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## James P. Coleman (1956-1960) and Mississippi Poppycock

by *Robert Luckett*

A few short weeks after the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision of May 17, 1954, James P. Coleman, the attorney general of Mississippi, made a statement about the future of public education in the state. He was in a precarious situation. As the state's chief attorney, he was responsible for the legal defense of the Jim Crow status quo—white economic, political, and social control. Eyeing a run for governor in 1955, his political future depended on his ability to undermine the advancements of the modern civil rights movement and hold at bay the insistence of the federal government that its power superseded that of the states. In the aftermath of the *Brown* decision, white backlash had rejuvenated massive



*James P. Coleman, Courtesy,  
Mississippi Department of Archives  
and History*

resistance to black empowerment, and white leaders throughout the South denounced the United States Supreme Court's decision and declared their refusal to abide by it. Some even pronounced that they had rather see public education end altogether rather than succumb to integration. It was Coleman's turn to make a statement.

Significantly, Coleman did not believe it was necessary to abolish public schools in order to maintain segregated education, but he toed the segregationist line and blamed the Supreme Court for a bad

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decision, which, he believed, illegitimately overturned legislative and judicial history. Instead of legal precedent, Coleman argued, the *Brown* decision relied “upon the opinions of nine psychological and sociological publications as authority.” Not only that, the Court “did not undertake to say how or when that separate education can be in fact abolished.” Coleman remained hopeful because the decision dealt with segregation by race, and he believed that there was plenty of room for gerrymandering “normal district boundaries. This is the answer to a sizeable portion of the problem.” He closed, declaring, “We did not ask for this school crisis. It has been forced upon us. We will not shrink from the challenge. Our public-school system and separate education for the races will be preserved.”<sup>1</sup> His sentiment replicated what most segregationists were saying, but the notion that there might be some way out of the predicament beyond line-in-the-sand racist defiance and the complete abolition of public schools was more unconventional.

Coleman represented a brand of white supremacy much more resilient and savvy in its effectiveness than the proponents of total massive resistance. It was a type of bend-but-not-break segregation that sought to defy black progress without resorting to explicitly racist tactics. The end goal was the same—the maintenance of white supremacy. But leaders like Coleman who adhered to this more malleable brand of segregation recognized that outright racism was more susceptible to the attacks of modern movement activists and to the federal government’s reluctant but increasing willingness to demand adherence to the laws of the nation, including Supreme Court decisions like *Brown*. With the murder of Emmett Till, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the integration of Little Rock Central High School on the horizon, the doors to the civil rights movement were prepared to swing wide open. Thus, Coleman’s assertion of a way to avert desegregation by redrawing school district lines, rather than closing schools, represented his realization that the state could move away from being an openly racist regime while inherently maintaining racial distinctions.

In his book *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*, Joseph Crespino illustrates the perverse motives of white leaders, like Coleman, who engaged in “strategic ac-

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<sup>1</sup> James P. Coleman, “‘Meeting the School Crisis,’ An Address by Attorney General J. P. Coleman of Mississippi,” June 1, 1954, TV Station WLBT, Jackson, Mississippi, Box 273 (Civil Rights), Folder: Segregation, Thomas Abernethy Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford.

commodation” of the civil rights movement. If they were to retain power, they had to abandon unconcealed racism and acquiesce to some demands of the movement. Over time, “the emotional, overtly racist politics of massive resistance . . . gradually gave way—even in Mississippi—to more subtle, color-blind political language” that appealed to a growing national conservative movement.<sup>2</sup> “Color-blind” politics did not mean the elimination of racist prerogatives; rather, their reinforcement through measures that did not deal with racial power on the surface masked their intent.

In this analysis, previous arguments about Richard Nixon’s “Southern Strategy” that brought racist rednecks into the conservative, Republican fold are turned on their heads. Instead, the conservatism of the 1970s and 1980s emanated from the grassroots level in the South.<sup>3</sup> Crespino shows that white Mississippi was never monolithic, and he calls for more investigation into the diversity of the white experience as a means to reveal a more complete understanding of the civil rights movement. James P. Coleman mastered the manipulation of the calculated accommodation that Crespino describes.

Like Crespino, Anders Walker describes white efforts to thwart the modern civil rights movement in his monograph, *The Ghost of Jim Crow: How Southern Moderates Used Brown v. Board of Education to Stall Civil Rights*. Walker explores how men like Coleman “sought to counterbalance extremism and manage the desegregation crisis.” For those white leaders who eschewed the ranks of massive resistance, their goal was not to support the civil rights movement but “to assemble a response to *Brown v. Board of Education* that was peaceful, legal, and attuned to northern sensibilities.” Anders argues that they were savvy purveyors of a type of Jim Crow policy that was “aimed at preventing violence, preserving as much segregation as possible, and complying, formally, with the Supreme Court.”<sup>4</sup> Anders’ fundamental argument is convincing although some of his terminology and points require some honing.

As opposed to Crespino’s “strategic accommodation,” Walker refers to Coleman’s work as “strategic constitutionalism” in the context of *Brown*. It was “a peaceful, legalist response” meant to present a “progressive image of the South” while “curtailing the Court’s ruling.”

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Crespino. *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 4, 9, 19, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Anders Walker. *The Ghost of Jim Crow: How Southern Moderates Used Brown v. Board of Education to Stall Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3-4.

If Walker's argument slips, it is in the assertion that Coleman represented moderation and that his "work to end racial violence benefited blacks." Coleman's success was not a "moderate" victory for African Americans. If anything, Coleman molded a version of Jim Crow that was more dangerous and less susceptible to federal and activist attacks. Walker acknowledges that Coleman was "remarkably successful" and that his ilk "discreetly shifted the burden of constitutional change onto black shoulders, held them responsible for their plight, and meanwhile exaggerated the extent to which they suffered from illegitimacy, immorality, and other social ills."<sup>5</sup> Instead of a moderate stance, Coleman helped to forge a system of power that was more insidious than the proponents of massive, hardline resistance ever imagined.

James P. Coleman was born on a red-dirt farm in Choctaw County near Ackerman, Mississippi, on January 9, 1914. He worked his way through an undergraduate degree at the University of Mississippi and through the George Washington School of Law in 1939. Over the course of the next decade, his ascent in state politics included working for U. S. Representative Aaron L. Ford (D-Miss.) before becoming a district attorney and circuit court judge. In 1951, he was elected state attorney general and found himself at the forefront of the segregationist cause. As a committeeman for the Mississippi delegation to the Democratic National Convention in 1952, he kept the state from bolting the national party over a requirement to support the party's nominee for president. In 1948, Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and Governor Fielding Wright of Mississippi had led the States' Rights Democrats, or Dixiecrats, in forming their own segregationist party in response to the civil rights platform adopted by the delegates.<sup>6</sup> As was the case with the *Brown* decision, Coleman's commitment to the national ticket of the Democratic Party had nothing to do with a desire to dismantle Jim Crow in 1952. He felt he had a better chance of defending white supremacy in Mississippi with a seat at the national table.

As benign as that might sound, Coleman's stance was quite controversial for white Mississippi, which had exploded in outrage at the Supreme Court's decision. In the wake of *Brown*, white leaders in the Mississippi Delta founded the Citizens' Council, which grew to become the largest private, segregationist organization in the nation. Often re-

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<sup>5</sup> Walker, *The Ghost of Jim Crow*, 5, 47.

<sup>6</sup> John D'Emilio. *The Civil Rights Struggle: Leaders in Profile* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1979), 43.

ferred to as the “White Citizens’ Council,” the founders were so assured of their supremacy that they did not deem it necessary to describe their organization as “white.” They assumed that only white people could be legitimate citizens, so they named themselves the “Citizens’ Council.”

William J. Simmons was one of the most prominent leaders of the Citizens’ Council, and a few days after the *Brown* decision, he wrote to then-Governor Hugh White. Simmons told White that the Supreme Court decision was not just an assault on segregation in schools but an assault on segregation everywhere. Praising White for his “strong reaction in defense of the preservation of our society and our institutions,” Simmons was happy that White had created a committee to fight *Brown*, and he proposed a six-step, detailed plan to further defy the Supreme Court opinion. Of note, Simmons proposed the closing of all public schools that might face desegregation. “The time has come when we will do either one of two things. We will fight, or we will submit to racial amalgamation.” Two weeks later, that letter appeared in the *Jackson Daily News*, the largest newspaper in the state, and was forwarded to all state legislators, the Mississippi congressional delegation, and every southern governor.<sup>7</sup>

In an infamous segregationist treatise, Tom Brady, a Mississippi circuit court judge and leading philosopher for the Citizens’ Council, declared the day the *Brown* decision was handed down to be “Black Monday.” Addressing the Council in remarks that were printed in a sixteen-page pamphlet, Brady utilized segregationist rhetoric tied to religion when he asserted that “this Supreme Court seeks to set aside all the laws of eugenics and biology!”<sup>8</sup> In this context, Coleman’s idea that segregation could be defended in any way other than an all-out defiance of the federal government was much more than a debate over semantics.

Coleman’s philosophy was put to the test when he threw his hat in the ring for governor in 1955. A primary plank in his platform was the defense of segregation but by all legal means. In a state that led the nation in the total number of known lynchings between 1877 and 1950, or the equivalent of a lynching every six weeks for seventy-three years, his messaging did not foreshadow success, and he encountered

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<sup>7</sup> William J. Simmons to Hugh L. White, May 15, 1954, and William J. Simmons to Thomas G. Abernethy, June 1, 1954, both in Box 273 (Civil Rights), Folder: Segregation, Thomas Abernethy Collection, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi.

<sup>8</sup> “‘A Review of Black Monday’ by Judge Tom P. Brady of the Fourteenth Circuit Court District, Brookhaven, Miss. In an Address Made to the Indianola Citizens’ Council October 28th, 1954,” 16, Box 273 (Civil Rights), Folder: Segregation, Thomas Abernethy Collection.

significant opposition in the Democratic primary. Ten years away from the Voting Rights Act, voters remained nearly all-white and committed to their racist system of power. And the Democratic ticket in the race was crowded with former governor Fielding Wright as well as future governors Ross Barnett and Paul B. Johnson Jr., whose father had served as governor in the early 1940s.<sup>9</sup> Wright had the experience, and Barnett honed his renowned racist demagoguery, while Johnson decried the legacy of Hugh White. Coleman toed a different line.

Avoiding the issue of desegregation on the front end of his campaign, Coleman touted his toughness on crime and illegal gambling during his time as state attorney general and accused his opponents of being weak. During the campaign, Bill Minor, a journalist noted for his commitment to civil rights, touted Coleman's work, which had ironically inspired a few to take the law into their own hands. At a rally for Coleman, a group of "citizens of Monroe County armed themselves with shotguns and pistols and raided a honky-tonk containing slot machines and other contraband," which the vigilante group was proud to say "proves the absolute necessity for a law authorizing the people to recall public officials who either cannot or will not discharge their sworn duty."<sup>10</sup> While Coleman may not have been proud of that specific moment, he stayed on his message of law-and-order, a tactic that Richard Nixon took up with great skill a decade later. For his part, Coleman attempted to avoid the explicit discussion of race relations while guaranteeing white, racialized power, but he could not stay out of the racist fray.

On the stump in 1955, Coleman connected to his primary message from the start: "From this very moment we are beginning an unrelenting fight to see to it that the people—NOT THE BOSSES—will elect their Governor. This is one time we are going to have a people's election [original emphasis]." Coleman was not a populist, but he cast his opponents as part of the same political machine that had ruled Mississippi since the 1890 state constitution had instituted black disfranchisement and white political control. But by the third page of a sixteen-page address, he was compelled to talk about "SEGREGATION

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<sup>9</sup> D'Emilio, 43; Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>; "For release by the press from and after 6 P. M.—May 28. COLEMAN PUTS THE QUESTIONS TO HIS OPPONENTS PASCAGOULA, MISSISSIPPI May 28, 1955," Box 2, Folder: Coleman, J. P. (1/2) 1950-1959, Wilson F. Minor Collection, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville.

<sup>10</sup> "Coleman Puts the Questions to His Opponents."

AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS original emphasis],” as the Supreme Court held the full attention of black and white Mississippians in 1955.<sup>11</sup>

In that year with what became known as *Brown II*, the Supreme Court ruled that desegregation should come to public education with “all deliberate speed,” an intentional oxymoron since “deliberate” was slow and “speed” suggested quickness. The contradiction gave the white South time to formulate strategies for postponing school desegregation, which didn’t come to Mississippi until 1969 when the Supreme Court demanded compliance with *Brown* in its *Alexander v. Holmes* decision. Even before 1954, segregationists strategized on ways to blunt attacks on separate-but-equal education. As Coleman noted during his campaign, since 1946, the Mississippi legislature had spent \$65 million on buildings in an effort to shore up the state’s failure to comply with the dictates of separate-but-equal.<sup>12</sup> In the South, segregation was never meant to be equal, but the glaring discrepancies between white and black schools was a weak spot in the defense of white supremacy.

Taking aim again at a common segregationist target, Coleman first blamed the Supreme Court for ignoring the law and trying to make public schools come under the purview of the courts. “On the same day this decision was rendered, without a moment’s delay, I told the people of Mississippi that the Supreme Court would be unable to enforce this unreasonable decision upon an unwilling people.” Coleman continued and asserted that he “must point out that standing before you is the only candidate in this race who has had any official responsibility whatever in the last four years for the maintenance of segregation in this State [original emphasis].” He touted his televised defense of segregated education in 1954, pointing out that his opponents had not taken such a public stand.<sup>13</sup>

More than uttering empty words, Coleman had authorized every white attorney in Mississippi to fight desegregation, and he claimed that no civil rights lawsuit had ever been filed in Mississippi. “When you go to the polls on August 2, your ballot most certainly will determine the education of your children and the maintenance of segregation for the next four years, possibly for the next fifty years.” Then, Coleman made an audacious assertion: “I have said that those who propose to mix the races in our public schools had might as well try to

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<sup>11</sup> James P. Coleman, “Advance on J. P. Coleman Rally Speech To be delivered Tuesday night, May 10, 8:00 P.M.,” Box 2, Folder: Coleman, J. P. (1/2) 1950-1959, Wilson F. Minor Collection.

<sup>12</sup> “Advance on J. P. Coleman Rally Speech.”

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



dip the Atlantic dry with a teaspoon. I here and now give the people of Mississippi my solemn pledge that if I am elected Governor there will be no necessity to abolish the public schools, nor will there be any mixing of the races in those schools." Whether he could uphold that bargain remained to be seen, but he turned for the second half of his address to economics in Mississippi, law enforcement, public utilities regulation on natural gas and power companies, and old-age pensions.<sup>14</sup>

Coleman's platform, "A Program for Progress," emphasized his levelheadedness as attorney general when it came to the *Brown* decision. "As in all times past, I will be a TRUE FRIEND to ALL our educational efforts [original emphasis] . . . I already have a record on this subject. This is no task for the amateur or the hothead." But, over the course of the campaign, his opponents made sure that the century-old white southern arguments of nullification, interposition, and states' rights kept resurfacing.<sup>15</sup> Slavery and the sectional tensions between the North and South stood at the core of these racist theories.

For nullification, white Southerners argued that states could reject federal laws they deemed unconstitutional since the states created the federal government through their common consent. Interposition took the theory of nullification a step further and declared it was a state's duty to assert itself to reject federal laws that that state deemed unconstitutional. The old racist mantra of "states' rights" was at the heart of both ideas, rooted in the Tenth Amendment, which reserved for the states all powers not specifically delineated as the purview of the federal government. The Civil War, as well as state and federal courts, had rejected all these tactics, but, a century later, white Southerners continued to hide behind them.

Coleman recognized the authority of the federal government, but he was focused on Mississippi and tried to make his position clear: "I am a Democrat. I shall take no foolishness from any National Level politicians who are enemies of the South. At the same time, I most certainly shall do nothing to give aid or comfort to the Republican party which has proven in so many ways that it, too, continues to be unfriendly to the South." Instead, "I shall not spend my time trying to remedy what is wrong with the United States; I think the chief duty of a Governor is to try to correct what

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> "A Program of Progress: The J. P. Coleman Platform for Governor," Box 2, Folder: Coleman, J. P. (1/2) 1950-1959, Wilson F. Minor Collection.

is wrong in his own state. That is true state's rights."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, other segregationists held onto states' rights, nullification, and interposition and trumpeted them after the *Brown* decision. Coleman's ability to navigate these issues was about to determine his political future in 1955.

When the first primary for the Democratic nomination rolled around on August 2, 1955, Paul Johnson's attacks on Hugh White, the outgoing governor, had made an impact. Johnson won the first primary, but due to the crowded field, he did not garner the 50 percent of the vote needed to take the primary outright. To the surprise of some, neither Fielding Wright nor Ross Barnett made the second round. Instead, James P. Coleman was in the runoff. Johnson's negative messaging had had an impact but not necessarily a positive one. Some like Governor White did "not believe there has ever been a nastier campaign conducted in Mississippi than Paul Johnson conducted," and three weeks later, Coleman won the nomination on August 23. Without a Republican opponent in the general election, Coleman was the governor-elect, but the questions of states' rights, interposition, and nullification continued to rear their ugly heads.<sup>17</sup> Coleman stepped into the middle of it all.

After the *Brown II* decision, Judge Tom Brady of "Black Monday" infamy, U. S. Congressman John Bell Williams, and U. S. Senator James Eastland—three of the state's most prominent, outspoken segregationists—released a statement supporting nullification and interposition as effective tactics of last recourse for states. Coleman disagreed. In an "unfortunate" choice of words, as Congressman Williams described it, "the Governor-elect, in what must have been a rare moment of impetuosity, chose to use the term 'poppycock' in referring to them." In Coleman's mind, the racist states' rights arguments were tied to a century-old question of Confederate history that the Civil War had decided, and for Coleman, those tactics threatened the white South with federal intervention in its affairs. Williams rebuffed Coleman's logic; he believed nullification was not linked to secession: "Nor can it be said with reason that interposition—the legal and peaceful means of resisting unconstitutional usurpation of States' rights—would bring Federal troops to the interposing states." Williams argued the only way to fight the *Brown* decision was

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> William M. Whittington to Hugh White, August 25, 1955, and Hugh White to William M. Whittington, August 26, 1955, both in Box 310, Folder: Politics—Letters to Hugh White 1952-1956, William Whittington Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford; D'Emilio, 43-44.

through interposition and nullification, but Coleman did not back down.<sup>18</sup>

As the acting attorney general and governor-elect, Coleman prepared his inaugural address to the state legislature on the topic of nullification and interposition. In an unexpected turn, Coleman wrote to James Silver, a longtime friend, for help. Silver was a history professor at the University of Mississippi who made headlines seven years later when he gave his presidential address to the 1963 Southern Historical Association annual meeting and coined the racist system of power in Mississippi as "The Closed Society." For those efforts, Silver was forced out of the state and took a position at the University of Notre Dame, but in 1956, Silver's later reputation had not coalesced in the public's eye.<sup>19</sup>

For his speech to the legislature, Coleman hoped Silver could articulate an argument against nullification. "I do not want to put excess labor upon you, but if you can help me again lay this ghost, now almost a hundred years after its final death, I shall be deeply grateful." The next day, Silver agreed to do whatever he could.<sup>20</sup> As his inauguration and legislative address neared, Coleman revealed much of his attitude towards the challenges facing Jim Crow Mississippi. To be clear, Coleman had no desire to undermine the system of power that guaranteed white supremacy, but he did believe in a more sophisticated, nuanced, and durable manner to defend white power in the state beyond total massive resistance to any black advancement.

At his inauguration in January 1956, Coleman recognized that white Mississippi faced a moment in history much like it had at the end of the era of Reconstruction. "So, I say to you, the Members of this joint assembly, that probably more than at any other time since 1876, the people need you; they realize they need you." For Coleman, the answer was "GOOD GOVERNMENT AND HONEST LAW ENFORCEMENT [original emphasis]," not an all-or-nothing focus on the defense of Jim Crow. After dealing with his vision for normal state business, Coleman broached

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<sup>18</sup> John Bell Williams, "Statement of Congressman John Bell Williams, Thursday, Dec. 15, 1955," Box 2, Folder: Coleman, J. P. (1/2) 1950-1959, Wilson F. Minor Collection.

<sup>19</sup> Hodding Carter to James Silver, March 20, 1962, and James Silver to Hodding Carter, March 20, 1962, both in Box 22, Correspondence: 1962: O - Typing. 1963: A - R. Folder: Hodding Carter: Correspondence: 1962: S. (January - June), Hodding and Betty Werlein Carter Papers, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville.

<sup>20</sup> James P. Coleman to James Silver, December 19, 1955, and James Silver to J. P. Coleman, December 20, 1955, both in Box 23. Folder 12: Correspondence w/ J. P. Coleman, James W. Silver Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford.

the topic of public education.<sup>21</sup> His argument centered on what the state had done and needed to do to meet the dictates of separate-but-equal.

Foremost, Coleman knew the state had to spend more money on education. Although dollars had been infused into both black and white schools since 1940, that funding remained unequal, Coleman admitted. In 1954, one of the most obvious indicators was the fact that white teachers were making \$2,447 annually while black teachers only made \$1,184 per year. The governor believed in the "SEPARATION OF THE RACES [original emphasis]," but per sixty years of Supreme Court jurisprudence, separate had to be equal even if the white South's intention was to guarantee that it never was going to be.<sup>22</sup> Otherwise, segregation might fall in the face of assaults by the likes of the NAACP.

To reemphasize his commitment to Jim Crow, Coleman declared segregation had been confirmed by "the experience of ninety years . . . to be for the welfare of all concerned." Then, addressing his message to the entire nation, Coleman stood by his campaign pledge to keep public schools open and defy any integration. The governor was confident that, after four years of his administration, segregation in Mississippi was going to be healthy for his successor. After the farce and fiasco of a trial that had freed the murderers of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in 1955, Coleman promised "that during the next four years the full weight of the government will unfailingly be used to the end that Mississippi will be a State of law and not of violence."<sup>23</sup> In closing, the governor wanted to assuage national doubts.

Ignoring the reality and history of lynching in the state, Coleman emphasized that "the white people of Mississippi are not a race of negro killers." Instead, he noted, "Official statistics for the State of Mississippi for 1954 show that in that year, the last for which we have figures available, eight white people were killed by negroes and only six negroes were killed by whites, while 182 negroes were killed by members of their own race." For Coleman, the bottom line was the fact that "there were thirty times as many negroes killed by members of their own race as by members of the white race." In Coleman's mind, such statistics proved

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<sup>21</sup> James P. Coleman, "Inaugural Address of Governor J. P. Coleman, Tuesday, January 17, 1956 (for release for all news purposes from and after 12:30 p.m., January 17<sup>th</sup>)," Box 1, Folder 8: Coleman 1956-1957, Kenneth Toler Collection, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville.

<sup>22</sup> Coleman, "Inaugural Address."

<sup>23</sup> Coleman, "Inaugural Address."

that white people were not a threat to black Mississippians. Then, emphasizing *de facto* segregation in the North, Coleman called out the ambiguity of the *Brown* decision in terms of its enforcement but promised to help blacks in Mississippi when they had “problems which deserve the assistance of the state government.”<sup>24</sup> One month later, Coleman agreed to bring a similar address to the Mississippi Historical Society.

This time, the governor broached “The Origins of the Constitution of 1890.” Coleman wanted to call a constitutional convention to draft a new version of the state’s governing document and remove explicit, racist language and intent. As always, his goal was not to undermine white supremacy but to make it more durable in the face of activist attacks. Again, Coleman turned to James Silver, and the University of Mississippi professor was glad someone in the governor’s position was going to give a professional paper, which few politicians ever attempted.<sup>25</sup> And Silver had an opportunity to share with the governor a version of Reconstruction history that was controversial for most white Southerners.

After talking to Charlotte Capers, the director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Silver put together some materials for Coleman. Ultimately, Silver argued “it was corruption among the whites, dangling for Negro votes, from 1875 to 1890 that was the basic cause of the calling of the convention” to broker black disfranchisement. When a farmer’s movement arose and the one-party system of white Democrat rule was threatened, Silver argued, black voting became important, and the Convention of 1890 was meant to suppress that vote.<sup>26</sup> Formed for the explicit purpose of black disfranchisement, the 1890 Constitution was susceptible to assault due to the demands of the Fifteenth Amendment not to deny the right to vote based on race. Therefore, with Silver’s help, Coleman declared that the state needed to change its governing document, but the legislature’s opinion was another matter.

Coleman’s attempt to call a constitutional convention narrowly failed. Instead, the state legislature took the opportunity to announce its position on the issues of states’ rights. As had happened in every southern state, Mississippi legislators adopted a resolution “invoking the historic

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> James P. Coleman to James Silver, December 10, 1956, and James Silver to James P. Coleman, December 11, 1956, both in Box 23, Folder 12: Correspondence w/ J. P. Coleman, James W. Silver Collection, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi; D’Emilio, 44.

<sup>26</sup> James W. Silver to James P. Coleman, December 18, 1956, Box 23, Folder 12: Correspondence w/ J. P. Coleman, James W. Silver Collection.

doctrine of interposition to protect the sovereignty of this and the other states of the Union” after the *Brown* decision. The all-white legislature decried “the usurpation and encroachment on the reserved powers of the states by the Supreme Court” and declared that “its decisions of May 17, 1954, and May 31, 1955, and all similar decisions are in violation of the constitutions of the United States and the State of Mississippi.”<sup>27</sup> With the support of Governor Coleman, the legislature then created what became one of the most dangerous, state-funded segregationist organizations in American history—the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission.

In 1956, with a biennial appropriation of \$250,000, the Sovereignty Commission set out “to protect the sovereignty of . . . Mississippi . . . from encroachment thereon by the federal government.” Along with investigating civil rights activities, the Commission engaged in a propaganda campaign designed to obscure the reality of race relations in the state, and Coleman signed the Commission into law and served as its chairman. The Sovereignty Commission proved to be an important, state-mandated ally in the maintenance of white power, and the Citizens’ Council welcomed the state agency into the segregationist fold. Writing to Ney Gore, who had been named the first director of the Commission, the founder of the Citizens’ Council, Robert Patterson, remarked on the large number of members they had in common and encouraged Gore to call on him any time in the fight “to maintain states’ rights and racial integrity.” In turn, Gore affirmed that the Council’s support was going to “be invaluable to us” and established an “informal coalition” with deep pockets and racist motives.<sup>28</sup>

Coleman supported the mission of the Sovereignty Commission from the beginning. The governor believed the racist spy agency could work behind the scenes to ensure the stability of white supremacy without making public waves, but he stirred more controversy when he opposed siphoning off some of the Commission’s state funds to support the work of the Citizens’ Council. John Herbers, a United Press staff correspondent,

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<sup>27</sup> *Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 125*, February 29, 1956, Box 7516, Folder: Attorney General Correspondence: Joe T. Patterson State Sovereignty Commission 1956, Mississippi Attorney-General’s Office. Correspondence-Subject, 1931-1980, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson.

<sup>28</sup> Yasuhiro Katagiri. *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States’ Rights* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 6; Robert B. Patterson to Ney M. Gore Jr., June 15, 1956, Identification #99-40-0-152-1-1-1; Ney M. Gore Jr., to Robert B. Patterson, June 19, 1956, Identification #99-40-0-151-1-1-1; and Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, *Minutes*, June 20, 1956, Identification #99-13-0-4-3-1-1, all in Sovereignty Commission Records, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson.

reported that the move to support the Council with Commission dollars was going to pass the legislature “despite a blistering condemnation by Gov. J. P. Coleman, who had charged some members were afraid to vote against it because it bears a segregation tag.” His opposition was not about his distaste for the mission of the Commission or the Council but “because it ‘was started as a raw grab for political power’ and would permit use of public money by private organizations in violation of the Constitution.” A prominent Council lawyer and future president of the American Bar Association, John Satterfield, believed the funding was going to pass constitutionality because it “makes use of public funds for a public purpose.”<sup>29</sup> That logic assumed that the public was white and ignored the fact that almost half the population in Mississippi was African American.

In the end, Coleman could not ward off the use of state funds for the private purposes of the Citizens’ Council. Before those funds were cut off in 1965, the state contributed \$193,500 to the Council’s coffers through the Sovereignty Commission.<sup>30</sup> True to his word, though, Coleman was able to prevent the closure and desegregation of any public schools in Mississippi as governor. Jim Crow remained intact, and Coleman seemed to have found a way to preserve the racist system of power in the state without resorting to the defiance that had marked much of white supremacy. There were, however, other challenges over the course of his four years in office.

Amidst a rising tide of civil rights activism, Coleman acquiesced to the desegregation of the Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital in Jackson, to the chagrin of the Citizens’ Council, but Coleman’s decision thwarted, as he saw it, an unnecessary confrontation with the federal government, which ran the VA. Through his Sovereignty Commission operatives, he orchestrated the tragic story of Clyde Kennard’s doomed effort to integrate Mississippi Southern College (now the University of Southern Mississip-

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<sup>29</sup> John Herbers, “‘Blistered’ Council Fund Up for Vote,” United Press, April 17, 1958, Box 1-A. Folder 16: WCC—J. P. Coleman, A. E. Cox Papers, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville.

<sup>30</sup> Attachment, “Grants Given Beginning July 1, 1960 through June 30, 1962,” in Albert Jones to Joe Patterson, August 24, 1962, and Attachment, “Proposed Budget: Expenditures for July 1962,” in Albert Jones to Joe Patterson, August 24, 1962, both in Box 7516, Folder 1 of 4: Attorney General’s Correspondence: Joe T. Patterson Sovereignty Commission 1959-1962, Mississippi Attorney General’s Office, Correspondence—Subject, 1931-1980, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson; Neil R. McMillen. *The Citizens’ Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-64* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 337-338.

pi) with little public awareness, and, facing an international outcry, he invited the FBI to investigate the 1959 lynching of Mack Charles Parker.<sup>31</sup> These all stood as seminal moments that turned into segregationist victories during Coleman's tenure, but despite the success of his tactics, the tide turned with the 1960 election of Ross Barnett as governor.

Buoyed by the Citizens' Council, Barnett heralded an administration built on racial terrorism in the state, reminiscent of the dark days of James K. Vardaman and Theodore Bilbo, but Barnett's reign was short-lived. After James Meredith's successful integration of the University of Mississippi in 1962, white Mississippians came to realize that they were going to have to heed Coleman's example and agree to a modicum of black progress to preserve white dominance and privilege. Although Coleman ran for governor again in 1964, he lost in the Democratic primary run-off to Paul Johnson Jr., who labeled him a "Kennedy liberal," but Coleman must have been in the back of Johnson's mind when he delivered his inaugural address. Johnson surprised most observers, making a "pledge to strengthen Mississippi's ties with the rest of the nation and to shun ignorance, prejudice and hate."<sup>32</sup> Like Coleman, Johnson was not about to abdicate the throne of white supremacy, but he continued to put the state on a path that guaranteed the long-term stability of a muted version of Jim Crow, which has proven impossible to eradicate over the past fifty years.

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<sup>31</sup> "August 9, 1956, JACKSON VA HOSPITAL INTEGRATION," Box 1, Folder 6: Citizens Council 1950-1957, Kenneth Toler Collection; Zack J. VanLandingham, "Clyde Kennard, aka Clyde Kenard, Clyde Kinnard, Clyde Smith," December 17, 1958, Box 7516, Folder 3 of 4: Attorney General's Correspondence: Joe T. Patterson Sovereignty Commission 1959-1960," Mississippi Attorney General's Office. Correspondence—Subject, 1931-1980, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson; D'Emilio, 43-44.

<sup>32</sup> Claude Sitton, "New Mississippi Governor Gives Anti-Hatred Vow at Inaugural," *New York Times*, January 22, 1964, Walter Lord Papers, Box 9, Folder: Newspaper Clippings 7-63 – 5-64, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Massachusetts; D'Emilio, 44; Robert Luckett, *Joe T. Patterson and the White South's Dilemma: Evolving Resistance to Black Advancement* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).



