

THE NATION

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The Cat and Mouse Game

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Jackson, Miss.

To say that the summer just past was, in Mississippi, less bloody than it could have been, might sound too much like the FBI agent who came to investigate the shooting of a Negro in Jackson and was heard to say, "His head's not blown off? Oh, then it's not as bad as we thought."

It might also seem highly questionable to Silas McGhee, the young Negro who was shot in Greenwood on a recent Saturday night after his seven attempts to integrate a local movie theatre, or to Stokeley Carmichael, a SNCC field secretary who lost one automobile to a fire bomb and whose present car has more than its share of bullet holes. The Summer Project headquarters in Jackson has mimeographed a list of "incidents," from shootings of this type to church burnings and traffic-violation arrests, during the period of June 16 to August 14. It covers thirty-four pages, most of them legal size and single-spaced. Yet much of it has the curious monotony of a cat-and-mouse game; over and over again, the same arrests on phony charges, followed by early release on payment of bail; the same homemade bombs which somehow don't go off (or blow up windows but not people); the same obscene threats which stop short of fatality. The picture which emerges is more depressing than horrifying, and it's a relief to hear of the cops using some imagination now and then—making an arrest for "reckless walking" or raiding an office for what they called "deflammatory literature."

Last July, in Hattiesburg, I was waiting for the police to release project director Robert Moses, who had been stopped for speeding. An FBI poster in the station carried photos of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, then still missing, and I felt that in their presence the police wouldn't do anything really terrible to us that day. It was irrational but not altogether untrue, for the furor which followed the disappearance of those three so early in the summer—the hordes of FBI agents and sailors, newsmen and federal officials who descended on the state—made a strong, distasteful impression on local authorities. The hordes came, it is true, only because two of the missing youths were whites: indirectly, the major reason for the limited bloodshed last summer was the presence of so many white volunteers, particularly girls.

The degree of violence varied from one county to another, partly because the county sheriffs, elected officials whose power would be hard for a Northern city-dweller to imagine, range from Ben Collins, spraying volunteers with obscenities and, on one occasion, a real deodorant, to somewhat rational fellows anxious to keep a trouble-free record. The more sophisticated, or those receptive to more sophisticated influence from higher-ups like Senator John Stennis, would do a great deal to avoid federal intervention. The authorities of Indianola posted a notice urging all citizens to exercise restraint toward "the so-called Freedom Workers." In Greenville, a police officer was heard to give the order, "If it's a local guy, throw him out; if it's one of those agitators, take it easy." And in Gulfport, on the southern coast, the police sent a car to stand guard near the project office for some two hours when the workers there reported that a midnight bombing had

been threatened by telephone. Inside the office, no one except me was even watching the clock.

Some of this "protection" has been indistinguishable from harassment: who can say with certainty whether the police car driving past a project office late at night is looking for would-be attackers outside or aiming to jangle the nerves of those inside? One never knows; and that is the quality of fear in a cat-and-mouse game. Inescapable, amorphous, unpredictable—"the worst kind of fear I have ever felt," said a Californian who had fought in the Spanish Civil War and organized miners in a tough West Virginia town. Considerations of Mississippi's relative bloodlessness last summer have little bearing on that emotion.

Still, one can say that by mid-July the white civil rights worker had less to fear generally from the authorities than from the rednecks, whereas before they seemed equally dangerous. This does not mean that these two groups are the only sources of violence; there are also the "respectables," like the salesmen who machine-gunned SNCC worker James Travis last year. Nor does it mean that the groups operate independently. The authorities have created a climate of permissiveness in which others do the



dirty work. Thus, to be stopped by the police might or might not mean a day in jail, perhaps a beating, while to be chased by a gang of whites down a foggy country road at 1 A.M. raised a different question and only one: how fast can your car go?

None of these variations and distinctions applied to local Negroes, of course, and they applied in a much diminished degree to Negro volunteers. If the project had been able to fulfill its earlier hope, which called for a high ratio of Negroes, the whole summer might have been very different.

Northern reaction to the disappearance of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner not only improved the behavior of local officials; it also taught a lesson to COFO, the Council of Federated Organizations which served as the project's official sponsor, although actually SNCC staffed four of the state's five districts, with CORE working the other one. Betty Garman of SNCC tells how holding the FBI over local heads guaranteed the safety of some workers driving through a small town near Greenwood after a Freedom Democratic Party meeting. They reported that they were being followed by a game warden and an unidentified car; she called the FBI, then told the county sheriff she had done so and was about to notify the Department of Justice. A few minutes later, he sent out the order: "Let the brown Pontiac go through." Some volunteers followed a similar

tactic one night in McComb, when a sympathetic local Negro was jailed at 1 A.M. with bail set too high (\$950.57) to be raised until the next day. Knowing that local people are the most vulnerable, and remembering Philadelphia, the workers placed collect calls to friends and newspaper contacts from California to Boston, who then telephoned the McComb jail to inquire about the prisoner's condition. When lawyers arrived the next morning, they not only found the Negro in good condition but also were able to have his bail sharply reduced and the trial held over to permit removal to a federal court—a courtesy the police need not have extended. An officer was heard to mutter, "All they want is publicity. They'll even burn down their own place to get it."

His second sentence was a familiar Southern fantasy, but the first contained some truth. Publicity has played a key role in the COFO security system, which begins with certain ground rules as outlined in a notice on one wall of the Jackson headquarters office:

- (1) Anyone leaving town should check with our WATS operator.
- (2) Call collect for the person you checked out with as soon as you arrive at your destination.
- (3) If you are driving a car other than your own, get authorization slip from legal dept.

The WATS line (Wide Area Telephone Service), to which considerable mystique attaches, was the heart of all security and communications. In the delta town of Greenwood, where SNCC moved its national headquarters for the summer, there were two WATS lines: one covering the entire nation, the other state-wide. For a flat monthly rate, an unlimited number of calls can be dialed directly to any place in the country—or the state, depending on which line you use. The Jackson office also had a state-wide WATS line, and at SNCC's permanent headquarters in Atlanta, Ga., there was yet another which extended as far west as Chicago. All three were maintained on a twenty-four-hour basis.

A project worker would telephone news of any "incident" or threat to the Greenwood office, if it occurred in the northwestern quarter of the state known as the delta; to Jackson if elsewhere. When the call came to Greenwood, the WATS line operator there took down the details and notified Jackson, where another WATS operator recorded the story too. When the story was newsworthy, Jackson would notify the newspapers and wire services which had reporters stationed in Mississippi. Several of them helped protect workers by calling jails when that was beyond the line of journalistic duty. Meanwhile, Greenwood was notifying the FBI and Justice Department (John Doar, of the Civil Rights Division, lost a lot of sleep last summer) and telephoning out-of-state newspapers and a volunteer's parents if the situation called for that. Greenwood also used its national line to notify Friends of SNCC groups around the country; sometimes Atlanta did that job for those groups and the press east of Chicago. As further information came in, new rounds of calls were made. On a bad night, the hectic Jackson office at 1017 Lynch Street, and the smaller office in Greenwood looked and sounded as though the stock-market had crashed.

On the other end of the line, the

FBI seems to have gone through a sort of cycle of attitudes: indifference and reluctance to act, followed by a period of concern and quick response, and then recently a return to the first attitude. But individual agents varied and sometimes their attitudes changed. On a bloody August night in Jackson, when the shootings and cross-burnings came in such rapid succession that one agent told all the witnesses who were streaming in, "The line forms to the left," I heard James Travis of SNCC plead with another agent for the FBI to come more often, merely as observers. "What's the matter—have you got a chip on your shoulder?" the agent asked. Later he apologized. At Itta Bena, on June 26, the FBI broke with policy by arresting whites for attacking voter-registration workers. Only one thing seemed sure about the FBI: if an endangered volunteer had a parent of power or influence, quick action could be counted on. There was no question of "coming by tomorrow" when Len Edwards, son of the California Congressman, was among those in the bomb-threatened Shaw office.

There were a few projects in rural areas which had no telephone; for them, the two-way radios installed at the end of July had special importance. COFO's radios operated on the Citizen's Band, which has twenty-three frequencies available on a sort of party-line basis. A license was obtained from the FCC within 24 hours of application instead of the usual six weeks. At the end of August, there were some fifty installations—twenty-five in automobiles, twenty-five on the ground—plus twenty walkie-talkies. This was made possible by one of the parents' committees formed last summer. The committee sent a representative down in July to propose not only these security measures but also scramblers, which frustrate the telephone-tapper, and snooper-scopes, infra-red equipped binoculars which light up the dark. Not to be outdone, some members of the White Citizens Council also stocked up on walkie-talkies and could be seen practicing with them in Greenwood. A more sinister sight was the proliferation of two-way radio antennas on pick-up trucks around the state. Civil rights workers dread the pick-up truck even more than the police car: it is the symbol of the redneck, and often carries no license plate, a tolerated illegality reflecting the links between officials and poor whites.

None of COFO's radio installations on the ground was destroyed by whites, although one irate policeman in Natchez bent the antenna at project headquarters there. (This happened immediately after the bombing of a house next door to the project. The officer in question is reported to have arrived on the scene, shouted "God damn, they bombed the wrong house!") But there were lots of minor kinks and problems with the radio system, most of them arising from its limited range and delicate construction. One night in Clarksdale, several workers left in a radio-equipped car for a town 18 miles away. There was no telephone there. When they didn't radio word of their arrival, another car with radio departed from nearby Batesville to search for them. For two hours, the Clarks-

dale office was like one of those exciting bad movies about airplanes, as tense faces hovered over the humming radio and magical code names filled the air. Some of the Clarksdale people went home because of the town's midnight curfew, while others watched through the curtains as a police car repeatedly circled the building. Finally the news came that the missing group was safe. The next day we learned that they had arrived on time and tried to radio confirmation but couldn't cope with the equipment, gave up, and went to bed. Four people in Clarksdale alone had stayed up until past one in the morning, and it wasn't much fun to run home down dark alleys after curfew praying that the barking dogs wouldn't bring the police onto the scene. But no one would have suggested not waiting to make sure the group was safe.

COFO's other main form of protection and deterrence was legal. Four groups of attorneys, totaling about 150, came to the state, with a remarkable white SNCC field secretary named Hunter Morey coordinating their work from Jackson. To some of the lawyers, Mr. Morey was a brash young man with only half a year of law school behind him. (He does, in fact, look more like that nice boy who delivers the morning paper than a 24-year-old veteran of several civil rights battlefields.) They might have thought twice if they had realized what he had to contend with:

(1) The National Lawyers Guild, with an office in Jackson and bases in Meridian, Greenwood and Hattiesburg. The Guild lawyers were generally acknowledged to be the most gutsy and the most experienced in civil rights cases. Representatives of the National Council of Churches, CORE and the NAACP's legal branch are reported to have refused to work with the Guild in Mississippi because of its left-wing reputation. Peace was eventually established and everyone calmed down except the Red-baiting Mississippi press, which tends to call all civil rights workers Communists anyway.

(2) The Lawyers' Constitutional Defense Committee, established this summer by a group of lawyers from various sources including the American Civil Liberties Union. In general, the LCDC handled cases in areas of the state where the Guild was not operating but there was occasional overlapping both ways. It maintained a Jackson office and additional attorneys were channeled into the state when the need arose, from Memphis, Tenn., and New Orleans, La.

(3) The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, known as "the President's Committee" because it was set up under a Kennedy program. It acted as counsel for the National Council of Churches, which sent about 325 ministers into the state during the summer.

(4) The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., known as "the Inc. Fund." It maintained only one full-time staff member in Jackson but helped establish the LCDC and coordinated with that group.

There was also an unofficial COFO Legal Advisory Committee, including attorneys William Kunstler and Mel Wolf, which initiated several broad suits such as the one against the poll tax. A few distinguished lawyers came to the state on an individual basis. And

finally, there was a group of law students who worked with the attorneys and who were supplied by yet another organization, the Law Students Civil Rights Research Council.

If the picture seems confusing, it was—at least to this observer. The actual work of the attorneys is easier to describe, since they—like the fifty-seven doctors who came down—were allowed to practice very little in the state. It consisted mainly of bailing or bonding out arrested volunteers, as well as local Negroes; getting cases removed from a state to federal court (unfortunately, many of these are being remanded to the state court); and acting as observers or advisers. Despite the limitations, the presence of the attorneys definitely had its effects. As Mike Starr, one of the law students, said in Hattiesburg: "The amount of actual legal work we've done could be engraved on the head of a pin. But our mere presence is a real deterrent. With the lawyers here, the chances of a person's being beaten are much less and the chances of getting a person released in his own recognizance instead of by putting up a lot of bail are much better."

He went on to discuss Mississippi's white attorneys, none of whom had been cooperative on any sort of regular basis except a short, slender Jacksonian named Leonard Rosenthal. "His landlord kicked him out of his office, his brother-in-law chased him with a shotgun," Starr said. "But Rosenthal doesn't believe so much in civil rights as in civil liberties."

The Mississippi Negro himself played a role—or rather, several roles—in making the summer relatively unbloody. When volunteers first arrived in the northern town of Batesville, a group of local Negroes with guns stood guard at night—unasked—for the first few weeks. As nothing developed, they stayed home. Guns have stood ready in Biloxi, too, where a tight little group of armed men used to stop by the project office from time to time and offer protection. Local Negroes have also risked their lives to bring the volunteers word of threatening danger. In one small Delta town, a volunteer's life was probably saved when local boys told him about a conversation among whites drawing up a murder plan. In Shaw, a young man came to the office and reported that he had been made two offers by whites—one of \$40, for pointing out the office, and another of \$400 for blowing it up.

On the other side of the coin, militant local Negroes have practiced self-restraint to make things easier for the summer workers. Groups of youths in several towns have said that they refrained from extensive testing of the Civil Rights Act during the summer because such testing was not part of COFO's program and could lead to bloodshed. In Greenville, one of them showed off his knife late in the evening at the office there and said with a grin, "You people are okay but I happen to be non-violent. We're going to start moving again this fall and no white man is going to push me around." For these older teen-agers, who may of course just be talking tough, the project is admirable but too tame; they have small interest in Freedom School

classes in Negro history because they want to make history themselves, and now. Their anger and impatience are understandable. The little testing which was done last summer had almost no effect; whites prevented integration by physical force, closing down, turning restaurants into clubs. The "White" and "Colored" signs are still up in courthouses; even where they are gone, as in Jackson's Trailways bus terminal or its University Hospital, white and Negro still sit in separate waiting areas, still go to separate washrooms.

If the project has not been provocative enough to satisfy some Negroes, there is also a sense in which it was not provocative enough to drive whites to greater violence. The project presented no direct economic threat. What if COFO had organized a plantation strike for the months of September-October, when the cotton is picked? It could not, of course, for several obvious reasons. Boycotting wasn't part of the program either, and when it occurred under local leadership it was not notably successful. In Greenwood, Negro youths would stand outside a store urging potential customers to pass it by. But when they left, their elders went in.

This does not mean that the movement failed to move forward last summer. Instead, it took solid root at last. The Freedom Schools, and the Mississippi Student Union which has largely developed out of them, will be the youthful base of the movement; the new Freedom Democratic Party its adult structure. These, said Bob Moses in late August, were the project's two great achievements. And behind them both is perhaps the most extraordinary phenomenon of the summer: the kids of 8 or 9 who go out to canvass, who practice demonstrating and being arrested and everything else the future holds.

Set against all this is a mood of white rebelliousness whose bounds are unpredictable. But there were signs, as August ended, that a new cycle in the cat-and-mouse game had begun. One of these was the bombing which destroyed the Jackson offices of *The Northside Reporter*, a weekly published by a noted white liberal.

Let no one think that only the crazy redneck is a die-hard segregationist, that most of the authorities now reluctantly but rationally accept Negro equality as inevitable. They are even more stubbornly opposed because they have more to lose: power. These men will evolve new barriers, refortify others, step up economic pressures. My most frightening hour in Mississippi was not on a dark road with a police spotlight suddenly turned on my car, or watching the pick-up truck in my rear-view mirror. It was in the office of a county attorney who chatted politely about the lack of rain. Somewhere in the room, invisible, a time clock loudly clicked off each minute. The attorney didn't bluster against intermarriage or reaffirm God's desire to keep the races separate; in fact, I didn't even ask him his racial views. Then unexpectedly he stopped smiling and said, in a calm voice, "You know everything I have in this town—my work, my family, my farm. I intend to protect them." It was a simple little statement, delivered with unmistakable portent and maximum hostility.

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