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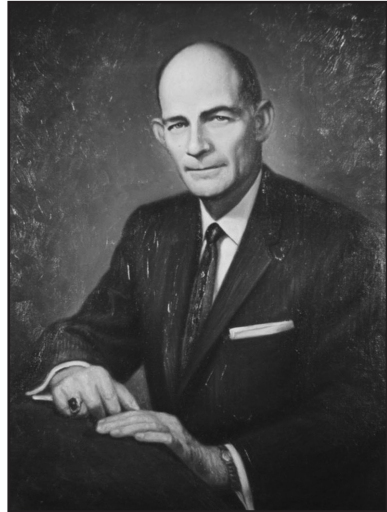
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## Master of Racial Myths & Massive Resistance: Governor Paul B. Johnson Jr. (1964-1968)

by Patricia Michelle Boyett

The twelve-year-old black boy shook with sobs in the front pew of the First Union Missionary Baptist Church in Meridian, Mississippi, and collapsed in grief on his mother's shoulder. He had last seen his brother James nearly seven weeks earlier, on Sunday, June 21, 1964. James, his friend and fellow civil rights activist Mickey, and Andrew, who had just arrived in Mississippi for the Freedom Summer project, planned to investigate a church burning in Neshoba County. Young Ben begged them to take him along. He had marched with James and Mickey in protests; he had even been arrested, but James refused this time. He promised to be back soon. Ben waited for James to return—for forty-four days, until August 4, when FBI agents dug the bodies of his brother and the two white activists from an earthen dam.<sup>1</sup>



*Paul B. Johnson Jr., Courtesy,  
Mississippi Department of Archives  
and History*

The mourners could not know it yet, but the killings of James

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<sup>1</sup> John Blake, “‘Mississippi Burning’ Murders Still Smolders for One Brother,” *CNN News*, June 28, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/06/28/us/mississippi-murders/index.html>; Hank Klibanoff, “The Lasting Impact of a Civil Rights Icon’s Murder,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 2008, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-lasting-impact-of-a-civil-rights-icons-murder-92172099>.

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Chaney, Michael (Mickey) Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman contributed monumentally to a major turning point that occurred in the summer of 1964. Some historians and journalists portrayed Governor Paul B. Johnson Jr., Mississippi's fifty-fourth governor, as one of the southern moderates fostering that shift. Upon Governor Johnson's death in 1985, *The Washington Post* memorialized him as a bold leader "who deplored violence" and "whose moderate policies were credited with a decrease in violence that led to desegregation." *The New York Times* acknowledged that Johnson campaigned on a segregationist platform but contended that once in office, he "guided Mississippi into desegregation" and attributed his "moderate policies . . . with helping to end violence in the struggle of black people to gain civil rights." In a more nuanced interpretation, historian Joseph Crespino theorizes that the assassination of John F. Kennedy, demonstrating "the dangerous anarchical potential of racial extremism," likely "chastened" Johnson and argues that he transformed into a moderate during his tenure. In contrast, David C. Carter contends that Johnson's reputation as a "moderate" compared to Governor Ross Barnett reflected a transition in "style (and intelligence)" rather than "substance."<sup>2</sup> Johnson was not chastened; he was clever.

A master of racial myths and massive resistance, Governor Johnson sustained a world of white privilege even as Jim Crow fell. As lieutenant governor, he solidified his reputation as a staunch segregationist when he blocked James Meredith from enrolling at the University of Mississippi and capitalized on that formidable image to seize the governor's seat. Once in power, Johnson remained devoted to white supremacy, but he redesigned the battleground. Most whites, he knew, ignored the daily oppressions blacks confronted. But violence attracted the media, elicited public outrage, and forced federal intervention. If he could diminish Klan violence, he could sustain the white supremacist state. When violence erupted, he often inverted the narrative using common racist propaganda that portrayed white Mississippians as the victims of black criminals and communists—the twin bogeyman that haunted white

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<sup>2</sup> First and second quotes, "Ex Mississippi Gov. Paul Johnson," *The Washington Post*, October 15, 1985, digital edition. Third and fourth quotes, "Paul B. Johnson Jr. Dies at 69," *The New York Times*, October 15, 1985, digital edition. Fifth and sixth quotes, Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 117, 115-119, 125-126, 132-137, 143, 223. Seventh, eighth, and ninth quotes, David C. Carter, *The Music Has Gone Out of the Civil Rights Movement: Civil Rights and the Johnson Administration, 1965-1968* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), Kindle edition.

America, and he depicted young activists as their pawns. Portraying himself as the guardian of law and order, he targeted both Klansmen and activists. Certainly, his cooperation with the FBI to investigate Klan killings helped deliver a crushing blow to the hooded order, which contributed to the dismantling of the most brutal edges of the white supremacist state. But Governor Johnson was no moderate. He remained as committed to white supremacy as Klansmen. He was simply smarter.<sup>3</sup>

Born in Hattiesburg to Paul Burney and Corrine on January 23, 1916, Paul B. Johnson Jr. came of age in a town battling with its racial complexities. Eight years prior to Johnson's birth, Hattiesburg patriachs seceded from Perry County and named their new county Forrest after Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Klan's first Grand Wizard. As the railroad hub and economic center of south Mississippi, Hattiesburg moguls recruited the needed black labor force with higher wages and better living conditions. The emergence of strong black working and middle classes fostered the growth of radicals who relied on the rope over the dollar to sustain racial control. Hattiesburg ranked 9th out of 210 Mississippi towns for lynching. Although occasionally townspeople condemned lynching, racial justice eluded the city. When Johnson was twelve, five hundred whites demanded authorities investigate the lynching of Emanuel McCallum. Despite substantial evidence, the grand jurors failed to deliver indictments.<sup>4</sup>

Fourteen years later in 1942, Paul Sr. struggled to mitigate the federal intervention lynching caused during his second year as governor. During the debacle, Paul Jr. fought in World War II, rising from private

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<sup>3</sup> The author makes a similar argument in her book. See Patricia Michelle Boyett, *Right to Revolt: The Crusade for Racial Justice in Mississippi's Central Piney Woods* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Biography/Historical Sketch, Paul B. Johnson Family Papers, McCain Library & Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, [hereinafter cited as PBJ bio and PBJ Papers; and all collections housed at McCain Library & Archives, cited as McCain, USM]; George R. Watson, "Historical Hattiesburg," 1974, City documents (1884-1960), A-17, Reel #113, Hattiesburg Municipal Records, McCain, USM; The National Lists: Places of Death, *The Lynching Century: African Americans Who Died in Racial Violence in the United States*, <http://www.geocities.com/Cosmosum/Base/8507/NLPlaces1.htm>, [hereinafter cited as The National Lists, *The Lynching Century*]; Elizabeth Hines and Eliza Steelwater, Project Historical American Lynching Data Collection Project, <http://users.bestweb.bestweb.net/~rg/lyncihgs/Mississippi%20Lynchings.htm>; Newspaper Clippings, Lynching, Hattiesburg, *The Anti-Lynching Campaign Reports*, Pt. 7, Ser. A, Reel 13, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, The Library of Congress, Washington D. C., [hereinafter cited as NAACP Papers]; Special Session of Grand Jury Report, January 10, 1929, *Forrest County: Minute Books Circuit Court*, vol. 9, 549, Circuit Court, Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

to captain in the Marine Corps. Before shipping out, he graduated from the University of Mississippi, passed the bar, and married his college sweetheart, Dot Powers. While Johnson fought in the Pacific for the Four Freedoms articulated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a mob in Shubuta castrated two black teenagers and hanged them. Governor Johnson condemned the killings. Days later, he dispatched the National Guard and state troopers in a failed effort to stop the lynching of Howard Wash in Laurel. Johnson demanded the grand jury investigate, but it neglected to even mention the lynching. President Roosevelt, under pressure from the black press's Double V campaign and the prospect of Japan using the lynchings to expose America's hypocrisy, had FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover dispatch agents to Laurel, marking the first time since Reconstruction that the federal government intervened in the nearly six hundred lynchings in Mississippi. Although the governor told a reporter that he welcomed the FBI, he complained: Northerners failed to understand "our feelings toward the Negro"; that "we'd rather die" than dine with "Negroes." Despite a vigorous federal prosecution, the all-white jury acquitted the killers.<sup>5</sup> The elder Johnson set a precedent that his son followed: condemn lynch mobs in the interest of mitigating federal intervention but defend white supremacy.

Paul Jr. faced deeper challenges as he lived in an era of a bold Civil Rights Movement and a powerful Klan. After thrice losing his bid for governor, he served as lieutenant governor under Governor Barnett (1961-1964). Barnett became famous for his vulgar racial rhetoric, particularly in response to James Meredith, a black Air Force veteran, who

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<sup>5</sup> Quoting Victor H. Bernstein, "The Story of 3 Lynchings—And How Mississippi Does Nothing About Them Is Another Matter," n. d., stamped October 28, Federal Bureau of Investigation Report, Howard Wash FBI File, #44661-A, Federal Bureau of Investigation Central Records System, Washington D. C., copy in author's possession. For investigation, prosecution, and results, see full Wash FBI File and Newspaper clippings, October 1942, and NAACP correspondence, in Anti-Lynching Campaign Report, Pt. 7, Ser. A-II, Reel 27, NAACP Papers. For Johnson's background, see PBJ Bio, PBJ Papers. For World War II, see Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "The Four Freedoms," Franklin Roosevelt's Annual Address to Congress, Washington D. C., January 6, 1941, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, Hyde Park, New York, <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu:8000/od4frees.html>; Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4, 191-196, 201-220. For federal intervention history, see Michael R. Belknap, *Federal Law and Southern Order* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), xix-xxxi and 1-26; and *U. S. v. Shipp*, 214 US 386 (1909). For lynching statistics, see lynchings by year, Douglas O Linder, Famous American Trials, 2012, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchstats.html>.

filed a racial discrimination lawsuit against the University of Mississippi when it denied him admission. After a sixteen-month battle, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered Meredith's admission. In September 1962, using the discredited interposition theory, Barnett physically blocked Meredith from entering the university twice. The U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals issued a restraining order forbidding all state officials from interfering with Meredith's registration. Meredith, accompanied by Department of Justice official John Doar and U.S. Marshal James P. McShane, made a third attempt on September 26. Johnson, backed by twenty unarmed state troopers, guarded the gates of the university and denied Meredith entrance. When McShane shoved Johnson, the lieutenant governor stood his ground and raised his fist; that image hardened his reputation as a guardian of white supremacy. On October 1, under the protection of the Mississippi National Guard, federalized by President Kennedy, Meredith desegregated Ole Miss amidst a riot that left two dead and hundreds injured. The Fifth Circuit charged Johnson and Barnett with criminal contempt, but it eventually dismissed the case. Johnson capitalized on his stand against Meredith to launch his gubernatorial bid in 1963 with the slogan "Stand Tall with Paul."<sup>6</sup>

Johnson centered his campaign on preserving white supremacy. During a speech to the Jackson Citizens Council, he called on citizens in every county to join the councils, "the only nation-wide organization (with its birthplace in Mississippi) dedicated to preserving the integrity of the white race." His five-point plan included collaborating with southern leaders to remove the Kennedys from office; opposing school integration; enlarging the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (MSSC); and disentangling federal funds from federal proscriptions that "endanger our sovereign rights to govern ourselves." After defeating former governor James P. Coleman in the primary, Johnson worried that hatred of the Kennedys aided Republican challenger, Rubel Phillips. Appealing to racial fears, Johnson warned: "A two-party system in Mississippi would divide" whites "into two political camps and thereby

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<sup>6</sup> Quoting Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi* (New York: Nation Books, 2008), Kindle edition. For campaign, see "Stand Tall Paul and Carroll Win," and "Phillips Carries Free State Jones," both in *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 6, 1963. For contempt charges, see U. S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit - 330 F.2d 369 (5th Cir. 1963). For Meredith case, see *Meredith v. Fair*, 83 S Ct. 10 (1962). For Meredith's story, see Charles W. Eagles, *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

place the balance of power in the hands of the Negro minority.” On November 5, Johnson won in a landslide. Seventeen days later, the assassination of President Kennedy thrust a southerner, Lyndon Baines Johnson, into the presidency. To the surprise of many, President Johnson vowed to pass the pending Civil Rights Act that would prohibit segregation, enforce *Brown*, and forbid discrimination in the workforce. Governor Johnson also shocked many when his inaugural speech on January 21 focused on law and order. “Mississippi,” he declared, “must acquiesce to social and political change . . . hate, or prejudice, or ignorance will not lead Mississippi while I sit in the Governor’s chair.”<sup>7</sup> However, Johnson wielded the weapons of law and order against civil rights activists too. His masterful use of nonviolent massive resistance imperiled the success of the Movement as much as Klan terror.

Johnson’s hometown of Hattiesburg provided him with the blueprint for his massive resistance strategy. In January, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) launched Freedom Days in Hattiesburg, in which eligible black voters tested registrar Theron Lynd’s compliance with the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruling to cease discriminatory registration procedures. In response, the Mississippi Highway Patrol (MHP), Mayor Claude Pittman, and local law enforcement officials gathered information from informants, briefed Governor Johnson, and implemented a plan to appropriate the Movement’s nonviolent strategy. Lynd admitted prospective voters at a sluggish pace. Officers arrested activists who violated the laws, and court officials convicted them, but peacefully and selectively to diminish nationwide media coverage and mitigate federal intervention. MSSC inspectors spied on activists. Local newspapers published the names of protestors so white bosses, landlords, and businessmen could fire, evict, and refuse to conduct business with them. It proved a clever counter-reaction because most

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<sup>7</sup> First and second quotes, PBJ speech, May 17, 1963, Jackson Citizens Council, Jackson, Mississippi, Ser. II, Subser. 4, PBJ Papers. Third and fourth quotes, Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 89. Fifth and sixth quotes, Governor Paul B. Johnson Jr., January 21, 1964, *Mississippi Senate Journal*, 1964, 37-38. Lyndon Baines Johnson, speech, November 27, 1963, *American Experience, The Presidents*, PBS, [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/36\\_1\\_johnson/psources/ps\\_firstspeech.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/36_1_johnson/psources/ps_firstspeech.html). See also, John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 211; United States, Civil Rights Act 1964 (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Print Office, 1969); “Stand Tall Paul and Carroll Win,” and “Phillips Carries Free State Jones,” both in *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 6, 1963.



Americans failed to understand the detrimental impact of nonviolent massive resistance. Still, Freedom Days garnered some attention and increased black registration. Building on the success, SNCC and COFO organized Freedom Summer, recruiting some one thousand mostly white college students to register black voters and teach in freedom schools.<sup>8</sup>

Governor Johnson vowed to suppress both Freedom Summer's "invasion" by an "army of agitators" and the rise of a new Klan. Immediately after his inauguration, Johnson commanded all MHP officers who belonged to the Klan to become informants. Many complied; others sustained their loyalty to their racist brethren. Through his informants, Johnson learned that Sam Bowers, a Mississippi member of the Original Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Louisiana, led a faction of Mississippians in February to create the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi. Bowers, the Imperial Wizard, established the headquarters in his hometown of Laurel. He quickly built the White Knights into the most powerful Klan in the state and planned to launch a war against Freedom Summer. Johnson shared the information with the FBI.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Johnson designed the "policed freedom of movement" plan after the Hattiesburg model, which legislators approved. Johnson secured the right to issue police powers to the MHP to suppress racial clashes. He permitted city leaders to assign curfews and restrain people's movements, pool their resources to suppress mob violence,

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<sup>8</sup> Fact Sheet: Hattiesburg, Mississippi, n. d., 1964, Ser. 15, Reel 38, Sandy Leigh, Hattiesburg Report, February 11, 1964, Ser. 7, Reel 15, and Hattiesburg Report, January 22, & 27, 1964, Ser. 7, Reel 15, all in Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972, Martin Luther King Center, Atlanta, Georgia, [hereinafter cited as SNCC Papers]; A. D. Morgan to T. B. Birdsong and R. L. Morgan, January 22, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 10, PBJ Papers; Elliott Chaze, *Hattiesburg American*, January 22 and February 8, 1964.

<sup>9</sup> Quoting "Paul Says State Ready For Invasion," *The Laurel Leader-Call*, May 14, 1964. FBI Summary Report, February 3, 1965, Bowers FBI File, vol. 2, #157-18-115, 10, 72, Vernon F. Dahmer Federal Bureau of Investigation File, Robert Helfrich Papers, McCain, USM, [hereinafter cited as Helfrich Papers]. For the presence of various Klan groups in the Central Piney Woods and Mississippi at large, see U. S. House, 89<sup>th</sup> Congress, *Activities of Ku Klux Klan of the United States*, index, 55, 58, 59, 62, 67-69, 76-77. See also, U. S. House, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, *The Present Day Ku Klux Klan Movement Report*, Pt. 2, 153-154. For suggestions about Johnson's mindset about the Klan, see Governor Paul B. Johnson Jr., January 21, 1964, *Mississippi Senate Journal*, 1964, 37-38, and Erle Johnston to Governor Johnson, May 1, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 9, and A. D. Morgan to Johnson, March 12, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 10, both in PBJ Papers. See also, George Saxon, interview by Reid Stoner Derr, June 3, 1993, digital file, Mississippi Oral History Project, the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg [hereinafter cited as MOHP]. For Bowers's planned war against Freedom Summer, see "Imperial Executive Order," May 3, 1964, Klan Misc. Info., Helfrich Papers.

and raise fines and extend jail sentences for lawbreakers. Johnson's Commissioner of Public Safety T. B. Birdsong implemented an "intelligence network" that created a flow of information about every local Movement's meeting places and plans, ordered collections of photographs and fingerprints of every arrested activist, and encouraged mass arrests. Birdsong cautioned all officers to avoid violent arrests and suggested officers host civic meetings informing citizens of the repercussions of disturbing the racial order. To mitigate federal intervention, legislators made it unlawful to file false complaints with federal authorities.<sup>10</sup>

Klansmen jeopardized Johnson's strategy when they decided to murder Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman, which intensified the Movement, media attention, and federal intervention. The three vanished on June 21, 1964, after Deputy Cecil Price arrested them and released them from jail at 10:00 p.m. On June 23, J. Edgar Hoover informed President Johnson that FBI agents found their burned-out vehicle. The parents of Goodman and Schwerner flew to Washington, D.C. to pressure President Johnson and their Congressmen to act. The NAACP planned to initiate demonstrations in the nation's capital. Mickey's wife, Rita, demanded the president launch a full-scale investigation and send "scores of federal marshals . . . to Mississippi" to protect every activist.<sup>11</sup>

President Johnson had no plans to supply enough federal marshals to protect every activist, for he knew the white South would perceive that act as akin to Reconstruction. Rather, he used all his considerable political skills to broker a collaborative investigation between Mississippi and the FBI. In his many conversations with Governor Johnson, the president relied on their shared southern culture, such as the exchange of pleasantries, to move the governor toward cooperation. He guided Johnson to meet with former CIA director Allen Dulles, who he

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<sup>10</sup> Quoting T. B. Birdsong to All Law Enforcement Officers, June 9, 1964, Charles Marx Papers, McCain, USM. *Mississippi Free Press*, June 20, 1964; "State Officials Develop Anti-Violence Methods," *Hattiesburg American*, June 24, 1964; "Paul Says State Ready For Invasion," *Laurel Leader-Call*, May 14, 1964; "State Prepared for Influx of Students," *Hattiesburg American*, June 19, 1964; Current Status of Mississippi Legislation, n. d., Matthew Zwierling Collection, McCain, USM; Kenneth Toler, "Governor Seeks Power for Patrol," *The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution*, March 8, 1964, Ser. 15, Reel 38, SNCC Papers.

<sup>11</sup> Quoting Cagin and Dray, Kindle edition. "Lyndon Johnson and J. Edgar Hoover on 23 June 1964," Tape WH6406.14, Citations #3837 and #3838, Presidential Recordings Digital Edition [Mississippi Burning and the Passage of the Civil Rights Act, vol. 8, ed. Kent B. Germany and David C. Carter] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–), <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/9080016>, [hereinafter cited as LBJ Recording]; Johnson and Hoover, Tape WH6406.14, Citation #3853, LBJ Recording.

insisted would serve as “an impartial, objective observer” in assessing how the president might assist. President Johnson asserted, “It’s just imperative that we work together as closely as we can with all the resources of the state and the local people . . . [to] see that the law is observed and that we avoid any violence.” Within weeks, the president and Hoover reestablished an FBI office in Jackson, infiltrated the state with agents, and sent hundreds of naval officers to drain swamps in search of the bodies. President Johnson also continued to emphasize to Governor Johnson that activists and politicians constantly pressured him to flood Mississippi with marshals, but he considered it best to rely on the collaborative federal and state relationship. Though he delivered the message in a friendly manner, the veiled threat of shifting federal intervention into occupation was surely not lost on the governor.<sup>12</sup>

Governor Johnson was not the President’s pawn. He wanted to avoid federal occupation and thus accepted the cooperation with the FBI as a necessary compromise. To his relief, Hoover had insisted that the FBI planned to solve a missing person’s case, not destroy Jim Crow. Governor Johnson responded to the president in respectful tones; however, he also capitalized on his access to the president to convince him that activists were more dangerous than Klansmen. The president referred to Klan violence as “acts of terror” and “terrorism.” Governor Johnson used the term once but appeared to refer to activists, stating that the National Council of Churches that was supporting Freedom Summer “is where our real danger lies.” During a conversation on June 23, Governor Johnson repeated: “The real danger in it, Mr. President, is these youngsters . . . you already have a hard-core group of people with long police records that are professional agitators. And these youngsters don’t realize what they’re getting into. They’ve been in here a good while and they’ve stirred up a great deal of tension. And now these youngsters come in when the tension is getting toward the boiling point.” He reiterated his concerns during a June 26 conversation: “If they continue to send these youngsters in here without them properly

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<sup>12</sup> Quoting “Lyndon Johnson and Paul Johnson on 23 June 1964,” Tape WH6406.16, Citation #3878, LBJ Recording. “Lyndon Johnson and Paul Johnson (President Johnson preceded by Allen Dulles) on 26 June 1964,” Tape WH6406.17, Citation #3919, LBJ Recording; Jack Nelson, *Terror in the Night: The Klan’s Campaign Against the Jews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 86-88; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 114-115; Dittmer, 246-252; “J. Edgar Hoover Arrives in State,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 10, 1964.

being oriented and realize what they're getting into with the nucleus with your hard-core communist leaning type people with police records; unless . . . the Council of Churches keeps these youngsters out of here the best that they possibly can, we going to have lots of acts of violence."<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the summer, Governor Johnson sought to stem the negative publicity from the Neshoba case with a myriad of myths about the state. During June, Mississippi's "hospitality" month, he attempted to offset white supremacist oppression with stories publicizing Mississippian's congeniality. He also supported the myth that spread across white Mississippi: the volunteers staged the disappearance of the activists to force federal intervention and reverse the racial order. The missing activists, he surmised, "could be in Cuba." Selecting a communist country, no doubt, played into the narrative that the activists were communists. When a reporter approached Johnson with Governor George Wallace, who was in Jackson, and inquired about the case, Johnson responded jestingly, in earshot of Rita Schwerner who was seeking a meeting with him, "Governor Wallace and I are the only two people who know where they are—and we're not telling." Johnson refused to meet with Schwerner. COFO workers referred to "hospitality month" as "hostility" month. Johnson's "protective custody" of activists, they asserted, translated into officers forcing them into vehicles, informing them that they had found one of their friends "cut-in-half in a swamp," and claiming a black person had raped a volunteer. They asked rhetorically: "Is this 'hospitality month' in Mississippi or . . . 'hostility' month."<sup>14</sup>

The pervasive hostility toward activists exploded on July 2 after President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The president requested the support of the governor and revealed that he had asked civil rights leaders to "take this thing slow . . . kind of adjust to it," rather than staging "invasions." The governor responded its "success" hinged on how quickly "the big niggers like to move . . . they could make it mighty, mighty rough." President Johnson advised the gov-

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<sup>13</sup> First, second, third, and fifth quotes, "Lyndon Johnson and Paul Johnson (President Johnson preceded by Allen Dulles) on 26 June 1964," Tape WH6406.17, Citation #3919, LBJ Recording. Fourth quote, "Lyndon Johnson and Paul Johnson on 23 June 1964," Tape WH6406.16, Citation #3878, LBJ Recording. Nelson, 87-88; Carson, 115; "Killed by the Klan," prod. and dir. Charles C. Stuart, Discovery Channel, Stuart Productions, Inc., 1999, videocassette.

<sup>14</sup> Second and third quote, Cagin and Dray, Kindle edition. All other quotes, "Hospitality Month in Mississippi," n. d., Ser. 15, Reel 39, SNCC Papers. See also, Jay West, "President Should Halt Our 'Long, Hot Summer'" *Laurel Leader-Call*, June 26, 1964; Florence Mars with Lynn Eden, *Witness in Philadelphia* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1989).

error “to keep a stiff upper lip . . . . I know what a spot you’re under and you know mine. And we just have to work together the best we can.” Instead, Governor Johnson publicly pledged to challenge the constitutionality of the Civil Right Act and advised Mississippians to defy it. Following Johnson’s guidance, the Association of Citizens Councils of Mississippi counseled citizens to resist nonviolently and promised legal assistance to noncompliant proprietors suffering from federal lawsuits. After Governor Johnson spoke at the Mississippi Democratic Convention on July 28, the delegates passed resolutions condemning the act and lauding the governor’s planned challenge.<sup>15</sup>

The federal judiciary also helped Johnson sustain white supremacy. In April, Johnson had signed a bill that prohibited demonstrators from marching in front of entrances to public buildings. Activists sued, claiming that it violated their First Amendment rights of free speech to assemble and petition the government. In mid-July, the federal district court dismissed the case. In addition, a judge dismissed a COFO lawsuit against the Klan, the Americans for the Preservation of the White Race, the Citizens Council, and local, county, and state law officers charging that they prevented blacks from exercising their constitutional rights through acts of terror and by passing unconstitutional legislation designed to impede black political participation.<sup>16</sup>

Shocking evidence of Klan terror received nationwide attention on August 4, when FBI agents, on a tip from an informant, found the bodies of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman. Despair gripped activists as they packed into the First Union Missionary Baptist Church for Chaney’s funeral. Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) leader Dave Dennis bellowed that even if the authorities brought the killers to court, the jury of their relatives would acquit them. His eyes fell

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<sup>15</sup> Quoting “Lyndon Johnson and Paul Johnson on 3 July 1964,” Tape WH6407.03, Citation #4150, LBJ Recording. PBJ, Address to State Democratic Convention, July 28, 1964, Ser. II: PBJ Jr., Subser. 4, and Resolutions Passed at the 1964 State Convention of the Democratic Party of the State of Mississippi, Ser. II, Subser. 9, both in PBJ Papers; James Saggus, “Governor Advises Citizens Not to Comply with Law Until Tested,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 3, 1964; Susan M. Weill, “Mississippi, Daily Press in Three Crises,” in *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* ed. Dave R. Davies (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 38; “Official Council Statements on the ‘Civil Rights Act,’” *The Citizen*, July-August, 1964 issue bound in vol. 8-9, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville, Mississippi, [hereinafter cited as MML-MSU].

<sup>16</sup> “3-Judge Court Dismisses Hattiesburg Negroes’ Suit,” *Laurel Leader-Call*, July 17, 1964, 12; “Local Negroes Lose Picketing Suit,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 16, 1964, 1; Bill No. 546, Antipicketing Law, vol. 471, Reel 47, Congress of Racial Equality Papers; “Judge Mize Dismisses COFO ‘Scattergun’ Suit,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 30, 1964, p. 1.

upon Ben's distraught face. Ben looked so much like James. Dennis's voice broke: "I look at the young kids here . . . Little Ben Chaney . . . I'm sick and tired of going to the funerals of black men who have been murdered by white men." He demanded the mourners honor the fallen by joining the Movement. "If you . . . take what these white men in Mississippi are doing to us . . . and don't do something about it . . . then God damn your souls! Stand up! . . . We want our freedom NOW!"<sup>17</sup>

Activists understood that freedom required power, which Governor Johnson struggled to deny them. To obtain power, they created the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and selected sixty-eight delegates to challenge the seating of the state's Regular Democrats at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. Testimony by legendary figures, including Martin Luther King Jr. and Fannie Lou Hamer, proved that Mississippi had used voter discrimination and terror to exclude blacks from the political process. The Credentials Committee, under pressure from President Johnson, who feared losing the southern vote, offered the MFDP two at-large seats—a compromise the MFDP considered a betrayal. Most regular delegates, perceiving the Democratic Party's recognition of the MFDP a betrayal, left their seats vacant. Governor Johnson denounced the challengers as "dissident, non-resident troublemakers" and "professional Negro extremists." In a televised speech on August 25, Johnson played the victim card again: "An underground assault is being waged against us by the welfare-staters, the beatniks, the communist-front agitators, the ethnic and socio-religious groups of the country which, with the aid of an uninformed northern press, have done everything in their power to malign the fine people of Mississippi." A month later, he cautioned Mississippians against voting for Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey, calling them "the

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<sup>17</sup> Quoting Dave Dennis, Address at the Funeral for James Chaney, First Union Baptist Church, Meridian, Mississippi, August 7, 1964, in *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*, Vol. 2, ed. David W. Houck and David E. Dickson (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 775-778. "Freedom Summer Clip: The Eulogy," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/freedomsummer-eulogy/>; Blake, "'Mississippi Burning' Still Smolders," *CNN News*; Cagin and Dray, Kindle edition. For discovery of the identity of informant, see Jerry Mitchell, "New Details on the FBI Paying 30K to Solve the Mississippi Burning Case," *Journey to Justice*, February 15, 2010, [blogs.clarionledger.com/jmitchell/2010/02/15/did-the-fbi-pay-30k-to-locate-the-bodies-of-the-three-missing-civil-rights-workers/](http://blogs.clarionledger.com/jmitchell/2010/02/15/did-the-fbi-pay-30k-to-locate-the-bodies-of-the-three-missing-civil-rights-workers/).

most dangerous political combination in the history of this nation.”<sup>18</sup>

Governor Johnson continued to walk a thin tightrope as Klan violence persisted and as Klan propaganda reflected the governor’s rhetoric. A week after agents found the bodies in Neshoba, a pilot, on Sam Bowers’s orders, dropped leaflets across the Neshoba County Fair, which stated “Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman were not civil rights workers [but] Communist Revolutionaries, actively working to undermine and destroy Christian Civilization.” Johnson was failing to diminish Klan power, which in turn led to intensification of federal intervention. In September, J. Edgar Hoover transformed the FBI’s mission from an investigation to a war on the Klan when he implemented the counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) “to expose, disrupt and otherwise neutralize the activities of the various klans and hate organizations, their leadership and adherents.”<sup>19</sup>

The Klan tested the FBI with a series of bombing attacks in McComb in September. Governor Johnson facilitated close coordination with federal, state, and local officials to investigate, and on October 1, announced the arrests of Klansmen. Although a jury convicted several Klansmen, Judge W. H. Watkins released them on probation. In Meadville, on November 6, agents and the MHP arrested Klansmen for the murders of two black men whose corpses had turned up during the Neshoba search. When agents turned the case over to state authorities; however, they refused to present it to a grand jury. Desperate to sustain control over law and order in Mississippi, state legislators passed a bill providing greater powers to the MHP. In December, FBI agents arrested suspects in the Neshoba case. On January 15, 1965, a federal grand jury in Jackson handed down indictments against Bowers and seventeen other Klansmen for violating the civil rights of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman; however,

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<sup>18</sup> First and second quote, PBJ speech, n.d., Ser. II, Subser. 4, PBJ Papers. Third quote, PBJ televised speech, August 25, 1964, and Freedom Democratic Party Delegates and Alternate Delegates, Ser. II, Subser. 9, both in PBJ Papers. Steve Max, *The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party: Background and Development*, Ser. 16, Reel 41, and *Freedom Registration Vote*, September 1, 1964, Ser. 16, Reel 4, both in SNCC Papers; Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in American Since 1941* (New York: McGraw Hill Inc., 1991), 101-102; Carson, 125-126; Dittmer, 125-129, 288.

<sup>19</sup> First quote, *Mars with Eden*, 108-109. Second quote, Nelson, 93-94.



local authorities refused to indict a single defendant on state charges.<sup>20</sup>

In the wake of this turbulence, Governor Johnson remained as committed to segregation and black disfranchisement as ever. Even after President Johnson won reelection that November in a landslide despite the defection of Mississippi and the rest of the Deep South from the Democratic Party, Governor Johnson fought the implementation of *Brown* and the Civil Rights Act. Section VI of the act prevented the federal government from denying funds to schools involved in desegregation litigation. So, Johnson encouraged school boards to initiate lawsuits. He also supported a Supreme Court case from Atlanta challenging the constitutionality of the Civil Rights Act's public accommodation clause. In December, the justices unanimously affirmed its constitutionality. Johnson denounced the decision as a "dangerous doctrine."<sup>21</sup> The court's affirmation of the bill imperiled segregation, one of the most substantial fortifications of white supremacy.

Simultaneously, activists sought to dismantle another formidable fortification—white control over the political system. On January 4, five MFDP candidates launched a Congressional challenge in which they requested that Congress seat them rather than the Regular Democrats because Mississippi registrars had refused to register black voters who had not paid their poll taxes, a requirement for state, not federal, elec-

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<sup>20</sup> FBI Report, February 3, 1965, Bowers FBI File, vol. 2, #157-18-115, and Preliminary Prosecutive Action, Supplemental Prosecutive Summary, Section 58, FBI Files #44-25706-12, MIBURN, 1-12, both in Helfrich Papers; T. B. Birdsong, Commending the Legislature of the State of Mississippi, Paul B. Johnson, and Joe T. Patterson, December 8, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 10, J. Y. Thomas, Sovereignty Commission Report, December 3, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 9, Charles E. Snodgrass to A. D. Morgan, December 4, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 10, Governor Paul Johnson Jr., press releases, September 30, 1964, October 1, 1964, and October 29, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 5, Charles E. Snodgrass to A. D. Morgan, November 6, 1964, and attached FBI Press Release, n. d., Ser. II, Subser. 10, all in PBJ Papers; Jerry Mitchell, "'64 Suspects in Klan Murders Scoffs at Reinvestigation Talk," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 23, 2000, *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* Online Archive; "Ex-Miss, Deputy Charged in '64 Deaths," *MSNBC.com*, January 24, 2007; W. F. Minor, "Concern Over State's National 'Image' Noted," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, December 13, 1964, Klaus & Elisabeth Spears Papers, McCain, USM; *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 4, 1964.

<sup>21</sup> Quoting Governor Paul Johnson Jr., press release, December 16, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 5, PBJ Papers. "Johnson Victory Nears Record 15 Million Mark," *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 4, 1964; "September Integration Aim for Aided Schools," *Hattiesburg American*, February 5, 1965; "I Would Not Sign the Compliance Thing,"—PBJ," *Hattiesburg American*, February 15, 1965; Drew Pearson, "Rights Loophole Exploited," January 30, 1965, Rabbi David Ben-Ami Papers, McCain, USM; "CR measure Being Put to Test Across Nation," *Hattiesburg American*, July 3, 1964; James Saggus, "Governor Advises Citizens Not to Comply with Law Until Tested," *Hattiesburg American*, July 3, 1964; "1964 Civil Rights Act Survives Supreme Test," *Hattiesburg American*, December 14, 1964.



tions, and had delayed certification of black voters to prevent their participation. Conversely, Freedom Vote registrars allowed all eligible voters to cast ballots. In the spring, the MFDP held hearings across the state, taking depositions from four hundred witnesses who gave ten thousand pages of testimony that mobs, the Klan, and police abused them when they tried to register, engaged in political activities, and participated in protests. The U.S. Civil Rights Commission bolstered the MFDP's findings when it held investigative hearings in Jackson that produced similar testimony from one hundred Mississippians. To undermine these hearings, Governor Johnson led a contingent of officials to testify and correct the MFDP "lies" and to tell the real "Mississippi story." These hearings demonstrated the need for the Voting Rights Act, which President Johnson proposed in the wake of the murders during the Selma-to-Montgomery march. The act would prohibit states from using voter qualifications designed to disfranchise persons based on their race or color, prevent states from using literacy exams to qualify voters, and allow Congress to send federal registrars into states with low voter turnout. Moreover, in mid-June, the Fifth Circuit ordered Theron Lynd, Forrest County registrar, to register persons meeting registration requirements.<sup>22</sup>

Governor Johnson responded with a two-fold strategy to sustain white political power over Mississippi. First, he worked with leaders in several southern states to challenge the constitutionality of the proposed Voting Rights Act. Second, he called Mississippi legislators into a special session to repeal the good moral character and interpretation requirements for registering. On August 5, at the Neshoba County Fair,

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<sup>22</sup> Quoting "Federal Commission Opens State Hearings," *Laurel Leader-Call*, February 10, 1965. "Caves Says He Practices Fair Registration Plan," *Laurel Leader-Call*, February 12, 1965; MFDP Congressional Challenge - Fact Sheet, Pt. 2, Reel 9, SCLC Papers; MFDP Congressional Challenge Brief, Abernethy Collection, Thomas Abernethy Papers, J. D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, [hereinafter cited as Abernethy Collection]; WATS Reports, February 8, and 10, 1965, Ser. 7, Reel 15, SNCC Papers; USCCRLE, *Law Enforcement, A Report On Equal Protection in the South*, 1-4, 45-46, 53, 64-65; Maurice Dantin to William Colmer, February 7, 1965, and William Colmer to Judge Darwin Maples, February 22, 1965, both in William Colmer Papers, McCain, USM; President Lyndon Baines Johnson, Address to Congress, March 15, 1965, American Experience, The Presidents, Lyndon Baines Johnson, PBS, [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/36\\_1\\_johnson/psources/ps\\_overcome.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/36_1_johnson/psources/ps_overcome.html); Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Public Law 88-352; 78 Stat. 241), United States Congress, in *Federal Civil Rights Laws: A Sourcebook*, November 1984, 54-71, Ser. 43, in John C. Stennis, MML-MSU; *United States v. Theron Lynd, Circuit Clerk and Registrar of Voters of Forrest County and the State of Mississippi* (June 16, 1965), case no. 22477, transcript, 13, Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, The United States of America v. Theron C. Lynd Collection, McCain, USM. See also, Frank R. Parker, *Black Votes Count: Political Empowerment in Mississippi After 1965* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1990), 26, 29; Dittmer, 338-349.

Johnson implored the public to approve the amendments, explaining they would strengthen his challenge. He theorized that the Voting Rights Act would pass and survive legal challenges and that it would fuel massive black registration. In addition, he expressed concern that the requirements for registration could ultimately prevent whites from voting and shift power to blacks. By repealing restrictive voting requirements, he could ensure white numerical dominance at the polls. He also called on the four hundred thousand unregistered eligible whites to register.<sup>23</sup>

Johnson did not articulate why he thought that the state requirements for registering would prevent more whites than blacks from registering. Perhaps he understood that the Civil Rights Movement's voter-registration education had prepared more blacks than whites to pass the registration exam and that the federal registrars would ensure the fair evaluation of registration applications. Moreover, the movement had fostered massive political mobilization of the black population through the proliferation of Freedom Days registration campaigns and the development of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the Freedom Vote. Finally, SNCC, COFO, CORE, and the NAACP, which were so deeply embedded in counties across the state, served as a powerful and organized machine to deliver black citizens to the courthouses to register and to the polls to vote.<sup>24</sup>

The day after Governor Johnson's Neshoba County speech, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, and the federal government ordered Federal registrars into Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. Panicked, Governor Johnson beseeched the President to refrain from sending registrars into Mississippi until after the state vote on the amendments. He insisted that the Klan would use the arrival of registrars to defeat the moral character and interpretation amendments, particularly in Adams County where "our own registrars are registering Nigras." The President refused. On August 17, voters approved the amendments, but Adams County voted against them. Still, Johnson's hopes must have soared in September, when the U.S. House of Representatives used the passage of the Voting Rights Act to dismiss the MFDP challenge,

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<sup>23</sup> PBJ, Address at Neshoba County Fair, August 5, 1965, Ser. II, Subser. 4, PBJ Papers; Voting Rights Act of 1965.

<sup>24</sup> For the various ways that civil rights activists had politically mobilized the black population in Mississippi, see Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Dittmer; Boyett.

claiming that the new legislation would prevent future discrimination.<sup>25</sup>

Enraged by the increase in black voting, Klan leader Sam Bowers decided to orchestrate the murder of Vernon Dahmer, a founding member and former president of the Forrest County NAACP and a plaintiff in the Lynd case, who sought to increase black voter registration by volunteering to collect poll taxes at his store. Bowers ordered a klavern in Jones County to firebomb Dahmer's home and shoot anyone who ran from the house. On January 10, 1966, Klansmen executed Bowers' orders. Dahmer stood inside his burning home, shooting back at the Klansmen, so that his family could escape. His daughter sustained burns on her forehead and arms, but she survived. Dahmer suffered from massive burns and smoke inhalation and died within a day of the attack.<sup>26</sup> Bowers had made a fatal mistake. The Neshoba case had initiated the war against the Klan; the Dahmer case would deliver the mortal blow. The FBI ordered an army of agents into Forrest County to launch the DABURN (Dahmer burning) investigation. Days later, in his State of the Union Address, President Johnson called on Congress to pass "legislation to strengthen authority of Federal courts to try those who murder, attack, or intimidate either civil rights workers or others exercising their constitutional rights" and to increase the punishment for the commission of such crimes.<sup>27</sup>

Governor Johnson used his power to fight both Klansmen and activists. He ordered the MHP to work with the FBI, issued a public state-

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<sup>25</sup> Quoting "Lyndon B. Johnson and Paul B. Johnson on 6 August 1965," LBJ Recording. For the repealed amendments, see, Miss. Const., art. 12, sec. 241-A, sec. 244. For the dismissal of the challenge, see "Contested Elections in the First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth Districts of the State of Mississippi," Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration House of Representatives, Eighty-Ninth Congress, First Session, September 13 and 14, 1965, 33, 49-51, Election Contest, Abernethy Collection.

<sup>26</sup> FBI Report, March 21, 1966, DABURN FBI File, vol. 30, #44-1512-2579; FBI Report, March 23, 1966, DABURN FBI File, vol. 30, #44-1512-2576; FBI Report, January 20, 1966, DABURN FBI File, vol. 8, # 44-1512-188; FBI Report, January 20, 1966, DABURN FBI File, vol. 8 # 44-1512-189; Pitts, written confession, n. d., FBI File, #[?] and Billy Roy Pitts, typed confession, September 30, 1967, FBI File, #44-31694-555, both in Billy Roy Pitts Notebook; FBI Report, January 13, 1966, DABURN FBI File, vol. 9, # 44-1512-342; and FBI Report, January 13, 1966, DABURN FBI File, vol. 9, # 44-1512-373, all in Helfrich Papers; WATS Report, December 19, 1965, Ser. 15, Reel 38, SNCC Papers; James K. Dukes, interview by Patricia Boyett, May 12, 2010, MOHP; Nikki Davis Maute, "Her Memories of Firebombing," *Hattiesburg American*, February 13, 1994; "Firebombing Victim Dies," *The Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 11, 1966; "Killed by the Klan," videocassette.

<sup>27</sup> Quoting President Lyndon Baines Johnson, State of the Union Address, in Dittmer, 391. Nelson, 29, 72; Don Whitehead, *Attack on Terror: The FBI Against the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970), 238; "Firebombing Victim Dies," *The Jackson Clarion-Ledger*; "Killed by the Klan," videocassette.

ment characterizing the perpetrators of Dahmer's murder as "morally bankrupt," and called for Mississippians to cooperate with law enforcement and to ignore "the cowardly voices of hate and fear which would destroy us." Yet he ordered the MHP to spy on the revived Hattiesburg Movement and continued his struggle against black suffrage—the right that Dahmer died fighting to achieve. Lawyers representing Mississippi and other Deep South states demanded that the U. S. Supreme Court find the Voting Rights Act unconstitutional, claiming that the federal government lacked the authority to abolish literacy and voter qualification tests. Conversely, Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach revealed that many illiterate whites had registered in southern states, proving that the South used the test to disfranchise blacks. After the act's passage, 250,000 blacks registered, demonstrating its necessity. On March 7, 1966, the Supreme Court found the act constitutional.<sup>28</sup>

The ruling proved useful in the DABURN case. By the end of March, the Department of Justice indicted Bowers and thirteen other suspects for violating *U. S. Code, Title 18, Section 241*, which prohibits persons from engaging in a conspiracy to impede citizens "in the free exercise and enjoyment of any of the rights or privileges" guaranteed by the Constitution; and for violating Section 11(B) of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibits any person from using intimidation, threats, and/or coercion against a person who is attempting to vote, has voted, or is assisting others in their efforts to vote.<sup>29</sup>

Although Governor Johnson supported the DABURN case, during the March Against Fear in June 1966, he demonstrated again that his opposition to white supremacist violence stemmed from the negative media publicity rather than his concern for black lives. On June 5, Mississippi attracted such attention when a white man shot James

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<sup>28</sup> Quoting Governor PBJ, press release, January 11, 1966, Ser. II, Subser. 5, "Racial Violence," *Hattiesburg American*, January 27, 1966, and Mississippi Highway Patrol Reports, January 10, 1966 - September 18, 1967, all in PBJ Papers. "High Court Upholds 1965 Voting Rights Act," *Hattiesburg American*, March 7, 1966; "Mississippi, 5 Others Challenge," *Laurel Leader-Call*, January 17, 1966; "Katzenbach Defends 1965 Voting Rights Act," *Hattiesburg American*, January 18, 1966.

<sup>29</sup> Quoting Title 18, U. S. C. Section 241, Federal Civil Rights Statutes, The FBI website: <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/civilrights/federal-statutes#section844h>. Voting Rights Act of 1965. See also, *Hattiesburg American*, March 28, 1966, FBI press release, March 28, 1966, FBI File, vol. 7, #44-31694-262, FBI Report, March 19, 1966, Bowers FBI File, vol. 4, #157-18-459, FBI Report, March 28, 1966, FBI File #44-31694-262, and FBI Report, March 31, 1966, Bowers FBI File, vol. 4, #157-18-482, all in Helfrich Papers; Ford O'Neal to A. D. Morgan, March 17, 1966, and Correspondence, Charles E. Snodgrass to T. B. Birdsong and A. D. Morgan, March 30, 31, and April 4, 1966, all in Ser. II, Subser. 10, PBJ Papers; Whitehead, 249-250.

Meredith at the onset of Meredith's sixteen-day pilgrimage from Memphis to Jackson to break the terror that permitted racial segregation and black disfranchisement to persist despite civil rights legislation. After the shooting, Dr. King and Stokely Carmichael, along with many other civil rights leaders, rushed to Mississippi to continue the march and used it as an opportunity to register black voters. Frustrated, Governor Johnson emphasized that authorities had arrested the shooter, who hailed from outside Mississippi, and claimed that Mississippians "deplored" the assault. Although he sent twenty state troopers to protect the marchers, he castigated these "agitators," who "have now seized upon this isolated incident to create a big production to foment strife and hate." He implored Mississippians to ignore them.<sup>30</sup>

Johnson's commitment, however resentfully, to protect the marchers waned after the first week, and he reduced the number of state troopers to four. Surely, the enormous expansion of the march, which led to mass registration of black voters, influenced Johnson's decision. So too did the declining sympathy of the media toward civil rights activism. That decline began when Carmichael rallied a crowd in Greenwood by shouting, "We want black power! . . . Every courthouse in Mississippi ought to be burned tomorrow to get rid of the dirt . . . What do you want?" Some six hundred blacks shouted, "Black power!" To Johnson's delight, many journalists condemned Carmichael's speech as reverse racism and black militancy. The reduction in troopers and the condemnation of black power created a permissive atmosphere for white violence. On June 21, when King led a contingent to a rally at the Neshoba County Courthouse, white mobs beat them. In Canton, local and state patrolmen tear-gassed and clubbed activists. President Johnson refused to deploy the National Guard and deferred to Governor Johnson. Capitalizing on the national press's critique of black power, Johnson declared that activists "thrive on incidents" and applauded the "patience and forbearance" of most Mississippians "in the face of extreme provocation." Black power became the enduring symbol of the march and instigated a shift in the struggle as activists debated its meaning and as white supremacists cap-

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<sup>30</sup> Quoting PBJ Press Release, June 7, 1966, Ser. II, Subser. 5, PBJ Papers. Carter, *The Music Has Gone Out of the Movement*. See also, Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 318-322; Dittmer; Carson.

itized on the fear it instilled in many whites to malign the Movement.<sup>31</sup>

During a speech at the Neshoba County Fair on August 4, 1966, Johnson compared black power leaders to Hitler and Mussolini, claimed that black power advocates did “not call for the ballots—they call for blood” and denounced “Black Power” as a “storm that contains the thunder of terror and the lightning of violence . . . . It harbors the seeds of a hurricane of hate and hostility that could sweep sanity aside and introduce an era of anarchy that would represent a real and present danger to the very fabric of society in the United States.” Police brutality, he insisted, proved a ruse used to destroy democracy. American police, he claimed, were at “war,” as demonstrated by the “riots” rippling across the nation. Johnson ignored the reality that violent responses by black activists to white attacks remained rare and greatly paled in comparison to the systemic, pervasive, and persistence violence Klansmen, mobs, and police used against blacks.<sup>32</sup>

Governor Johnson’s continued fearmongering helped him undermine programs for black uplift and oppose federal legislation and emboldened the Klan. The governor and state leaders used their control over the administration of federal War on Poverty programs to deny or lessen black access to Medicaid and Medicare, Job Corps opportunities, and welfare. Johnson characterized the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) as a corrupt black power organization bent on radicalizing black communities. Sam Bowers, who shared Johnson’s perspective of black activism and uplift, activated his new underground Klan cells in 1967. Klansmen used a car bomb to murder Wharlest Jackson, treasurer of the Natchez NAACP chapter, bombed the Blackwell Real Estate Office in Jackson because its agents sold homes to blacks in white neighborhoods, and bombed Temple Beth Israel in the capital city. Johnson condemned the murder of Jackson as “an act of savagery which stains our state” and the bombing of Temple Beth Israel as a “despicable” and “cowardly” assault. Yet he also appeared before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee to oppose the Civil Rights Act (1966), which

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<sup>31</sup> First and second quote, Dittmer, 336; 389-402. All other quotes, PBJ Press Release, June 24, 1966, Ser. II, Subser. 5, PBJ Papers. Jill Wakeman, “Journey to Mississippi,” transcript, Jill Wakeman (Goodman) to Friends, June 25, 1966 and July 8, 1966, all in Jill Wakeman (Goodman) Papers, McCain, USM. See also, Carson, 207-211, Fairclough, 318-322, and Carter.

<sup>32</sup> Quoting PBJ Address, Neshoba County Fair, Philadelphia, Mississippi, August 4, 1966, Ser. II, Subser. 4, PBJ Papers. For the occasional use of violence by black activists, see Boyett, 11-112, 169-173, 217-219.

President Johnson had proposed in the wake of Dahmer's murder.<sup>33</sup>

During Johnson's final months in office, the racial rage that had gripped Mississippi spiraled toward its climax. The Neshoba case came to trial in October in Meridian. An all-white jury acquitted seven defendants and deadlocked on verdicts for four. Still, the jurors found Bowers and six other defendants guilty, marking the first time that a Mississippi jury had convicted Klansmen in a federal civil rights case since Reconstruction. Freed by Judge Harold Cox, who allowed the convicted Klansmen to post bond pending the sentencing hearing, the Imperial Wizard launched a fall bombing campaign that included attacks in Laurel and Jackson. In late December, Judge Cox sentenced the convicted men. Bowers received the maximum ten years. Judge Cox permitted Bowers to post bond pending an appeal. Acting on Bowers's orders, in early January 1968, a cell led by Thomas Tarrants bombed two black churches in Meridian. Finally, however, over two years after Dahmer's murder, the FBI war against the Klan approached its decisive battle. In late January, the state delivered murder and arson indictments against Bowers and eleven Klansmen in the Dahmer case, marking the first time since Reconstruction that a Mississippi jury had indicted Klansmen on capital charges for an attack on a black civil rights activist.<sup>34</sup>

The reigns of the governor's office transferred from Johnson to former congressman John Bell Williams just weeks before the indictments in the Dahmer case. In his inaugural address, Governor Williams modeled his vision after Johnson's by promising to fight federal encroachment and condemning Klan violence while blaming

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<sup>33</sup> First quote, Press Release by PBJ, February 28, 1967. Second and third quotes, Press Releases by PBJ, September 19, 1967, both in Ser. II, Subser. 5, PBJ Papers. Press release by PBJ, October 10, 1966, and Statement by PBJ Before the Senate Judiciary Committee, n. d., both in Ser. II, Subser. 5, PBJ Papers; FBI Report: Bombing Investigations in Mississippi, June 18, 1968, Bowers FBI File, vol. 7, #158-18-1009, and FBI Non-Prosecutive Summary Report, March 7, 1968, Thornton FBI File, vol. 1, #157-4361-96, both in Helfrich Papers; Nelson, 12, 46.

<sup>34</sup> *United States v. Cecil Ray Price, et al.* (1967), case no. 5291, United States District Court, Southern District Court of Mississippi, transcript, Eastern Division, Jackson, Mississippi, [hereinafter cited as *U. S. v. Price* (1967) transcript]; Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Report, April 4, 1967, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson; William F. Dukes to SAC, Jackson, November 23, 1967, vol. 6, #157-18-867, SAC, Jackson to FBI File, December 6, 1967, vol. 6, #157-18-883, *Laurel Leader-Call*, December 30, 1967, Bowers FBI File, vol. 6, #157-18-904, and FBI Report: Bombing Investigations in Mississippi, June 18, 1968, Bowers FBI File, vol. 7, #157-18-1099, all in Bowers FBI File, Helfrich Papers; "Special Grand Jury Slated," *Hattiesburg American*, December 22, 1967; "4 Defendants are Released," *Hattiesburg American*, January 27, 1968; "Bowers, 9 Others Remain in Jail," *Laurel Leader-Call*, January 27, 1968; "'Break' Brings 12 Indictments," *Laurel Leader-Call*, January 26, 1968; Nelson, 50, 65-70, 106; Mars, with Eden, 250; Whitehead, 260-284.



it on black provocation. Yet changes were coming. Blacks voted in record numbers in 1967 and elected black leaders across the state in counties where blacks constituted a majority. Under Williams's tenure, the state won four convictions in the Dahmer case, including one arson conviction and three murder convictions, which helped decimate the Klan. Governor Williams lost his battle against school desegregation; Mississippi finally complied with *Brown* and the civil rights acts. However, over the next decade, white flight and private schools led to virtual re-segregation of education in much of the state. Mississippi, like the rest of America, had progressed, but racism still thrived.<sup>35</sup>

Governor Johnson greatly contributed to the racism that infected his state. His disdain for the Klan appears exaggerated as demonstrated by an interview in 1970. When discussing the murders of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman, Johnson claimed that the Klansmen "did not actually intend to kill these people . . . They were going to hang these three persons up in a big cotton sack" for a few days to "more or less scare them off." However, their plans failed when "the Negro boy from over at Meridian," who Johnson called the "ringleader," "was acting kind of smart aleck and talking pretty big." One of the Klansman hit him with a chain and "killed him as dead as a nit." Johnson concluded, "After this boy had been killed," they decided, "Well, we've got to dispose of the other two." As Philip Dray and Seth Cagin argue in *We Are Not Afraid*, which examines the Neshoba case, Johnson's story resembles so many in which racists seek to portray blacks as acting out of line and leaving whites with no choice but to use force against them. It also seems highly improbable that Chaney would have responded in such a way "while in the hands of a lynch mob." Finally, as they contend, many whites like Johnson seemed to think such a diabolical murder becomes less evil when "rationalized as the beating

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<sup>35</sup> For inaugural address, see John Bell Williams, January 16, 1968, *Mississippi Senate Journal* (Jackson 1968), 35-39. For elections, see State of Mississippi General Election Returns, November 7, 1967, Evelyn Gandy Papers, McCain, USM; James Saggus, "Mississippi Elects Williams Governor," *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 8, 1967; "Negroes Win 7 State Offices," *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 8, 1967. For convictions in the Dahmer case, see *State of Mississippi v. Charles Clifford Wilson* (1968), case no. 158/6795, *State of Mississippi v. William Thomas Smith* (1968), case no. 158/6797, *State of Mississippi v. Cecil Sessum* (1968), case no. 158-/6796, *State of Mississippi v. Lawrence Byrd* (1968), case no. 159/6803, all in *Forrest County: General Docket State Cases Circuit Court*, vol. 5, 164-167. For John Bell Williams's tenure and changes in Mississippi in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the full story on the Dahmer case, see Boyett, 173, 174, 201, 213, 214. For general struggles in the state after the Movement, see Boyett, 223-244.



of a Negro that got out of hand.”<sup>36</sup> Johnson, like so many whites of the era, sustained a fealty to white supremacy and possessed little, if any, empathy for the deep suffering blacks experienced across Mississippi.

Certainly, Johnson’s cooperation with the FBI’s war against the Klan marginalized white supremacist terrorists and ironically made it safer to expand the civil rights activism he so deplored. His acts proved not those of a moderate, but rather, a pragmatic racist, who understood that Klan violence forced federal intervention, threatened Mississippi’s state sovereignty, and would break Jim Crow. Moreover, Johnson became a master of racial myths as he drew false equivalencies between activists and Klansmen and portrayed activists as communists and terrorists. And he sought to use the activists’ highly successful nonviolent resistance method against them by calling on citizens to model that behavior in public. If only they had listened, Johnson seemed to think, he could have sustained white supremacy. Johnson used every method at his disposal to hold together the crumbling house of Jim Crow. During his tenure, he deployed the MSSC as agents of a police state against activists; he waged battles against the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, the Voting Rights Act, and the proposed Civil Rights Act of 1966; and he encouraged noncompliance with *Brown* by supporting school board lawsuits. These actions delayed registration of black voters, school integration, desegregation of public spaces, the hiring and promotions of black employees, and racial justice. Thus, even as Johnson helped release Mississippi from its Klan stranglehold, he served as a key leader in preserving white privilege. Much of his rhetoric, including his claims that the media lied about Mississippi, his false equivalencies between Klansmen and freedom fighters, and his portrayal of activists as terrorists and white radicals as frustrated victims survives in America today. Perhaps the tortured past is not so past.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Quoting Dray and Cagin, Kindle edition. See also, Carter.

<sup>37</sup> For reference to Charlottesville, see Joe Heim, “Recounting a Day of Rage, Hate, Violence and Death,” *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2017, digital edition; Rosie Gray, “Trump Defends White Nationalist Protestors,” *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2017, digital edition; and Elle Reeves, “Charlottesville: Race and Terror,” *Vice News Tonight*, S1, EP 2012, aired on Home Box Office, August 14, 2017.

