany. All four belonged to supporters of the SNCC voter registration drive. State investigators counted twenty-four bullet holes in the frame house where the chairman of the Lee County Movement lived with his extended family of twenty. No one was hit. Claude Sitton of *The New York Times* made sure to point out that the chairman was the same man he and Pat Watters had heard sheriff's deputies threaten at the Shady Grove church in July. Four nights later, vigilantes fired three shotgun blasts into the home of a Terrell County woman who boarded summer volunteers in the registration drive. The shots missed Charles Sherrod, who was asleep in a bunk, but wounded a white student in the arm and grazed two others.



By then the pilgrimage of rabbis and ministers had come and gone in the Albany jail. King stayed out of Albany. At first he did so on the slim chance that negotiations might be more productive and less rancorous in his absence, as critics ranging from Governor Vandiver to Attorney General Kennedy and C. A. Scott maintained. When the talks collapsed, however, he continued to stay away for lack of a constructive alternative. He did not have the support "to turn the city upside down and right side up," as he had promised to do. He knew the movement's striking power was in decline. Besides, King felt besieged by pressures from other quarters. His two-month diversion in Albany had cost him not only his vacation but also the revenues from SCLC fund-raisers that were essential to expand the voter registration campaign across the South.

He was giving a fund-raising speech in New York when the phones brought news of two fresh burnings of country churches: Mount Mary Baptist and Mount Olive Baptist in Terrell County, both of them sites for registration meetings and both completely destroyed. Judge Elliott already had denied the Justice Department's request for an injunction based on Sheriff Mathews' highly publicized raid at Mount Olive in July, and Mathews now said there was no evidence of arson at the two churches. FBI agents found plenty of evidence. Poking around in the ruins, wearing their standard FBI business suits, they enraged white bystanders who had gathered to view the destruction. Virgil Puckett went berserk, taking a wild drunken swing at one of the agents and knocking off his glasses. He was arrested for assault.

The next night, in Ruleville, Mississippi, night riders fired shots into two of the three homes providing shelter for volunteers in the SNCC registration campaign. Herman and Hattie Sisson were talking with their granddaughter and a friend, who were spending the night there on their way back to college, when a series of popping noises startled them. "That sounded like a rifle to me," Sisson observed calmly, but in the next instant both college girls tumbled from the couch to the floor, writhing. As Mrs. Sisson described it later, everyone in the house fell to the floor and began hollering, as other shots came spitting though the walls. By the time the two girls went to the hospital—one wounded critically in the neck and head, the other in the leg and arm—there were large pools of blood on the floor and Mayor Dorrough of Ruleville had arrived and was pacing about, clearly upset, talking incessantly. He ordered his men to take Mrs. Sisson to the hospital for treatment of glass cuts, then looked at the bullet holes. "I'm so glad Hattie didn't get shot," he said. Then, calling the sheriff of Sunflower County, the mayor said, "Bob Moses is the cause of all of it. I knowed something like this was going to happen. That's how come I been riding day and night." One of SNCC's summer volunteers rushed in, made a hysterical phone call to Moses in

Jackson, and then composed himself enough to make notes and talk to people, as Moses had instructed. His presence so annoyed Mayor Dorrough at the hospital that he ordered him arrested on the charge of doing the shooting himself as a publicity stunt to raise money for SNCC. He was in jail the next morning when Moses arrived, his car having broken down on the way.

Moses compiled his usual detailed report, running to nine single-spaced pages, and sent copies to SNCC, the FBI, the Justice Department, the news media, and Martin Luther King, anticipating correctly that white officials would move to consolidate the advantages gained by terror. The local newspaper in Ruleville published the names of all the Negroes who had tried to register. Mayor Dorrough ordered city water service cut off at Ruleville's Williams Chapel, the only church in the area that dared to host registration meetings. When U.S. Fidelity and Guaranty canceled the church's casualty insurance from faraway Baltimore, Moses tried vainly to persuade the company to reinstate the coverage. Driven finally from the church, the SNCC volunteers tried to hold classes in homes or in tents, but no one would come. They chopped wood and helped run errands, holding on. "Because it's very important that the Negroes in the community feel that you're . . . going to ride through whatever trouble arrives," Moses explained. "And in general, the deeper the fear, the deeper the problems in the community, the longer you have to stay to convince them."

President Kennedy held a news conference shortly after the shootings in Ruleville. In an opening statement, he denounced Soviet military shipments to Cuba and dismissed Fidel Castro's public claims that Cuba was only trying to protect itself against "imminent invasion" by the United States.* Later, in response to a question about King's telegrams protesting violence against voter registration workers, the President turned just as forcefully on the terrorists in the South: "I don't know any more outrageous action which I've seen occur in this country for a good many months or years than the burning of a church—two churches—because of the effort, made by Negroes, to be registered to vote." He went on to mention the Ruleville shootings as well, and to brand the attacks "cowardly as well as outrageous." "I commend those who are making the effort to register every citizen," he added. "They deserve the protection of the United States Government, the protection of the states . . . And if it requires extra legislation, and extra force, we shall do that."

* Kennedy ascribed some of Castro's difficulties to the U.S. boycott on trade with the island, but of course he did not mention the highly secret campaign of protracted economic and military sabotage, code-named Operation Mongoose, that the CIA had been conducting under his orders for the previous ten months. Its secrecy, plus the secrecy of Cuba's dealings with the Soviet Union, severely restricted the vision of historians trying to explain the origins of the Cuban missile crisis.



This was President Kennedy's strongest statement on civil rights to date. Given a shining opportunity to address the issues at the center of the Administration's civil rights strategy—violence and voting rights—Kennedy responded unequivocally. "We appreciate the strong and forthright words from the President of our nation," King said the next night. "We need his moral support. We are praying that these words will be translated into powerful action." He spoke at a prayer service at the ruins of Mount Olive Baptist Church, having led a nighttime car caravan out into Terrell County from Albany. The caravan itself was a daring act, inconceivable before the transformations of the Albany Movement. King announced that Nelson Rockefeller had pledged $10,000 to rebuild the three burned churches, and he presented each of the three pastors with a $1,000 check from the SCLC toward the same purpose.

The Kennedy and King statements proved to be no more than a rhetorical interlude between church burnings, as the I Hope Baptist Church of Terrell County was consumed by flame three nights later, torched by a kerosene bomb. This time, four of the arsonists were so brazen that the first FBI agents on the scene found them still there watching the blaze, drinking beer. Arrested, the four suspects confessed to the FBI. Justice Department lawyers, scrutinizing their statements as to motive, found them difficult to translate in the idiom of the Supreme Court's opaque ruling in the 1944 *Screws* case, but in general they had more to do with hating Negroes than with voting rights. At any rate, this was the interpretation placed upon them in Washington when the Attorney General revealed that the federal government, having solved the case in one day, was surrendering the suspects to Sheriff Mathews for trial in state court. The Justice Department's announcement explained the move as follows: "The evidence in this case was given to local authorities because the FBI investigation established that the persons responsible did not burn the church specifically to intimidate Negroes from registering to vote, Attorney General Kennedy said. . . . The Attorney General personally called Mr. Hoover and commended the quick, decisive action by FBI agents involved in the investigation of this case." Ironically, the four defendants in the arson would be convicted by a state jury—the only conviction in the many such cases in Georgia. All the major cases were "solved," in the sense that the FBI produced a report naming the responsible parties, but few went to trial in federal court and there were no convictions, in part because of obstacles such as Judge Elliott in the federal trial courts.

The Justice Department and the FBI both faced extremely hostile conditions in Southern courts and Klan counties. Both performed poorly at times. In general, two years in office had made Justice officials more rather than less timid about criminal prosecutions in their showcase area of voting rights. Burke Marshall said as much in a private meeting with Fred Shuttlesworth and other civil rights leaders that September, when he warned that the Justice Department offered no "protection guarantees" to those running registration programs in the South. Federal powers were limited, he told them, and so essentially they must look out for themselves. Hearing this, the Negroes complained bitterly that Marshall and others had steered them into voter registration precisely because it was the area of clearest federal authority.

Four more Negro churches were burned in Georgia within ten days after the fire at I Hope Baptist. King was in New York at the time, accepting the death of his hopes for a Second Emancipation Proclamation from President Kennedy. This was difficult for him, as the idea of a great symbolic presidential stroke against segregation long had been dear not only to him but to officials within the Kennedy Administration. USIA Director Edward R. Murrow, for example, had urged the proposal on Kennedy since his first days in office. He said the centennial of Lincoln's attack on slavery offered an ideal opportunity to invoke the full authority of the White House against segregation.

In the summer of 1862, Lincoln had surprised his cabinet with a private reading of his original draft proclamation, which abolished slavery in the areas under Confederate rebellion. He defended it as a war measure that would weaken the Southern economy and force Jefferson Davis to divert more soldiers to security against slave rebellion. Moreover, Lincoln argued, the measure would give the Union war effort a public purpose that would make it impossible for European powers to intervene on the side of the Confederacy. For these reasons and others, Lincoln ignored the objections of some of his cabinet members, saying that he would make public his proclamation as soon as the Union Army achieved a victory in battle. Timing was important to Lincoln, because he did not want the proclamation to be seen as a desperate act. The humiliations of the second battle of Bull Run forced him to wait a month, but only days after the slaughterous stalemate at Antietam forced Robert E. Lee to retreat back to Virginia, Lincoln made good on his word.

Now, one hundred Septembers later, the debate within the Kennedy Administration had nothing to do with a new proclamation but whether President Kennedy should show up at the official ceremony honoring the last one. At a White House meeting, Kenneth O'Donnell startled planners of the event by announcing that he had never heard of plans for Kennedy to make the major address, and had in fact scheduled the President to make a speech outside Washington. "We were amazed," responded a congressman from the delegation, in a letter listing no fewer than a dozen White House commitments made earlier that year, including two conversations with the President himself. Copies of the letter went to the three presidential aides most involved in planning for the centennial—Arthur Schlesinger, Ted Sorensen, and Lee White. A final round of internal lobbying ensued, but O'Donnell held his ground. For the President to appear was to draw attention to the occasion, and thus invite comparisons between Kennedy's performance and Lincoln's.



In New York, raising funds to rebuild the burned churches in Georgia, King had to balance Kennedy's coolness to the Emancipation celebration against Nelson Rockefeller's ardor. This was Rockefeller's day, honoring a president of his Republican Party and summoning up nearly a century of Rockefeller family interest in the welfare of the former slaves. Fittingly, Rockefeller possessed the original parchment of Lincoln's Proclamation. When he invited King to appear with him at the Emancipation dinner of the New York State Civil War Centennial Commission, King's advisers discussed the drawbacks at length. Kennedy still held the power, they said, and was notoriously sensitive about Rockefeller's presidential ambitions. If King embraced Rockefeller too closely, he risked driving Kennedy toward Southern Democrats.

The FBI wiretap on Stanley Levison picked up discussions of the Rockefeller invitation. Was the New York dinner too "Republican," asked the advisers. Soothed by Clarence Jones's discovery that there were Democrats on the New York centennial commission, they turned to the delicate, complicating issue of money. So far, Nelson Rockefeller had delivered only $5,000 of the $50,000 that Wyatt Walker said he had promised to deliver to the SCLC and the Gandhi Society. Now Rockefeller had pledged another $10,000 toward the burned churches. His invitation to King conflicted with a scheduled fund-raiser in New York, so that in effect King was being asked to give up hard funds in part to cultivate the maker of delinquent pledges. This presented a dilemma common to those dependent on philanthropy: whether to call a rich man on his promises. They also debated whether they could safely push to solicit the Emancipation dinner guests—Rockefeller's political friends. Legally, they could not pass the hat at the dinner itself, which was a state function, but could they ask for the mailing list, or perhaps even invite the guests to an SCLC reception across the street? "I don't think . . . this choice [is] as hard as you are making it," Levison advised them. "Gover-

nor Rockefeller is a sophisticated man. He knows the need for funds, that that money is in that crowd and it would be a pity not to get it. There isn't a multi-millionaire I know that didn't want to see other people contributing when he contributed. Anything they hate is for them to contribute alone. I don't think it would sit badly unless it was said crudely that Dr. King would not come unless he is assured [of funds]."

At the Emancipation dinner, King criticized President Kennedy's sluggishness on civil rights, pointing among other things to his unfulfilled "stroke of the pen" campaign promise on housing discrimination. Rockefeller followed King with similar criticisms of Kennedy, then packed up the Emancipation Proclamation and headed for the centennial celebration in Washington on Saturday, September 22. He joined a fervent but relatively small crowd on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Archibald MacLeish read a poem on Lincoln. Adlai Stevenson eulogized the Emancipator as the pride of Illinois. Robert Kennedy represented the Administration but did not speak; instead a tape-recorded message came over the loudspeakers from President Kennedy himself, who was spending the weekend in Newport, Rhode Island. The tape-recorded speech—final product of all the lobbying—was a skillful address, stirring in its evocations of history. Only specialists in civil rights bridled at the President's summary of events since Lincoln's Proclamation, which consigned race problems generally to the past. "A structure of segregation divided the Negro from his fellow American citizen," Kennedy's voice told the crowd. "He was denied equal opportunity in education and employment. In many places he could not vote. For a long time, he was exposed to violence and to terror. These were bitter years of humiliation and deprivation. Looking back at this period . . . it can be said, I believe, that Abraham Lincoln emancipated the slaves, but that in this century since, our Negro citizens have emancipated themselves." Rockefeller then made a brief speech on the Proclamation itself. Partisan rivalries among the politicians were subdued by the state occasion, then washed completely aside by Mahalia Jackson's performance of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

King did not appear at the Lincoln Memorial. He had gone to jail twice more since handing President Kennedy his own dream proclamation, and now he turned with chastened expectations to January 1, 1963—the centennial of the Proclamation's effective date, the Day of Jubilee itself. He hoped Kennedy could be persuaded to do something more dramatic then. More immediately, King was headed for Birmingham, where President Kennedy sent him a warm telegram "on the occasion of the sixth annual convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference." Kennedy praised King's "personal conduct and your dynamic leadership," which



had gained "the respect and admiration of the great majority of the people of the United States." This telegram was a trophy of the convention, read publicly to the four hundred delegates gathering that September in the heartland of segregation.

The balmy shower of official telegrams was becoming a welcome staple at SCLC conventions. What was new in Birmingham was an undercurrent of impending collision that belied the surface calm of the gala banquets and the usual long-winded committee meetings. For the first time, FBI agents planted informants inside the SCLC convention and sent daily reports to headquarters. And for the first time, the mere fact that King was scheduled to visit a segregated city already had led to an unprecedented—and tentatively productive—round of negotiations with white leaders. In this respect, King achieved more in Birmingham before his plane touched the ground than he had during all the months of battering in Albany.

The tension was the result of two currents that had been eating slowly at the stability of Bull Connor's segregation—one uniting the city's Negroes for protest, the other dividing its whites. Birmingham's parks had been closed all year. Its baseball team was gone. Sporadic Klan violence continued. Since the jailing of Fred Shuttlesworth in January, Negroes had supported what began as a student boycott of downtown stores; at its peak the boycott caused some merchants to complain of a 40 percent decline in sales. And King had planned all year to come to Birmingham —not just with his convention's business but with its manpower, to support Shuttlesworth in his long-awaited showdown with Connor. Moreover, King planned to return in 1963 "for a real mobilization of our civil rights forces," he wrote William Shortridge early in September. Shortridge was Shuttlesworth's treasurer and "connectional man," a whirlwind funeral director of Daddy King's generation, Howard '23, and King Jr.'s fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha. When night riders sprayed his home with gunfire the previous March, Shortridge had dived safely for cover behind the wall of his front porch as the first slug zipped through the front wall and knocked the telephone receiver from his wife's hand. Since then, Shortridge had erected a small extra bedroom on the side of his porch to house the volunteers who guarded his house every night.

On the whites' side, Chamber of Commerce president Sidney Smyer had been groping slowly for eighteen months—since the shock of seeing front-page photographs in Japanese newspapers of the Birmingham mob attacking the Freedom Riders—toward a solution of the cliffhanger riddle: how to get rid of Bull Connor without so much as mentioning his name. Conceding that Connor was politically untouchable as the elected, independent police commissioner, Smyer and his allies hatched a circu-

itous plan to remove the office instead of the man. Over months of meetings with lawyers, teachers, civics professors, and assorted do-gooder groups, they developed the idea that Birmingham urgently needed a modern, "mayor–city council" form of government, such as Atlanta and other prosperous cities possessed.

There was realpolitik behind the façade of reform. People could campaign for the new structure without overtly challenging Connor or segregation; they could even tout him for the new office of mayor. If the new city government was ratified, however, the reformers could hope that the marginal Birmingham voter might look for more polish in a mayor than in a police commissioner.* To implement the plan, Smyer first tried to recruit a committee of twenty-five "silk-stocking people" to head a public committee, but the nominees all declined with regret, knowing that Smyer's sleight of hand would not fool Connor. Then Smyer had settled for a committee of five hundred "anybodies," headed by a house painter named William A. Jenkins. There were small businessmen, disc jockeys, union stewards, and even the head of the local Nixon campaign from the last election. Early that September, the committee achieved its first miracle by filing a petition signed by some 12,000 citizens, more than enough to trigger a special election on the proposal for a new city constitution.

The reformers were waiting for a judge to verify the petition and set a special election date when someone reminded them that Martin Luther King was about to come to Birmingham. Under the circumstances, they regarded his visit with such foreboding that they sent an emissary secretly to Atlanta to ask King to cancel the convention. The situation was critical, said the emissary. It was no small task to abolish the office of Bull Connor, who had just received 61 percent of the votes for reelection as police commissioner, and nothing would drive the marginal voters behind Connor more decisively than a racial confrontation. King listened politely and referred the emissary back to Shuttlesworth.

These pressures generated Shuttlesworth's introduction to Sidney Smyer. Never before—in more than six years of sit-ins, boycotts, lawsuits, bombings, and Freedom Rides—had he been granted a meeting

* Connor's image problems predated the civil rights movement. In 1951, a rival police officer had raided a Birmingham hotel and arrested the police commissioner for having an extramarital affair with his secretary. Convicted on a morals charge and driven from office, Connor had taken advantage of the school desegregation crisis to make his political comeback. In 1957, running as a bareknuckled segregationist who could protect whites more effectively than candidates from polite society, which he scorned, Connor had regained his old office by the slim margin of 108 votes. Since then he had consolidated his power, to the discomfort of many respected leaders in Birmingham.



with the local "power structure," or, for that matter, with Birmingham's leading white clergy. But a few days before the SCLC convention, A. G. Gaston guided Shuttlesworth to a secret conclave. As they went inside, Shuttlesworth joked that even Gaston with all his money never before had been permitted inside a white hotel in Birmingham. When they arrived, Smyer shook Shuttlesworth's hand, calling him "Doctor." Alluding to the precarious reform movement in Birmingham, Smyer first asked Shuttlesworth to persuade King to stay away, and when Shuttlesworth turned that notion aside, he asked for assurances that there would be no trouble. Shuttlesworth could not help making a speech about how long and how much he had suffered to attract the honor of such a request, but then he denied that the honor itself was worth a truce. He said he had to show the city's Negroes deeds instead of words. So how much segregation would the downtown stores give up to avoid demonstrations? When Smyer parried this question by saying that he couldn't speak for the downtown merchants, Shuttlesworth headed for the door and said, "You all called me to the wrong meeting."

Smyer reconvened them the very next morning, this time in the presence of grim-faced representatives from the major stores: Sears, Loveman's, Newberry's, Greene's, Woolworth's, Pitzitz. It began with an awkward silence, which was broken when Shuttlesworth said he was there to hear what they had to say. After another silence, the man from Loveman's said, "I don't mind desegregating my water [fountains]."

"Oh, no, gentlemen," Shuttlesworth replied. "We're past water now. We have to have toilets. Women have to be able to refresh themselves in your stores."

After pained silences, separated by terse outbursts on both sides, A. G. Gaston attempted to break the stalemate. "You know, your daddy and I got started in business about the same time," he told Loveman. "And you know you got your start among the Negroes like I did. We got our money together. And most of our customers are Negroes. And it looks like you could do something. We don't want demonstrations either, but I don't have the power. I can't stop it. But this man here can stop it." He said Shuttlesworth had the marbles.

Shuttlesworth stood up after another silence, saying they should all go pray that the best would come out of this. As he was leaving, he turned to Louis Pitzitz, owner of Birmingham's largest department store. "Mr. Pitzitz," he said, "the last time, they arrested two students in your store. This time it's gonna be different. Martin Luther King and I are gonna sit on your stool, and we aren't gonna walk out. They're gonna have to drag us out. And the press will be there. And you'll be out of business all over Alabama. That's just the way it is."

As Shuttlesworth and Pitzitz glowered at each other, Loveman rose

hastily to his feet. "Wait a minute," he said. "I can just call the maintenance man and just paint over that sign in the restroom." He was referring to the "Whites Only" sign.

This was the beginning of a breakthrough. In exchange for integrated water fountains and restrooms, Shuttlesworth agreed to hold a convention without demonstrations. There was much backsliding and quibbling over seemingly trivial details. For example, the "Whites Only" signs must be painted over rather than removed, so that the store owners might more easily disclaim responsibility if Bull Connor thundered down upon them for violating the local segregation laws. In the end, a fragile bargain was struck. Each side worried that the other would renege.

Pressure was also building inside the FBI. Bureau officials, clearly alarmed by the repeated phenomenon of mass arrests in Albany, took note of a report from the Savannah office that the Negroes from the summer jailings "were all trained" at Septima Clark's Dorchester retreat. The report was grossly exaggerated, in that only a tiny fraction of the Albany demonstrators had been to Dorchester, and also misleading, in that Clark's classes focused on literacy and voter registration, not protest. Nevertheless, Bureau officials were inclined to credit the report, in the belief that such unprecedented upheavals must be fomented by cadres. This was the view of people far away, steeped in conspiratorial intelligence work, who never had gone near a mass meeting. It stripped the demonstrators of appreciable human motivation, leaving them more like robots and yet somehow more fanatical. In short, they became more like Communists to the Bureau, and it was seen as no small confirmation on that score that the man in charge of Dorchester was Jack O'Dell.

Bureau officials took word to Attorney General Kennedy that O'Dell, linked to Levison by the wiretaps, was a threat to Birmingham, and Kennedy undertook to handle the problem privately, through his aide John Seigenthaler. As former editor of the Nashville *Tennessean*, Seigenthaler had come to know Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, from whose church James Lawson, Diane Nash, and John Lewis had organized the first of the Nashville sit-ins. Smith sat on King's SCLC board. Before he left for the Birmingham convention, Smith received an official but confidential contact from Seigenthaler, who told him the government was gravely concerned about King's alliance with a man of known Communist associations. King should sever all contact with O'Dell, and in no case should he allow him in Birmingham.

Smith promptly relayed the message to King, who treated the matter as an intriguing nuisance. In context, King decided, the indirect warning meant that the Kennedy Administration was accommodating its own internal McCarthyite forces while hinting to King that there was a relatively painless way out: O'Dell should not go to Birmingham. He called O'Dell in to inform him personally. O'Dell chafed at the news. He was scheduled to lead several workshops at the Birmingham convention—indeed, he was at the center of the SCLC's voter registration drive, as well as its collaborative efforts with COFO and other groups, which were by far the biggest hidden successes of the past year. O'Dell grumbled that it was a ridiculous compromise to admit that he might be a threat to the nation's security and then respond by grounding him for a conference. King said he had seen much sillier things in politics.



O'Dell remained behind in Atlanta when the SCLC convention opened that Monday, September 24. Birmingham's downtown merchants delayed painting over their "Whites Only" signs until the last moment, but they did it, causing amazement among the Negroes. Adhering to the agreement, neither side trumpeted the change to the press, for fear of provoking Bull Connor. Still, the victory put Shuttlesworth into higher spirits than usual. At the Monday-night mass meeting in St. John's Church, he gave such a rousing introduction to Wyatt Walker as King's advance guard that Walker seized the pulpit and cried, "I have come to Birmingham to ride the Bull!" Jackie Robinson, recently elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame, also arrived for the convention that night, but the Birmingham police refused to allow him a motorcade to the church. Shuttlesworth told the packed crowd to obey the police. "No one knows what's going to happen the next few days," he said.

Publicly, the SCLC convention in Birmingham caused about as much stir as a Rotary luncheon. There were no demonstrations. The news was drenched that week with events in Mississippi, as J. H. Meredith's quest to enter Ole Miss reached its climactic stages. Already Governor Ross Barnett once had blocked Meredith in a dramatic physical confrontation. (The Mississippi legislature had made Barnett himself the emergency university registrar, in a ruse to circumvent the court order binding the regular registrar.) Promptly after that, the full Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals hauled the registrar and the university trustees into a hearing, threatened them with contempt, and secured a promise that they would register Meredith.

On Tuesday, September 25, as King was arriving in Birmingham, Chief U.S. Marshal James McShane and John Doar picked Meredith up at Dillard University in New Orleans. Doar was a volunteer courier for a sheaf of the Fifth Circuit's latest orders against evasion and obstruction. Meredith said good-bye to his wife and to Medgar Evers, who had been counseling him for his lonely walk into the maw of Ole Miss. At the New

Orleans airport, Doar and McShane waited awkwardly while Meredith went downstairs to the colored snack bar and restroom. Then the three of them flew to Jackson, Mississippi, in a Cessna 220 owned by the U.S. Border Patrol. Mississippi Highway Patrol aircraft flew alongside them the whole way. In Washington, Al Rosen fed Burke Marshall a stream of FBI reports on the intentions of Barnett, the trustees, and a few local sheriffs who were threatening to arrest Meredith on any convenient charge.

The trio proceeded by car to the Federal Building in downtown Jackson, where Registrar Robert Ellis had agreed to perform his loathsome duty of admitting Meredith. They found no state officials present, however. When Doar reported this newest wrinkle to Washington, Marshall tracked them down by telephone at the Woolfolk State Office Building, some blocks away. The president of the trustees told him they were trying to comply with the order but were restrained—being practically in the custody of Barnett and the legislature, which had summoned them to testify about the university crisis. Another trustee told Marshall that the Fifth Circuit order no longer applied, because Meredith had been late reaching the Federal Building. Marshall short-circuited the dispute with phone calls to Judge Tuttle in New Orleans, by which he obtained a phone-relayed extension of the deadline. The trustees eventually relented on the time but held fast on the place, insisting that the extension did not apply to the part of the order that specified the Federal Building. By then it was almost dark. Robert Kennedy decided to give in and send Meredith to the Woolfolk Building.

"Can you clear the crowds so we don't make a big circus?" Kennedy asked Governor Barnett.

"You would have a big space," Barnett replied. "They're not going to bother him."

Soon the long wait was over. Doar, McShane, and Meredith pushed their way through a jeering crowd of two thousand outside the Woolfolk Building, then up the elevator to the tenth floor and through another crowd in the corridor. Barnett, bathed in television lights, blocked the threshold of Room 1007. Legislators inside climbed atop chairs and tables to obtain a better view. As Doar moved forward to explain the Fifth Circuit's orders to Barnett, television and radio stations transmitted the confrontation to Mississippians across the state. Barnett "interposed" Mississippi's sovereignty, as embodied in his own person, between Meredith and the university officials, who maintained an outward willingness to obey the orders.

"Which one is Meredith?" Barnett inquired, sparking titters of laughter, as the familiar and well-known Meredith, standing in front of Barnett, was the only Negro in sight. Barnett read to Meredith his second proclamation of interposition, ending that he did "hereby finally deny you admission to the University of Mississippi." A Rebel yell went up from the crowds gathered around transistor radios ten floors below. When Barnett refused Doar's request to enter, some legislators chanted, "Get going! Get going!" One cried, "Three cheers for the governor!" They hooted the Meredith trio along its path of retreat, then filed back to their chambers in triumph. One state senator hailed Barnett's stand as "the most brilliant piece of statesmanship ever displayed in Mississippi." Another vowed to persevere "regardless of the cost in time, effort, money, and in human lives."



An angry Robert Kennedy called a cheerful Barnett as Meredith was heading for Memphis that evening. "He is going to show up for classes tomorrow," said Kennedy.

"At Ole Miss?" replied the startled governor. "How can you do that without registering?"

". . . I think they arranged it," said Kennedy. ". . . It is all understood."

"I don't see how they can," said Barnett. "They're going to give him special treatment? They can't do that, General."

Ten minutes later, Kennedy called Barnett again, after Marshall and the other Justice officials in his office convinced him that he must give Barnett precise notice of Meredith's arrival on the Ole Miss campus. Otherwise, Barnett could disclaim responsibility for any violence against him. Kennedy relayed the notice along with a stern lecture on the supremacy of federal law. He pointed out that all the judges of the Fifth Circuit were Southerners. "But anyway, Governor," he added, "they will be down there at ten o'clock."

"Ten o'clock will be all right," Barnett said politely. Later that night, three judges of the Fifth Circuit signed an order commanding Barnett to appear before them on Friday in New Orleans for a hearing on whether Barnett should be held in contempt of court. The impending collision of races, and perhaps even armed forces, dominated the next day's news. *The New York Times* published three Meredith stories on its front page beneath a banner headline: U.S. IS PREPARED TO SEND TROOPS AS MISSISSIPPI GOVERNOR DEFIES COURT AND BARS NEGRO STUDENT.

Doar, McShane, and Meredith flew back to Mississippi the next morning in the same Cessna, this time to Oxford. They arrived without troops or any other support force, as Robert Kennedy wished to avoid any appearance that the federal government required abnormal measures to obtain compliance with the law. When an escort of Mississippi highway patrolmen unexpectedly abandoned them near the campus gates, the three of them stepped forward alone to confront Lieutenant Governor

Paul Johnson, who was backed by formidable rows of state troopers and sheriffs. This third standoff ended much like the others, except that Chief Marshal McShane, having heard through the telephone maze that the Mississippians might yield to a face-saving show of force, tried to push his way by. "Governor," he told Johnson, "I think it's my duty to try to go through and get Mr. Meredith in there."

"You are not going in," Lieutenant Governor Johnson replied.

"I'm sorry, Governor, that I have to do this, but I'm going in," said McShane. After a few physical rebuffs, he had to conclude that the rumors of capitulation were false. He and Doar sounded Meredith's third retreat, which pushed euphoria still higher in Mississippi.

King addressed the SCLC convention that night, defending the Albany Movement as a political success even though friend and foe alike were branding it a failure. Behind a merciful curtain of media disinterest, he spent most of his time planning a coordinated assault that would avoid the errors of Albany. With Shuttlesworth, he assembled special caucuses of the Alabama leaders. They scheduled a People-to-People recruitment tour early in the new year, plus a voter registration drive with VEP funds. The plan was to build toward a Christmas shopping boycott as the first stage of a planned confrontation "somewhere in Alabama." King remained coy about the target city, knowing that the meetings were infiltrated. Also, he worried about attacking Birmingham as long as negotiations finally were producing results. On this point Shuttlesworth had no such doubts. "They took those signs down because you were coming to town," he told King, "and they'll put 'em up again just as soon as you leave."

With Governor Barnett vowing to scorn the Fifth Circuit's orders and the federal government threatening openly to back Meredith with soldiers, commentators compared the confrontation to the events preceding Little Rock or even Fort Sumter. Robert Kennedy took advantage of the pressure to bear down on Barnett in nearly continuous telephone negotiations. By their voices, two Americans scarcely could have sounded more foreign to each other. Kennedy spoke a high-pitched, nasal Bostonian, brimming with energy but often garbled by pauses and staccato asides. Barnett, in a low Mississippi drawl, fashioned sentences of cleaner syntax, masking his nerves behind homespun amiability. What united them was the fraternal belief that politicians weathered crises best by accommodating the interests of other politicians—by skirting public controversies to take care of each other. Accordingly, Kennedy never pressured Barnett with the prospect of jail or overwhelming military force. He did not vow to "convert the state of Mississippi into a frog pond," as the Chicago *Tribune* threatened to do in 1865 when the legislature tried to impose onerous Black Codes on the newly freed slaves. Nor did Barnett swear to block the schoolhouse door or die the fire-breathing death of a Rebel martyr. Instead, Barnett focused on Kennedy's need to get Meredith into Ole Miss with the least possible public display of federal power, while Kennedy addressed Barnett's need to defend segregation as vigorously as any Mississippi rival might claim to have done.



Drifting inexorably into public relations, they fashioned an agreement to stage a fake showdown at the gates of the campus. Two dozen armed U.S. marshals would support Meredith, and Barnett, yielding reluctantly to superior force, would retire to the new task of getting Meredith out of Ole Miss. Ironically, this solution faltered when Kennedy's desire to appear accommodating did not quite satisfy Barnett's desire to look as though he was being pushed around.

"Hello, General," said Barnett that afternoon. "I was under the impression that they were *all* going to pull their guns. This could be very embarrassing. We got a big crowd here, and if one pulls his gun and we all turn, it would be very embarrassing. Isn't it possible to have them all pull their guns?"

"I hate to have them all draw their guns," Kennedy replied, "as I think it could create harsh feelings. Isn't it sufficient if I have one man draw his gun and the others keep their hands on their holsters?"

"They must all draw their guns," Barnett insisted. "Then they should point their guns at us and then we could step aside."

By late afternoon, as Doar and McShane were preparing to escort Meredith into Mississippi on his fourth attempt to register—traveling this time by car from Memphis—Barnett and Kennedy were still fashioning the scene. Barnett was afraid that Kennedy might let on that there was a deal, which would finish Barnett in Mississippi politics. Kennedy, having reduced Meredith's military support to a level that made Barnett uncomfortable, was assuring Barnett that he would portray their pretend showdown as a real one.

"You understand we have had no agreement," said Barnett.

"That's correct," Kennedy replied.

"I am just telling you—everybody thinks we're compromising," said Barnett.

Kennedy assured Barnett there would be no appearance of a compromise. "I am just telling you that we are arriving and we are arriving with force," he said.

Actually, they both knew that Meredith would be arriving with practically no federal force, and this aspect of the plan began to look less promising as ominous reports reached Kennedy about the size of the mob gathering in Oxford. Mississippi was caught up in a defiant holiday mood. Horns blared in the streets. Confederate flags flew. Radio stations, on emergency programming, filled the time between Ole Miss bulletins with recordings of "Dixie." The FBI relayed stories of vigilantes converging from distant states with rifles and beer coolers, swearing to defend Mississippi. As Meredith's small caravan left Memphis, Kennedy feared that the federal escort, though small enough for him and large enough for Barnett, might be too small to handle a riot. He wanted Barnett's assurance that state authorities would protect Meredith once the marshals left the campus, but by then Barnett preferred to think of the state forces as weak and submissive. "After he gets in," he told Kennedy, "you certainly don't expect us to guard him all the time. . . ."

"Whatever is necessary, Governor," said Kennedy. "Whatever is necessary to preserve law and order."

"But, General," protested Barnett, "I declare I don't think I could agree to guarantee the man after he gets in. When he gets in he is just one boy."

"I had better call it off, Governor," Kennedy said sharply, but he let the caravan proceed.

An hour later, after touring the crowded, gun-laden streets of Oxford, Barnett called Kennedy again. Fear stripped most of the artifice from his voice. "There are several thousand people here in cars, trucks," he said. ". . . There is liable to be a hundred people killed here. It would ruin all of us. Please believe me . . . a lot of people are going to get killed. It would be embarrassing to me."

"I don't know if it would be embarrassing," Kennedy replied. "That would not be the feeling." Barnett's bluntly selfish comment seemed to snap Kennedy out of his scriptwriter's perspective.

"It would be bad all over the nation," Barnett said.

"I'll send them back," said Kennedy. His order flashed from the Justice Department through military channels to a communications plane. From there it was beamed down to Doar in the Meredith caravan, which was hurtling down one of Mississippi's new interstate highways at nearly a hundred miles per hour. They pulled into a filling station in Batesville, Mississippi, just west of Oxford, so that Doar and McShane could call Robert Kennedy personally to confirm the retreat. To the stoically apprehensive Meredith, sitting in the car, Batesville seemed deserted—stripped of its population, who, from the sound of the radio reports, had motored ahead to join all of Mississippi in defending against him. He was relieved when they turned back toward Memphis.



Events raced at collision speed. THOUSANDS SAID READY TO FIGHT FOR MISSISSIPPI, announced the Jackson *Daily News*, which urged readers to learn a resistance song titled "Never, No Never." Outside Mississippi, the news centered on the challenge to the Kennedy Administration. In the third set of triple-tier headlines that week, *The New York Times* blared: U.S., TO AVERT VIOLENCE, CALLS OFF NEW EFFORT TO ENROLL MEREDITH; SENDS HUNDREDS MORE MARSHALS. In New Orleans, on Friday, a Fifth Circuit panel tried Governor Barnett in absentia and found him guilty of contempt. Lieutenant Governor Johnson promptly received the same verdict. The three judges sentenced them to indefinite prison terms beginning on Tuesday, unless they purged themselves by securing Meredith's registration before then. Robert Kennedy, charged with executing this sentence, faced a new political dilemma. Barnett called Kennedy after lunch and secured a promise that no Negro marshals would be used on the next registration attempt.

Although days earlier Kennedy had branded Barnett a "loony," citing a report that he had been struck on the head by an airplane propeller, and although he now saw Barnett's followers as mad, latter-day brownshirts, still he shrank from using force to support Meredith, because to do so would not only reveal an exhaustion of domestic authority but blot America's reputation in the world. His only alternative was to collaborate privately with Barnett to produce an inspired theatrical effect, worthy of Shakespeare. None but a genius could hope to orchestrate the desired illusion of normalcy and control, especially since Kennedy and Barnett simultaneously sounded public war trumpets that attracted hordes to overrun their stage. The threat of a jailed governor stimulated no new ideas for the script, and by five o'clock the Pentagon was flashing a DEFCON 3 alert to units from Texas to New Jersey: prepare to move within four hours.

King's convention was dull by comparison, as the three hundred SCLC delegates passed resolutions at a closing session late that Friday afternoon. One called upon the Justice Department to correct lapses in the protection of constitutional rights around Albany, Georgia. Another commended James Meredith for courage in seeking to enroll at Ole Miss. King, in the lolling drone of closing announcements, was reminding his audience of major SCLC events ahead—such as Mrs. William Kunstler's gala December fund-raiser in suburban New York, starring Sammy Davis, Jr., and Peter Lawford—when one of the white men in the audience walked to the stage and lashed out with his right fist. The blow made a loud popping sound as it landed on King's left cheek. He staggered backward and spun half around.

The entire crowd observed in silent, addled awe. Some people thought King had been introducing the man as one of the white dignitaries so conspicuously welcome at Birmingham's first fully integrated convention. Others thought the attack might be a staged demonstration from the nonviolence workshops. But now the man was hitting King again, this time on the side of his face from behind, and twice more in the back. Shrieks and gasps went up from the crowd, which, as one delegate wrote, "surged for a moment as one person" toward the stage. People recalled feeling physically jolted by the force of the violence—from both the attack on King and the flash of hatred through the auditorium.

The assailant slowed rather than quickened the pace of his blows, expecting, as he said later, to be torn to pieces by the crowd. But he struck powerfully. After being knocked backward by one of the last blows, King turned to face him while dropping his hands. It was the look on his face that many would not forget. Septima Clark, who nursed many private complaints about the strutting ways of the SCLC preachers and would not have been shocked to see the unloosed rage of an exalted leader, marveled instead at King's transcendent calm. King dropped his hands "like a newborn baby," she said, and from then on she never doubted that his nonviolence was more than the heat of his oratory or the result of his slow calculation. It was the response of his quickest instincts. This impression struck a number of others, including perhaps the assailant himself, who stared at King long enough for Wyatt Walker and some of the others to jump between them.

"Don't touch him!" cried King. "Don't touch him. We have to pray for him." His words, signaling an end to the immediate crisis, released a flood of noise, some delegates loudly repeating King's instructions, others shrieking hatred at the attacker. Several preachers moved to enclose the assailant in a protective circle. Walker, Andrew Young, Bernard Lee, and Birmingham's Rev. Edwin Gardner consulted furtively about what to do. One of them jumped to the microphone to hold back the crowd, saying, "We can handle this on the stage." Others, seeing that people were bolting outside with the news, gave orders that all the doors should be locked, fearing a lynch mob of Negroes or a second wave of attackers. King kept talking quietly to the white man, saying no one was going to hurt him, and the man said very little except to mumble that he believed in white supremacy and that Sammy Davis, Jr., was married to a white woman. As King and the preachers escorted him slowly offstage to a private office, a hastily organized quartet of singers moved to the microphone to hold the crowd, singing "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me" and the somber slave spiritual "Steal Away to Jesus." James Bevel interrupted to say this was no funeral—Dr. King was all right, and they had weathered a stern test of nonviolence. It was a joyful occasion, he declared, as he started them off in a rendition of "I'm on My Way to Freedom Land," which gathered volume until the auditorium shook.



King hushed them when he returned, holding an ice-filled handkerchief to his face. Rosa Parks, mother of the bus boycott, stopped him briefly to administer her favorite remedy for headache: two aspirin and a Coca-Cola. King then announced that he and the assailant had been able to talk calmly in the office, and that the man had presented himself as a soldier on a mission for the American Nazi Party. His refusal to press charges infuriated the Birmingham police officers who arrived at the auditorium, as it put their boss, Bull Connor, into a perverse predicament. Having breached his fundamental political rule—which he had enforced against First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt herself, among many others—to allow an integrated SCLC convention in Birmingham at all, Connor did not hesitate to point out that a white man could not have attacked King at a lawfully segregated meeting of Negroes. Under duress, Connor had permitted the integration, just as he had permitted the signs to come down in the stores, in the hope of holding business support against the new city constitution. For all his strained tolerance, he reaped only a crazed "Nazi" and the prospect of unwelcome publicity. With King refusing to press charges, Connor had no choice but to have the department bring them itself. The Birmingham police persuaded Roy James to plead guilty and hustled him off to serve thirty days.

Wyatt Walker, trying to get the news out, was stymied temporarily because the few major reporters who had come to Birmingham long since had departed to cover Ole Miss. Finally he tracked down a young *New York Times* reporter who was sympathetic and trusting enough to write a story datelined Birmingham, as though he had been there. The reporter, being at risk himself for the deception, could do no more than identify the attacker as a "self-styled Nazi." No firmer description reached the news world, but FBI agents advised headquarters within hours that James was a member of the American Nazi Party, and that his home address was a Nazi "dormitory" outside Washington, D.C. His FBI rap sheet showed previous arrests for violence in New Orleans and his native New York. Almost immediately, police intercepted a letter from Nazi Party commander George Lincoln Rockwell, who wrote "Lieutenant" James that "your heroic deed has put new heart into hundreds of people who . . . have protested the outrage of sending a white American to jail for punching a communist-nigger agitator." Adding, "I know how much you hate jails, Roy," Rockwell promised to secure James's prompt release and closed with "Heil Hitler!" His letter, along with other reports of organized violence against King, lay buried in the files.

When the SCLC convention left town, a Birmingham judge ordered a November referendum on the new city constitution. Bull Connor, having tarnished his segregationist credentials for no political reward, lost patience with the blandishments of reform politics. He promptly sent his men to notify the downtown store owners that they were in violation of city ordinances, and the "Whites Only" signs reappeared one by one.

From his home in Atlanta, with a swollen jaw and a bruised back, King watched the conclusion of the Ole Miss saga on television. On September 29, the day after the James attack in Birmingham, the screen showed the arrival in Oxford of former Major General Edwin Walker, who, disciplined for insubordination, had resigned from the U.S. Army in flaming public protest against what he called the Kennedy Administration's "collaboration and collusion with the international Communist conspiracy." Walker already had gone on the radio to rally volunteers, confessing that he had been "on the wrong side" when he carried out Eisenhower's orders to integrate Little Rock's Central High School five years earlier. "Barnett yes, Castro no!" he declared. "Bring your flags, your tents and your skillets! It is time! Now or never!" Other cameras showed trucks and cars already cruising the streets of Oxford. Intelligence reports picked up Klan Klaverns mobilizing from as far away as Florida. Barnett's desk was stacked with telegrams offering services to the defense of Mississippi.

That Saturday afternoon, Robert Kennedy concluded that the situation was grave enough for him to bring the President himself into the confidential talks with Barnett. In the Oval Office, historian Arthur Schlesinger joined Kennedy, Burke Marshall, and Kenneth O'Donnell, all seated expectantly around the President as the call to Barnett went through. "Go get him, Johnny boy," the Attorney General told his brother with a tight smile, as though spurring on a champion boxer. The President responded with a breezier levity, rehearsing a fake greeting that went, "Governor, this is the President of the United States—not Bobby, not Teddy, not Princess Radziwill." Then Barnett came on the line and President Kennedy, turning serious, was promptly deflected. Barnett asked whether he had talked with the Attorney General that morning about the Attorney General's latest talk with one of Barnett's aides, Tom Watkins, and the President, despite frequent asides with his brother, could not catch up with the third-hand conversation. This gave Barnett an opening to suggest that Kennedy wait for the Barnett aide—"really an A-1 lawyer," said the governor—to bring his unspecified idea personally to Washington. Kennedy agreed to have the Attorney General receive him, but asked what Barnett intended to do about the Tuesday deadline.



"I want to think it over a few days," Barnett replied.

"Well, of course," said Kennedy. "The problem is, Governor, that I got my responsibility just like you have yours."

"I realize that," said Barnett. "And I appreciate that *so much.*" He spoke the last two words with a long earnest drawl, stopping the conversation. Reemphasizing his hope that Watkins could find a way out, Barnett started to sign off. Then abruptly, and sincerely, he said, "I appreciate your interest in our poultry program and all those things."

President Kennedy stifled a laugh until the phone connection was broken, then chuckled in wonder that Barnett could mention livestock in the midst of the constitutional crisis. "You've been fighting a sofa pillow all week," he told the Attorney General. By this he seemed to mean that Barnett's warm, simple manner made him an easy mark, but by the objective results the governor was no pushover for anyone. The President's personal authority—carefully reserved until now—had just come to bear in the emergency with no effect except to ratify a postponement. Segregationists were streaming into Oxford more rapidly than Justice Department officials could reassemble their Freedom Ride–style civilian force of prison guards, Border Patrol agents, and deputy marshals. That force was gathering at the naval air base outside Memphis, having stripped three prisons and the Mexican border of federal manpower, but it numbered only five hundred at maximum strength.

The White House conferees decided that something stronger than words was required to force a change in Barnett. They resolved to nationalize the Mississippi National Guard, though there was some doubt as to whether its units would fight other Mississippians in behalf of James Meredith and the Kennedy White House. The Attorney General immediately set lawyers to work on the necessary presidential proclamations, and the President himself called his chief speechwriter, Ted Sorensen, in the hospital, where he was recovering from a case of White House ulcers. Kennedy asked Sorensen to rouse himself to write a speech for him to deliver on television. Sorensen agreed, saying he would craft some ideas in light of the fact that "the Republicans are taking the straight Ross Barnett line."

"Except Eisenhower," laughed Kennedy. He appreciated the irony of looking more favorably now upon the Little Rock precedent. "Eisenhower's taking a little away from 'em," he said.

"No, I mean the Republicans in Alabama," said Sorensen, making the point that Kennedy would be safe from partisan attack at least in the Deep South: both parties would attack him.

A second call to Barnett went out from the Oval Office an hour after the first. This time Robert Kennedy prepared the way by telling Barnett that they need not wait for Watkins to come all the way to Washington,

as Watkins "would be wasting his time. . . . He doesn't have any suggestions," said Kennedy. "He just told me, Mr. Governor."

"I thought he did have," said Barnett, sounding puzzled.

"Well, he didn't," said Kennedy. "I mean he said something about sending the, Meredith, uh, sneaking him into Jackson and getting him registered while all of you were up at . . ."

"Yeah?" said Barnett.

". . . at Oxford. But that doesn't make much sense, does it?"

"Well, I don't know," drawled Barnett. "Why? Why doesn't it? That's where they ordered him to go at first, you know." The idea was that Barnett would continue to lead the charge of segregationists up to the Ole Miss campus at Oxford for the scheduled confrontation; meanwhile the Kennedys would sneak Meredith into deserted Jackson and register him there in accordance with the court order from one of the earlier registration attempts. By this devious plan, Barnett could swear to the people of Mississippi that he had not given an inch on segregation, and that Meredith had been registered only by the conniving tricks of the Kennedys.

Not surprisingly, Barnett had stalled until he heard this idea come out of Kennedy's mouth rather than his own, but then he embraced it as a mighty fine suggestion. His enthusiasm led Kennedy to reconsider the scheme. Its obvious drawback was that while Meredith might leap the great hurdle of registration, he would wind up an hour's drive from the Oxford campus, and in the meantime the federal government would have allowed Barnett to gather Mississippi's army of resistance to prevent him from setting foot there. Perhaps registration was only fool's gold. In this light, Kennedy pushed Barnett to guarantee that state forces would maintain order in Oxford. The President came back on the line to press the same question.

"Oh, they'll do that," Barnett assured him. He said his 220 highway patrolmen, backing up the local police, would "take positive action, Mr. President, to maintain law and order as best we can . . . and they'll absolutely be unarmed."

Kennedy stumbled over this surprise twist: "I understa—"

"Not a one of 'em'll be armed," Barnett said proudly.

But the problem was, said the President, "what can they do to maintain law and order and prevent the gathering of a mob . . . What can they do?" Kennedy wanted the state forces armed to the teeth when it came to quelling the mob, and nonviolent only in confronting Meredith, but Barnett refused to be so discerning. He stuck blithely to the previous negotiating scenarios in which Robert Kennedy had addressed the reality being screamed in the headlines—that the state forces were lining up



*against* Meredith. The President found himself in the backwash of earlier deals, and the demands of secrecy made his predicament the more vexing. He was like a farmer trying to convince a sly mule that the way to the feed house went through the plow fields. Nevertheless, Kennedy and his advisers concluded that Barnett's ruse promised a step forward. Once Meredith was registered, the game would shift in their direction. When Barnett's next call came in, the President undertook again to move him off the nonviolence idea as applied to the mob at Oxford.

There were rumblings of movement at the White House soon thereafter. Pierre Salinger called the television networks to cancel President Kennedy's scheduled address that night. Burke Marshall called the Justice Department to tell the lawyers to stop drafting the emergency proclamations. "We've got a deal with Barnett," he said. As happy as the draftsmen were to hear that they could go home on a Saturday evening, Marshall's glad news left them with doubts. Norbert Schlei's premonition was so strong that he kept his secretary there until nearly midnight typing up the required presidential documents, just in case. Meanwhile, Ross Barnett went to see the Ole Miss Rebels play the Kentucky Wildcats at Jackson's Memorial Stadium. The war fever of the political crisis boosted the normal emotions of the football rite to the heights of pandemonium, and by halftime the crowd was shouting "We want Ross!" in a deafening roar. Barnett made his way to the fifty-yard line, where he raised a fist of defiance and cried out over the loudspeakers: "I love Mississippi!" The roar intensified, and Barnett, nearly overcome, rose above it to let loose another shout: "I love her people!" Then at the peak: "I love our customs!" These three short sentences were enough to ignite pre-battle ecstasy. People were ready to die. This was as close to, and yet as far from, the fervor of a Negro mass meeting as segregationists came. No one could know that this football game would be the last militant race rally among respectable whites for at least a generation.

In Washington, Norbert Schlei had just gotten home when Burke Marshall called to say that the deal was off again. Barnett could not go through with it. "The President wants to sign those documents," said Marshall. Schlei made it down to the White House and upstairs into the residential quarters by midnight Saturday. President Kennedy, looking over the proclamations necessary to call out the troops, asked, "Is this pretty much what Ike signed in 1957 with the Little Rock thing?" Told it was, Kennedy signed, handed the documents back to Schlei, and rapped the table as he stood up. The moment engaged his sense of history. "You know," he remarked, "that's General Grant's table." He said goodnight, but then stopped Schlei on his way down to face the White House press corps with the documents. "Don't tell them about General Grant's

table," Kennedy cautioned. He did not want to antagonize the South any further with reminders of the Civil War.

Robert Kennedy and Barnett resumed the search for a way out on Sunday, while the Pentagon was relaying notice to Mississippi Guard units that they had been placed under the President's command. It was difficult to tell whether the great swell of segregationist sentiment had fortified or encumbered Barnett, who told Robert Kennedy that now he required a truly spectacular show of force to camouflage a retreat. He proposed a large-scale version of the gun-drawing plan, this time with some three hundred Mississippi lawmen and three hundred "soldiers" (apparently some sort of honor guard drawn from the volunteer vigilantes) arrayed in three lines at the Ole Miss gate to block Meredith. Barnett would stand at their head. If Kennedy would send a superior force of federal agents to confront them with guns, he said, he could order them to step aside without losing face.

Now Kennedy balked. Barnett was talking troop numbers larger than the garrison at Fort Sumter in 1861, and he was maneuvering so that Kennedy, unlike Lincoln, would appear to be the aggressor. The governor kept saying that all the Mississippians would be harmlessly unarmed, but there was a limit to what Kennedy would believe. He told Barnett that the grand surrender scheme was unacceptably dangerous. According to Burke Marshall's record of the conversation, the Attorney General "said that he thought the matter had gone beyond the stage of politics."

What Kennedy meant was that it had gone beyond the stage of political courtesy, as he promptly fired a well-aimed dart at Barnett's political nerve center. The President, he told Barnett, was committed to address the nation that night, and he would be forced to say that he had called out the troops because Governor Ross Barnett had broken yesterday's agreement to register Meredith.

"That won't do at all!" Barnett roared.

"You broke your word to him," Kennedy insisted.

Shocked into disbelief, Barnett asked, "You don't mean the President is going to say that tonight?"

"Of course he is," said Kennedy. He said they had a complete record of the times of the phone calls, the circumstances, the words. "We have it all down," he declared, springing the threat of phone intercepts he had compiled surreptitiously.

Barnett fairly howled in pain. It got him nowhere to protest that the Kennedys had given him solemn promises of secrecy, as the Attorney General only replied that Barnett had lied too, and that a lie canceled a promise. Barnett pleaded. Couldn't the feds at least storm fences and barricades around the campus? Couldn't the Attorney General keep the



President from mentioning the prior agreements? Kennedy said no, pressing his advantage. He knew that millions of Americans would consider it a grievous misdeed to lie to a President. He also knew that the governor's fear was precisely the opposite: Barnett was petrified of the revelation that he had *agreed* with the President in a secret integrationist deal. He would have welcomed a thousand lies to keep this one truth hidden.

A new idea popped up from the depths of Barnett's misery. "Why don't you fly him in this afternoon?" he asked suddenly. As a variation on the trick place idea, he suggested that they register Meredith at a trick time. They could sneak Meredith onto the Oxford campus while Barnett continued to rally all of Mississippi for the expected showdown on Monday or Tuesday. Then Barnett could claim he had been hoodwinked. This idea became the heart of a new bargain, although arguments erupted sporadically over lies that were told and lies that were ruined. Burke Marshall and Tom Watkins came on the line to soothe tempers and piece together a detailed plan. Kennedy agreed to keep Barnett well posted on all Meredith's movements. Barnett, in return, agreed to let Kennedy clear the language of the statement in which Barnett, crying foul tyranny and pledging to fight on against integration, would recognize Meredith's registration as a *fait accompli.*

The Justice Department boiled immediately into action, having rehearsed this drill during the Freedom Rides. Any lawyer who happened to be strolling the hallways that Sunday was in danger of being flung aboard a military transport plane. Within hours, the head of the Tax Division found himself commanding a "communications center" in the basement of the post office in Oxford, Mississippi. Press spokesman Ed Guthman shuttled between telephones and troop bivouacs, as did legal draftsman Norbert Schlei. Airborne, the legal shock troops discovered among themselves even an old Harvard football chum of Robert Kennedy's, who had been in Washington that weekend for a White House conference on narcotics. When they landed, Nicholas Katzenbach assumed the role of field commander of the combined civilian forces. Kennedy had stopped him on his way out of the Justice Department to say, "Hey, Nick. Don't worry if you get shot . . . 'cause the President needs a moral issue." Katzenbach laughed at the warm irony and the taut grin. This was the Kennedy panache—bright amateurs dashing cavalierly into semi-war.

James Meredith, plucked from the professional football game he was watching on television at the Memphis air station, flew south with Doar and McShane. At six o'clock that afternoon they looked down from their Cessna to behold the stunning transformation of the little Oxford airport. The field was lined with Army trucks, buses, jeeps, cars, and assorted

government planes, plus piles of tents and riot equipment. Other supplies included dramatic items like giant searchlights. Katzenbach and Guthman met the plane when it landed, their Jetstar having cruised in from Washington two hours earlier. By then they had already posted the main body of three hundred marshals around the university's administration building, known as the Lyceum. Katzenbach had assumed that Meredith would be registered there, but he advised Doar that university officials had talked Burke Marshall out of registering on Sunday, for religious reasons. This change confronted Katzenbach with the unhappy decision of whether to leave the marshals all night at the Lyceum, pending registration the next morning, or to move them. Nothing would be easy, he reported, as downtown Oxford was jammed and tense. The first sightings of the marshals, with their white helmets and yellow armbands, had touched off alarms by radio bulletin and word of mouth. A hostile crowd swelled across the tree-dotted lawn called the Grove, outside the Lyceum. Students chanted "Go to hell, JFK!" and other unfriendly slogans.

The only good news was that Barnett, true to the deal, had provided escorts of sullen but cooperative highway patrolmen. Some were helping to hold off the crowds at the Lyceum, while others escorted the prize onto the campus by a back road. By six thirty Sunday evening, little more than a half-hour after his plane landed, Meredith had picked out a room at deserted Baxter Hall. Katzenbach called Robert Kennedy to report the success, then posted marshals with orders to shoot anyone who tried to break into Meredith's room. As he and Doar returned to the Lyceum to negotiate with university officials over the logistics of the next morning's registration, Meredith pulled books from his briefcase and began to study.

President Kennedy had postponed his national address until ten o'clock Washington time—eight o'clock in Mississippi—wanting to make sure that Meredith was safely at Ole Miss. There was nearly an hour and a half to spare when Robert Kennedy called Governor Barnett in Jackson to report that Meredith was safely installed in the dorm. The only deviation from the plan was that he had arrived by car instead of helicopter, and Kennedy advised the governor to revise his draft statement accordingly. Barnett replied glumly that it was too late to correct the minor error. He had no secretary to retype the press release. Within minutes, Barnett stunned Mississippi with his rueful announcement that the state's defenders had been "physically overpowered" at Oxford.

From this last smooth click of the complicated plan, events tumbled toward the abyss. By the time Katzenbach and Doar reached the Lyceum, the crowd outside had reached a thousand in number, mostly students. Anger was rising among them as dusk fell. While some shouted the rhythmic cheer "Go to Cuba, nigger lovers, go to Cuba!" others lobbed pebbles, then rocks, at the lines of marshals standing outside. Worst of all, a Mississippi state senator was inside the Lyceum with a proclamation, signed by Governor Barnett, authorizing him to take command of the highway patrol. Senator George Yarbrough was making no secret of his intention to withdraw the highway patrolmen from the scene. Now that the federal government had "invaded" Ole Miss and defiled it with Meredith, he told Doar and Katzenbach, the feds could defend themselves. Some of the highway patrolmen milling around were only too glad to hear it, but Doar and Katzenbach knew from the crowd's ugly mood that withdrawal would invite disaster. Students were slashing the tires of the Army trucks parked outside. Somebody sprayed a truck driver in the face with a fire extinguisher. The darkness was making it harder for the marshals to dodge the flying rocks.



Doar pleaded for time. Vainly hoping that the students would get tired, he asked Yarbrough to hold the highway patrol until nine, but Yarbrough said no. Each panicky report from outside made Doar desperate for more time and Yarbrough itchy for less. Meanwhile, Katzenbach relayed word of the emergency to Robert Kennedy in the White House Cabinet Room, and Kennedy leaped to the phone with the only proven threat he had: that a withdrawal by the highway patrol would break Mississippi's promise to maintain order, in which case President Kennedy, who was preparing to go on national television, would announce that Mississippi leaders had made and then reneged on a deal. With raw warnings both to the Mississippi officials in the Lyceum and to Barnett in Jackson, he finally induced Barnett to order the highway patrol to stay. Doar and the others were masking their relief, so as not to provoke the mortified and rebellious Mississippians, when marshals burst in shouting that the patrolmen were drifting away. Now it was the Mississippians who masked their satisfaction, saying this could not be true. They pointed to some patrolmen still on duty.

By this time the federal officials and the Mississippians no longer trusted their own eyes, let alone each other, and dozens of contradictory rumors flew at once. At first, Doar and Katzenbach preferred to believe the telephone reports over what they thought they saw happening outside the Lyceum, because the telephones connected them with those in authority. Eyewitness accounts of the withdrawal flew from the bank of pay phones inside the Lyceum to Robert Kennedy or Burke Marshall in the Cabinet Room, or to Ramsey Clark in the Justice Department command center, only to be refuted by those talking simultaneously to distant authorities such as Barnett or an Ole Miss trustee. Under the circumstances, the facts of the incipient riot fought their way up the

pecking order in remarkably good time. Historian Walter Lord later pieced together files showing that FBI agents first overheard the withdrawal order on the highway patrol radio frequency at 7:25. Within nine minutes the startling news was being shouted from the post office "communications center" to the Lyceum and up to the White House, steadily beating back contrary reports. By 7:40, it was generally established that most of the highway patrolmen had vanished.

It was 9:40 Washington time, twenty minutes before President Kennedy went on the air. Network technicians were adjusting their equipment in the Oval Office. In the Cabinet Room, Ted Sorensen went over the speech with the President, while Robert Kennedy reacted to the mounting apprehension coming over the wire from the Lyceum. When Ed Guthman told him the marshals might have to use tear gas, Kennedy said he still hoped to avoid it. Guthman scrambled to fetch Senator Yarbrough and Colonel Birdsong of the highway patrol, who argued directly with Kennedy about how many patrol officers had received Barnett's order to stay at the Lyceum. By now each minute was crammed with shouts, fresh advances by the mob, new injuries, and new forms of chaos.

The first flesh-to-flesh violence victimized newsmen, as in the Freedom Rides. Beaten by students, a television cameraman from Dallas struggled to what he thought was refuge inside his car, only to have the windows and fenders kicked in. As the contagion spread across the Lyceum lawn, students attacked two other reporters. An Ole Miss professor tried to rescue one of them but was himself beaten to the ground. Molotov cocktails—gasoline in Coke bottles—spread flames at the feet of several marshals. Senator Yarbrough, racing outside from his phone call with the Attorney General, was horrified to see that the marshals had put on their gas masks. The whole idea of dressing the marshals in civilian clothes had been to make them appear less military, less antagonizing to the Ole Miss students, but now they looked like ghoulish space warriors. Chief Marshal McShane ordered the men to remove their masks in exchange for Yarbrough's desperate promise to make personal pleas for an end to the violence. Yarbrough plunged out into the swirling mob, but his shouts had no greater effect than any other loud noise. The students, darting closer and closer to the Lyceum, added bricks to their projectiles, and when the first big piece of lead pipe felled a marshal, McShane shouted for the tear gas. Cannisters were fired into the crowd from the marshals' line all around the perimeter of the Lyceum. Battle chaos curled backward, as some choking marshals had forgotten or lost their gas masks. And because there had been no warning to the few remaining highway patrolmen struggling against the mob, these most



dutiful of the Mississippi officers were rewarded with a dose of gas from behind at point-blank range. A casing knocked one patrolman unconscious and the gas nearly killed him. Mississippi officials screamed with rage at their federal allies.

Inside the Lyceum, Colonel Birdsong was still on the phone with Robert Kennedy, who did not think well of his suggestion that Governor Barnett fly in from Jackson to make a speech to the mob. Ed Guthman, standing next to Birdsong, grabbed the telephone when he heard the thumping report of the first tear gas grenades. "Bob, I'm very sorry to report we've had to fire tear gas," he said. "We had no choice."

It was 7:58 in Oxford. A minute later, Burke Marshall left the Cabinet Room for the Oval Office with news that Ole Miss had deteriorated into a full-scale riot, but the President was frozen in the commanding glare of the television lights. "Good evening, my fellow citizens," he began, facing the cameras from behind his desk. "The orders of the court in the case of *Meredith* v. *Fair* are beginning to be carried out." Meredith was safely on campus, he said. National Guard units had not been used. The rule of law was prevailing, and students and professors alike could return to their normal activities. "This is as it should be," said the President. Twice he emphasized to the nation that the federal government had not been party to the Meredith case. He announced the name and home state of each Fifth Circuit judge who had voted to send Meredith to Ole Miss, adding that his responsibility to carry out their order was "inescapable." "I accept it," he said.

The speech was written on a tight line, crafted to reach undecided white Southerners. Not mentioning Governor Barnett, he neither criticized segregationists nor embraced Meredith's cause. He praised Mississippi specifically as the home of Lucius Lamar, of "four Medal of Honor winners in the Korean War alone," and of Sergeant Jake Lindsay, who in 1945 "was honored by an unusual joint session of the Congress." Then he spoke directly to Ole Miss: "You have a great tradition to uphold, a tradition of honor and courage, won on the field of battle, and on the gridiron, as well as the university campus . . . The eyes of the nation and all the world are upon you and upon all of us . . . I am certain the great majority of the students will uphold that honor. There is, in short, no reason why the books on this case cannot now be quickly closed in the manner directed by the court."

President Kennedy's speech disposed of the Meredith case so convincingly that some troop commanders in Memphis released their men from DEFCON 2 alert (prepare to move immediately). Desire and pronounce-

ment were being overrun by fact, however, as the President quickly discovered. Back in the Cabinet Room, he joined the Attorney General, Sorensen, O'Donnell, Marshall, and congressional adviser Larry O'Brien for a grim siege watch that was destined to last all night. Two or three of them talked on telephones at once, pausing to relay reports to the others. "They're throwing iron spikes," Robert Kennedy told the President. "And they're throwing Coke bottles, and they're throwing rocks." The huddled leaders absorbed erroneous reports that the gassed highway patrolman had died, and accurate ones that it was almost impossible to get injured marshals through the mob to a hospital. One early idea was to enlist football coach Johnny Vaught, a sainted figure at Ole Miss, to make a speech urging the students to disperse. Periodic bulletins on this effort punctuated the early reports that the great cloud of tear gas was only spurring on the rioters: "He [Vaught] said he wants to keep this, all the football squad out of it . . . It's a hell of a squad . . . His wife says he's out . . . Listen, why don't we get Bob to try to call him from here? . . . His wife may be lying to you . . ."

Within an hour of the President's speech, the first shotgun blasts rang out at Oxford. One marshal was bleeding profusely from a neck wound, and his colleagues, lacking either first-aid equipment or an ambulance, despaired for his life. A few minutes later the first high-powered rifle shot hit a border patrolman in the leg. As casualties mounted, the marshals placed their wounded along the wall inside the Lyceum. Outside, many of the student rioters fled the gunfire, giving way to the adult roughnecks who had converged on Ole Miss. The mob grew above two thousand around the Lyceum, with untold others roaming the campus on foot and in cars.

Gallows humor prevailed at the White House, where the President quipped that he remembered "riots like this at Harvard." During lulls in the incoming calls, the leaders fidgeted glumly. They discussed what to do about a tip that James Reston intended to write a column in *The New York Times* suggesting that the Kennedy Administration was more anxious to meet with the Soviets than were the Soviets to meet with Kennedy. The President attacked the story, ticking off Soviet invitations from memory. "We ought to knock it down tonight," he said. "That's just kicking Reston right in the balls, isn't it . . . Do you want to call him up? Or is that just gonna make him mad?"

The besieged Katzenbach called in again. Those in the Cabinet Room could hear only Robert Kennedy's end of the conversation: "Do you want these troops in there? . . . He got hit by what? . . . Is he gonna live? . . . The state police have left?" Marshall broke in to announce that he had just had a talk with Barnett, who said the troopers "*can't* have pulled



out." They *had* pulled out, Kennedy replied. Then Marshall repeated Barnett's assurance that he had just talked with the highway patrol and that everything was under control. Frustrated, the leaders in the Cabinet Room began denouncing the insurrectionist harangues of General Walker, which led them into a discussion of the novel *Seven Days in May*, about a military coup in the United States. President Kennedy remarked that the book's president seemed "awfully vague" to him, but that the coup-plotting general was "a pretty good character." On the phone, Marshall almost plaintively asked someone whether Coach Vaught was "doing any good." On another phone, the Attorney General quietly consoled John Doar, saying he knew Ole Miss was "a long way from Wisconsin."

"I haven't had such an interesting time since the Bay of Pigs," sighed President Kennedy. His brother, assigning himself comparable responsibility for this new disaster, wryly composed a press release for his own sacking: "The Attorney General announced today, he's joining Allen Dulles at Princeton Univ—" Nervous laughter cut him off.

When they ran out of tear gas at the Lyceum, and the volunteer who tried to drive through the mob to fetch new supplies was delayed—feared lost—the leaders in the Cabinet Room decided to move the regular Army units down from Memphis by air, and to move a Mississippi National Guard unit to the campus from the local armory in Oxford. Waiting anxiously for confirmation of troop movements by military officers of unproven loyalty, the President thought of the Shah of Iran. "This is what they must do every night in Teheran," he remarked dryly. Then came a maddening disparity of communications: the cries of desperation arrived instantly from Katzenbach's pay phone inside the Lyceum, but responding orders for help seemed to vanish into a maze of radio hookups. "Well, they have to call the Attorney General's office to get the Attorney General's office to call the Secretary of the Army," Marshall explained in exasperation, "and the Secretary of the Army to call to Memphis, and then . . ." When he reported that one unit was known to be forming to receive orders, Sorensen objected that the unit had formed ten or twelve hours earlier. "I saw them form on television," he said. Marshall said they must be forming again.

Robert Kennedy's voice chilled the room shortly before midnight. "They're storming where Meredith is," he said. "They're storming where Meredith is." Bands of rioters had discovered Meredith at Baxter Hall, and the battered marshals at the Lyceum were in no position to move across the campus to help protect him. The men in Washington clung to their telephones, scrambling for ideas. O'Donnell said he feared the riot might turn into a lynching. The President placed an urgent call to Barnett

in Jackson. Robert Kennedy tried to reach Katzenbach on the pay phone, but Katzenbach was out rallying his men in the face of new shootings. The Attorney General wound up speaking with his old Harvard football friend, Dean Markham, who told him the marshals could not defend themselves with tear gas alone. O'Donnell, listening in, broke the news to the Cabinet Room that "the marshals are now going to start firing." They had sidearms, he said.

President Kennedy returned to report that Barnett had parried his demand for highway patrolmen, saying the best way to rescue Meredith was to remove him from Ole Miss.

"I *can't* get him out," Robert Kennedy said miserably, hearing the President. "How am I gonna get him out?"

"That's what I said to him," the President replied. "Now the problem is, if he can get law and order restored . . ." He paused, then said, "Okay, we'll move him out of there if he can get order restored."

The decision to withdraw Meredith was impossible to carry out, which rendered it easier for Kennedy to make. And now fresh waves of chaos superseded the Barnett negotiations. Three more marshals had just been shot, Larry O'Brien announced. Listening in on the line, Ken O'Donnell remarked that Ed Guthman was "so scared he can't talk." Robert Kennedy tried to talk Katzenbach out of authorizing the marshals to return gunfire. "Can you hold out if you have gas?" he asked. ". . . Is there any way you could figure a way to *scare* 'em off?" Katzenbach's anguished reply made the Attorney General back off this last suggestion. "Sorry," he said sheepishly, but the marshals held their fire.

About that time a call came in from one of Guthman's assistants. When busy men declined to accept an underling's call, Evelyn Lincoln, President Kennedy's secretary, agreed to take a message for the Attorney General, whereupon she heard the assistant say in a precise, disembodied monotone that "a reporter for the London *Daily Sketch*, whose name is Paul Guihard, G-U-I-H-A-R-D, was killed in Oxford just now. His body was found with a bullet in the back, next to a women's dormitory."

At midnight in Washington, Katzenbach told Robert Kennedy that he needed regular troops—as many as possible. Like Guthman, he spoke with soldierly remorse, blaming himself for failing Kennedy in his prolonged effort to avoid using soldiers. Kennedy took the blame, sent the troops, and summoned Guthman back to the phone to discuss what they would say to the press. "We're gonna have a hell of a problem about why we didn't handle the situation better," he said.

The riot went on all night, as the mob showed astonishing persistence. Rioters sent a bulldozer, then a car, crashing toward the Lyceum as a battering ram. They wounded 160 of the marshals—28 by gunfire—and



sent a stray bullet into the head of a local juke-box repairman, killing him. In the Cabinet Room, the leaders absorbed the reports of injury one by one until dawn. They heard that flying wedges of students were attacking Baxter Hall, that flying wedges of marshals were trying to break out with wounded men. Robert Kennedy stressed "how important it is to keep Meredith alive." The leaders adjusted stoically to the two deaths. O'Donnell suggested that the Administration "hit the London papers" with the death of Guihard, who, as a reporter, guaranteed widespread news coverage. "A good story over in Europe," someone said.

What nearly broke them was the waiting. Robert Kennedy, who blamed himself for waiting too long to summon the military, alternately joked, whimpered, seethed, and cursed when the night dragged on past the arrival times promised by the generals. Army Secretary Cyrus Vance* and Division Commander Creighton Abrams† had assured the White House that they could airlift soldiers from Memphis to Ole Miss within an hour, but it took that long for the sixty-five-man Mississippi National Guard unit‡ to reach the campus from the local armory in Oxford. After false sightings and interminable delays, the National Guard trotted loyally up to the Lyceum to stand alongside the battered marshals. ("One of them was just wounded," Larry O'Brien finally announced to the Cabinet Room, "so they know they're there.") No more reinforcements arrived for some three hours, during which time most of the night's injuries were sustained. Both Kennedys spoke sharply to the brass. "I have a hunch that Khrushchev would get those troops in fast enough," O'Donnell sighed. "That's what worries *me* about the whole thing."

A bone-weary Katzenbach was talking with President Kennedy when joyous shouts went up that regular troops had been sighted outside the Lyceum. "Just a minute, Mr. President," said Katzenbach. "They may be here now. Please stay on the line while I confirm it." Katzenbach dashed off, shouting back orders not to let anyone touch the phone because the President was waiting. Returning seconds later, Katzenbach was mortified to discover that the man holding the receiver was not his aide but a reporter. Far from seizing his scoop, however, the reporter was so awed by the thought that the President of the United States was on the other end of the line that he had been unable to move or speak, much less ask a question. Katzenbach grabbed the phone to say, "They're here, Mr. President."

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* Later Secretary of State under President Carter.
† Later commander of U.S. military forces in South Vietnam.
‡ Commanded by Captain Murry Faulkner, the novelist's cousin.

Meredith's room smelled of tear gas a few hours later when Doar came to pick him up. With Guthman and McShane, they climbed into the same Border Patrol car that had carried them to the first registration attempt eleven days earlier. Then shiny and new, its doors now were pockmarked with bullet holes, its windows shattered by bricks. McShane put army blankets on the backseat to protect them from the shards of glass as they rode to the Lyceum for registration. Soldiers stood on the Grove, holding back students who had gathered to witness the surrender. Meredith—unknown and withdrawn, temperamental, practical, of military bearing and yet erratically sentimental—said it was then that he heard Mississippi whites call him "nigger" for the first time in his life. An hour later, escorted by marshals, he attended his first class in Colonial American history.

The soldiers, once marching, proved even more difficult to stop than to start. Long after the campus had quieted to Meredith-taunting and petty vandalism, new units piled in on top of each other until there were some 23,000 soldiers—three times the population of Oxford. The Marines got in on it; so did the Air Force. No fewer than 10,000 troops scrambled for a riot alarm on the night of October 11, surrounding what turned out to be a pre-engagement "pinning" serenade on the porch of a sorority house. Ordinary soldiers, while dodging a few rocks and grinning at the blistering obscenities they received from otherwise demure coeds, found enough humor to relieve the tedium. They named their tents "Andersonville" and "KKK HQ." A giant sign proclaimed one latrine the "Governor's Mansion."

Political ramifications helped pin the troops down in Mississippi, as neither the generals nor the politicians wanted to look as though they were backing down from Governor Barnett's torrent of indignant rage. All official Mississippi joined the governor in blaming the riot entirely on "trigger-happy marshals" and other federal intruders. Senator Eastland charged that the marshals had "provoked the students and others." Lieutenant Governor Johnson, in a private complaint forwarded to Burke Marshall, charged that the tear gas "affected my lungs and my throat and caused, as the doctor put it, a blood clot upon my lungs." The Mississippi senate passed a resolution expressing its "complete, entire and utter contempt for the Kennedy Administration and its puppet courts." A Lafayette County grand jury indicted Chief Marshal McShane for inciting the riot. The Mississippi legislature's official report, oozing with self-pity and trampled virtue, charged the marshals with "planned physical torture" and other atrocities against Ole Miss students. This document



caught the attention of President Kennedy, who lamented that such a brazenly fantastic inversion might one day be taken seriously by historians. Firsthand experience with Ole Miss made the President doubt his old Harvard professors, who taught that Northern fanatics trampled upon an innocent South after the Civil War. "It makes me wonder," Kennedy said privately to Sorensen, "whether everything I learned about the evils of Reconstruction was really true."

President Kennedy, while insightful about the effects of racial passions upon the perception of history itself, took steps toward a renewed mythology. To protect the racial sensibilities of Mississippi, he stripped Negro soldiers out of the military units at Ole Miss. Like Governor Barnett, he went out of his way to avoid mentioning that Meredith was a Negro. The President and his brother ignored most of Governor Barnett's slanderous accusations, and in fact they tasked the best legal minds in the Justice Department to find a way *not* to collect the contempt fines imposed on Barnett and Johnson. There might have been persuasive tactical reasons, as they did not want to renew the constitutional crisis, but such small steps consistently beckoned the Administration to minimize both the significance and the racial texture of the Ole Miss crisis.

President Kennedy's most effective political response to the Ole Miss riot was to move on to other things. Almost never did he mention the subject in speeches, nor did he exercise his famous aptitude for reviewing and interpreting political events during informal interviews. His power to define what was news consigned the Ole Miss story quickly to the back pages. The soldiers remained practically unnoticed at Ole Miss until the last five hundred departed late in the summer of 1963, after Meredith received his degree. The climate of the times helped contain the story. Had the riot occurred later, in the era of the "live network feed," synchronized scenes of the Ole Miss rioting before, during, and after President Kennedy's national address might have been broadcast with jarring effect, making the President appear Pollyannish or incompetent. As it was, however, the sequence of events was blurred to his advantage, making the riot appear to be a rude answer to Kennedy's timely appeal. Friendly newspapers went to great lengths to adjust the speech to the riot. *The New York Times* went so far as to report that Kennedy "qualified his optimism most carefully" in his address, "and indeed made clear that the Government was waiting anxiously to see how Mississippi officials and citizens behaved."

The Ole Miss crisis left people feeling victimized on all sides. Mississippians and other Southern leaders howled against the invasion. The formerly deputized marshals recovered from their wounds and went back

to regular duty at prisons and border crossings. Kennedy's political advisers, realizing that all their efforts to accommodate Mississippi had served only to blanket the South with bumper stickers screaming FEDERALLY OCCUPIED MISSISSIPPI and KENNEDY'S HUNGARY, were reinforced in their belief that taking risks for integration invited political suicide. As for Negro leaders, all of whom praised President Kennedy in public for doing what was necessary to get Meredith registered, the sense of victory was hollow. NAACP lawyers, who had handled Meredith's case alone for nearly two years, felt shunted aside by Justice Department lawyers who had taken control of their case and even physical custody of Meredith.

Martin Luther King complained privately that President Kennedy had summoned the nation to nothing more positive than a grim obedience to law. In Kennedy's nationwide address there had been talk of burdens and closed books but not a word of freedom, fresh beginnings, or renewed hope. For King, by contrast, the issue went far beyond his identification with Meredith to touch his core conviction that human beings could transcend enemy-thinking. At stake was nothing less than the capacity to lighten the stain of evil and demonstrate the possibility of justice in the world's design, which for King was the realization of God's presence. His moral intensity in this regard struck President Kennedy as narrow and stifling. King, on the other hand, had heard enough glowing talk of Mississippi's gridiron traditions—and read enough of the political dickering between Mississippi and the Administration—to sink into profound depression. As much as he admired President Kennedy for his stylish command of the modern world, King knew that Kennedy and Barnett still had more in common with each other than either had with him. Their performance at Oxford, he wrote, "made Negroes feel like pawns in a white man's political game." He blended this lament into a bleak assessment of 1962 as the year civil rights lost ground in national politics. No longer the "dominant issue" of domestic debate, it had receded since the year of the Freedom Rides and of the Kennedy Administration's early cry, "We will move!" King too had receded, as measured by his ineffectiveness in Albany, and his criticism of the Administration no doubt reflected his fear that no matter how mightily he shouted and sacrificed, he remained a cork in Kennedy's ocean, left to rise and fall with its tides.

# EIGHTEEN

# TO BIRMINGHAM

In October 1962, CIA officials obtained photographic intelligence that Soviet nuclear missiles were being shipped to Cuba. "Can they hit Oxford, Mississippi?" asked the President, facetiously suggesting that Fidel Castro and the Russians could do worse than to obliterate the site of his recent vexations. The President kept his nerve during the crisis, if not always his humor. He convened his war chiefs to debate whether to bomb, invade, or quarantine Cuba to root out the missiles, and when it came time to brief congressional leaders, the fever of emergency was so high that Air Force planes retrieved Congressman Hale Boggs from his fishing boat in the Gulf of Mexico, first dropping him an SOS in a plastic bottle.

C. B. King was in Washington, pleading unsuccessfully for federal prosecution of Sheriff Campbell for caning him in July. When President Kennedy announced the naval quarantine of Cuba, King rushed homeward, driving down the East Coast past closed businesses and deserted towns, listening to bulletins on military movements and prayer services, and on his door found a note from his wife saying she had moved the entire family to Clarence Jordan's Koinania Farm for fear that the military bases near Albany would make prime targets for Soviet missiles. Hundreds of millions of people in scores of countries shared similar apprehensions. Certainly not since World War II, and perhaps never, had so many people experienced world politics so vividly at once.