

Spring 5-2015

“All That is Necessary for the Triumph of Evil is That Good Men Do Nothing”: Anticommunism, Protestant Christianity, and State Sovereignty in the Civil Rights Era South

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The University of Southern Mississippi

“All that is necessary for the triumph of evil
is that good men do nothing”:
Anticommunism, Protestant Christianity, and State Sovereignty
in the Civil Rights Era South

by

Taylor Herring

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of History

May 2015

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Abstract

During the decade after *Brown v. Board of Education*, civil rights advocates faced segregationist opposition due to both socially ingrained white supremacy and the widespread fear of Communism in the United States. Although the Supreme Court officially mandated racial integration in 1954, segregationist groups like the White Citizens' Council and the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission organized to oppose the *Brown* ruling's implementation. This thesis uses segregationist propaganda material, newspapers, periodicals, and agency correspondences to examine the tactics of those who hoped to preserve racial inequality. In particular, this study focuses on the impact that anti-Communist rhetoric had on the Civil Rights Movement, demonstrating both the strengths and limitations of southern segregationists who equated racial integration to Communist agitation. Local segregationist leaders, ranging from pastors to politicians, often took advantage of the nationwide paranoia that accompanied the Cold War, inducing among white southerners the fear that racial equality and democracy could not coexist.

Key words: Segregation, Communism, Civil Rights Movement, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, Citizens' Council, Protestant Church.

Dedication

For my parents and my brother, Drew:

If you three found this project half as interesting as you pretended to,
that's good enough for me.

Acknowledgements

I would never have been able to complete this thesis without the help of my adviser, Dr. Kevin Greene. You encouraged me when I needed it most, and you believed in my research ability at times when I didn't even believe in it myself. When I doubted my potential, you convinced me that I "had the chops" to complete my first major research project. You took the time to learn what motivates me, and never allowed me to cut corners or settle for average work. I don't think I will ever be able to express how much I appreciate you as a mentor and a friend. Thank you for everything.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction-----	1
Chapter 2: “God is on Our Side”: The Influence of Anti-Communist Rhetoric on Southern Protestant Christianity, 1954-1964-----	11
Ministers Sidestep Politics-----	12
Political Gap Between Local Ministers and National Leaders and “Concern for the Poor”-----	17
Redbaiting Tactics of the Citizens’ Council-----	21
Biblically Ordained Segregation-----	23
Chapter 3: Magnolia State Menace: The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and its efforts to uphold white supremacy, 1956-1973-----	27
Background of Redbaiting in the South-----	28
Connection to the Citizens’ Council in Mississippi-----	30
Relationship with Northern Anticommunists and State Duties-----	32
Harrison County Case-----	37
Chapter 4: Conclusion-----	42
Bibliography-----	46

Chapter 1: Introduction

In order to best understand the American Civil Rights Movement, historians must analyze the impacts Communism, radicalism, and feminism had on the activists involved. Civil Rights historians have confirmed that many African Americans in the South, especially those confined to the working class, experimented with communist ideology and were often enticed by its promise of an egalitarian society. Further examination is required, though, in order to confirm how crucial of a role Communism played in the movement. In the 1930s, the Communist International classified African Americans in the South an “oppressed race,” meaning they had the right to self-determination against the white oppressors.¹ Many African Americans saw Communism not only as a way to identify with an international movement against discrimination on the basis of race, but also as an outlet to expose hypocrisy in the United States government.

In light of the Cold War, Federal Government officials saw international pressure to prove its democratic ideals. As a result, leaders like John F. Kennedy had reason to promote Civil Rights legislation in order to help the United States develop its international reputation for democracy. As historians have pointed out, however, social equality did not come for African Americans until much later. Still, President Kennedy knew that it would be impossible for the United States to urge third world nations to choose democracy over Soviet-promoted Communism, if they saw media coverage of oppression in the Southern United States.²

¹ Timothy V. Johnson, “‘We Are Illegal Here’: The Communist Party, Self-Determination and the Alabama Share Croppers Union” *Science & Society* 75 (2011): 476-477.

² Ibid.

Certainly, a study of Communism in southern black communities before and during the height of the Civil Rights Movement must begin with an analysis of how these African Americans understood Communism for themselves. Blacks in the South had limited access to literature on Communism. Nonetheless, they developed their own adaptation of the ideology, which was in many ways different from traditional Marxism. For instance, while Karl Marx advocated an abolition of religion, many black left-wing radicals held strong to their religious beliefs. In addition, many African Americans used their churches or cultural centers as meeting grounds for discussing Communism and white oppression. To what degree many blacks felt alienated from the Communist Party on the basis of their religious beliefs may require further examination. Still, the fact that African Americans developed their own homegrown variety of Communism leads this study to suggest that during the Cold War, blacks in the South were not necessarily looking to Moscow as an example of an ideal society. Instead, I will argue that many African American men and women simply saw Communism as a way to escape social and political inequality in the United States.

Not surprisingly, the working class represented the largest group to identify with the Communist Party. This study seeks to investigate how social class worked in some ways for, and in some ways against, the southern black communist agenda. I will show that in some cases, middle class or petit bourgeois blacks actively sought out suspected working class Communists. The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission strategically hired black agents, which proves that the Civil Rights Movement involved a deeper struggle than black versus white; in some ways, it was a class struggle as much as it was

a racial one.³ In this study, I hope to determine the degree to which Communist allegations against Civil Rights leaders, and grassroots resistance efforts, hindered the impact of the early Civil Rights campaign. Conversely, I will attempt to show how social class worked in favor of Southern blacks who identified with Communism. Unionization was one way in which communism infiltrated the working class; groups like the Alabama Share Croppers Union (SCU) made strides for higher wages and better working conditions for poor African Americans. Further examination of class-based struggles will contribute to a more complete understanding of the importance of the Communist Party to poor African Americans.

In his book *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*, Robin D. G. Kelley explains that the Alabama Communist Party allowed members to identify with the movement through a lens of their own culture. Kelley uses excerpts from the *Southern Worker*, a communist newspaper, and *Red Hammer*, an ideological newsletter, to prove that “the Alabama Communist Party was resilient enough to conform to black cultural traditions, but taut enough to remain Marxist at its core.”⁴ Through detailed analysis, Kelley explains that communism appealed to African Americans in the south due to its focus on their financial instability, because many black Southerners were sharecroppers who faced mistreatment from their landowners. Black working class Alabamans saw Communism as a way to acquire legal backing against unfair, racist rulings; Kelley examines the Scottsboro Cases as an example of

³ Rick Bowers, *Spies of Mississippi: The Campaign to Stop Freedom Summer's Civil Rights Movement of 1964*, Documentary. Directed by Dawn Porter. Public Broadcasting Service, (2014.), Film.

⁴ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 116.

Communists uniting to defend blacks against democratically-sanctioned racism. Kelley's argument that blacks in the South understood Communism through "their own lens" is supported by multiple examples of communist-led labor unions in the South. He also analyzes ways in which southern communists disguised their alliance with the Party; one specific tactic was for the members to bring a bible to meetings in order to avoid outsider suspicion.

While Robin Kelley focuses on the Alabama Share Croppers Union as an example of Party-led organization in the 1930s, his book also shows that a class-based struggle hindered the membership of the union. Many white members of the working class were deterred from unionization on the basis of racism; white workers still refused to ally with African American workers for fear of being ostracized. This in turn steered many whites away from the party; Kelly explains that they equated "racial equality and communism as two sides of the same coin."⁵

Among other scholars of communism in the southern United States, Timothy V. Johnson discusses the Party influence in the Alabama Share Croppers Union. In his article, Johnson argues that although the union eventually dissipated without achieving a successful revolt against oppressive landowners, the Party's involvement was ultimately successful in the long run. The Share Croppers Union served as a vehicle for mobilizing working class African Americans; more importantly, though, the Communist Party helped "plant the seeds of radicalism within the rural South."⁶

Johnson's most important contribution is his conclusion that "the Party demonstrated that African American sharecroppers could be organized around an

⁵ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 156.

⁶ Johnson, "We Are Illegal Here," 477.

advanced political line.”⁷ According to the United States Census Department, the illiteracy rate among African Americans was around 30% in 1930 — twice that of the white population.⁸ Communist Party organizers in Alabama, such as Mack Coad and Nat Ross, used Party publications to educate African Americans about their political rights. When their comrades were unable to read the material, officials would either print “shorter, easier-to-read articles” or simply read aloud from *The Liberator* or *The Daily Worker*.⁹ Despite widespread illiteracy, Southern blacks were determined to demonstrate their international political awareness. Johnson’s study illustrates black communists’ dedication to an international movement, through citing Robin Kelley’s particularly telling description of the 1934 Dadeville rally in *Hammer and Hoe*. The rally was conducted in protest of Ernst Thaelman’s arrest for leading the German Communist Party. Johnson explains:

If this type of political awareness and understanding was made possible by the transmission of knowledge through Party publications and meetings, it is reasonable to assume that these rural, Black Belt Communists were perfectly capable of understanding that African Americans should rule politically in that area of the country where they are the majority.¹⁰

This discussion of African American political capability not only shows what confidence the Communist Party gave working class blacks to organize, but it also speaks to the transnational nature of the movement. Communism was a way for African Americans to ally with other oppressed groups, and the Share Croppers Union played a role in their involvement. In the 1930s, the Communist Party in the American South laid the foundations for later radicals, like the 1960s Black Panther Party, to be successful.

⁷ Johnson, “We Are Illegal Here,” 446-447.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 468.

¹⁰ Johnson, “We Are Illegal Here,” 469.

In a later publication, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class*, Robin Kelley further explores the connection between militancy and communism. In 1928, once the Communist International (Comintern) adopted the stance that Southern African Americans had the right to self-determination, the militant, nationalist nature of black members of the American Communist Party was reconsidered. In his chapter titled “Afric’s Sons With Banner Red,” Kelley explains that many black nationalists and “ex-Garveyites” had a tradition of yearning for revolution against their white oppressors. After all, African Americans had a long-standing history of resistance, born from a climate of white supremacy in the Southern United States. Thus, the link between race pride, black militancy, and communism is strong; militant protests carried over to the 1960s at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, outliving American communism itself.¹¹

In a similar study, Timothy Tyson examines the life of black radical Robert F. Williams in *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power*. Robert F. Williams embodied black radicalism, and Tyson argues that he is proof that “the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement emerged from the same soil.”¹² Early in Robert F. Williams’s life, he became involved in the military, where he learned that Southern racism bore striking similarities Third Reich anti-Semitism. When African Americans who had served in the military returned home, many demanded respect from whites after they fought abroad for their freedom.¹³ Because many soldiers brought home

¹¹ Robin D. G. Kelley, “Afric’s Sons With Banner Red,” in Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, edited by Robin D. G. Kelley, (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1994), 109-116.

¹² Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29-32.

militant attitudes toward resistance, people like Williams were flagged as communists. Tyson cites an NAACP petition headlining, “It is not Russia that threatens the United States so much as Mississippi.”¹⁴ Tyson also discusses different politicians’ approaches to combatting international skepticism for the democracy that the United States advocated. Officials went to great lengths to cover up Southern racism, and Tyson exposes their hypocrisy through the lens of Black Power radicals like Robert F. Williams.¹⁵

Historians have documented multiple instances of organized, sometimes state-sanctioned, efforts to subdue black power in the name of anticommunism. Based on the scholarship of Rick Bowers, *Spies of Mississippi: The Campaign to Stop Freedom Summer’s Civil Rights Movement of 1964* is a PBS documentary which exposes the corruption of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, the spy agency that was used to seek out activists in Mississippi. As a result of the taxpayer-funded spy operations, many Civil Rights activists were labeled as Communists and fired from their jobs, forced to move out of their homes, and framed for criminality. The spies also implemented terror tactics against Civil Rights sympathizers; some of their strategies included publishing names and addresses of people who attended interracial meetings, and recording the license plate numbers of cars parked outside of meetings.¹⁶

In a National Public Radio interview about *Spies of Mississippi*, Rick Bowers sheds light on a particularly surprising aspect of the efforts to combat radical leftism: African Americans sometimes collaborated with the Mississippi State Sovereignty

¹⁴ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 51.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁶ Bowers, *Spies of Mississippi*.

Commission and enabled their search.¹⁷ The Commission actually hired many black agents who would be paid secretly attend NAACP meetings, pretending to be activists, and report findings back to the Commission. Some African American men, such as B. L. Bell, volunteered to work for the Commission due to arrogance over working class blacks. Others saw working as a spy for a state agency as a means of social mobility; the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission could serve as a way to rise out of financial suffering. What African American spies failed to realize, though, is that the white supremacist Mississippians who hired them to spy on their brothers would be the very men to fire them once they were no longer needed.¹⁸

The Mississippi Sovereignty Commission did not act alone in its efforts to suppress black freedom. As historian Neil McMillen explains, the White Citizens' Council of Arkansas was instrumental in preserving white supremacy in the South. Described as "a force to be reckoned with" in Arkansas, the Citizens' Council organized with other segregationist groups in attempt to "sabotage the desegregation plan" through circulation of racist propaganda.¹⁹ In 1957, when state officials from Georgia visited Little Rock promoting their segregationist stance, Arkansas segregationists rallied around the idea of multiple states defying a federal mandate to integrate.²⁰

One of the most important tactics the Citizens' Council used to discredit integrationists was to induce fear. In the climate of the Cold War, Arkansas segregationist officials implemented propaganda techniques to scare moderates into standing for

¹⁷ Rick Bowers, interview with Michel Martin, "Mississippi Spies Sought to Uphold Segregation," 2010.

¹⁸ Bowers, *Spies of Mississippi*.

¹⁹ Neil McMillen, "The White Citizens' Council and Resistance to School Desegregation in Arkansas" *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 66, no.2 (2007): 130-132.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

segregation. Accusing Daisy Bates, Arkansas state president of the NAACP, of being a Communist made people afraid to sympathize with her cause; the Citizens' Council distributed a propaganda leaflet that accused Bates of "inducing 'prison-like fear'" and "preventing white pupils from telling even their parents of the horrors... inside the integrated school."²¹

With similar disregard for credibility, state Council leader James Johnson advised members of the Mothers' League of Central High School that an "active Communist cell in your own community" was "pulling the strings" throughout the summer and fall of 1957. Given sufficient time, the former state senator promised the pro-segregation organization that he could even produce the "card numbers" of Little Rock's "Communist Organizers."²²

While some historians like Robert Korstad argue that the United States involvement Cold War narrowed the possibility of racial advancement, historian Mary Dudziak believes the opposite is true.²³ In her book, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, Dudziak argues that officials in the federal government were more likely to concede a level of equality to African American advocates, because of their spotlight on the international stage. The transnational nature of the Communist Party could work to the advantage of oppressed African Americans in the South, because it would provide their international constituents with information about American governmental hypocrisy on the issue of civil rights. Dudziak explains that Cold War warriors like John F. Kennedy saw international pressure to improve domestic inequality before advocating the democratic process abroad.²⁴ This thesis, then, seeks to determine

²¹ McMillen, "The White Citizens' Council," 137.

²² Ibid.

²³ Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

²⁴ Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 9.

the importance of communist allegations against African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement. The timing of the Civil Rights Movement, which followed a period of American history in which communism was a very real fear, allowed for political paranoia, resistance to change, and fruitless allegations against activists. This thesis contributes to the field of Southern History by investigating the tactics of segregationist groups and demonstrating how the fear of communistic agitation influenced segregationist me

Chapter 2: “God is on Our Side”: The Influence of Anti-Communist Rhetoric on Southern Protestant Christianity, 1954-1964

In his letter from Birmingham Jail, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. appealed to southern clergymen, responding to their criticism of his involvement in protests with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). As a member of the clergy, Dr. King strategically referred to key biblical figures to exemplify his reason for coming to Birmingham. “Just as the Apostle Paul” temporarily abandoned his village of Tarsus to take “the gospel of Jesus to practically every hamlet and city of the Greco-Roman world,” Dr. King wrote, he too could not ignore the conviction to rectify injustice in the United States.¹ Dr. King viewed segregation not simply as unjust, but as a fundamentally unchristian practice, inconsistent with the “Law of God.”²

Dr. King and his supporters identified their campaign for equality as a biblically ordained, fundamentally Christian movement. Yet by encouraging southern Christians to disregard social reform in favor of fortifying their personal relationships with God, white pastors allowed their church members to ignore social inequality. Not surprisingly, the idea that Christianity could be entirely separate in nature from racial reform was incredibly useful for the White Citizens’ Council in Mississippi. As he appealed to multiple denominations of clergymen in Birmingham, Dr. King presented the irony that the greatest hindrance to Civil Rights workers in the South was not the presence of Klansmen or members of the White Citizen’s Council. Instead, integrationists met their greatest obstacle in white moderates. Clergymen, for example, succumbed to a

¹ “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” King Papers, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, 2.

² Ibid., 7.

“lukewarm acceptance” of white supremacy, while ignoring its fundamental immorality.³ Although many southern clergymen demonstrated a will to remain apolitical and autonomous in the immediate wake of 1954’s *Brown* decision, ministers often tactically tied anticommunist rhetoric to traditional Christianity. Many southern Protestant ministers believed and preached that racial segregation was engrained in Christian doctrine. Locally respected ministers like G. T. Gillespie, Henry L. Lyon, and W. Douglas Hudgins, all of whom pastored large and influential churches, cited Christian doctrine to justify racism.⁴ Fortified by the relationship between clergymen and the Citizens’ Councils, an appeal to the widespread fear of communistic agitation proved to be malleable enough to justify both sides of the segregation argument.

Part I: Ministers Sidestep Politics

Many historians have sanctified Civil Rights workers’ religious motives, while vilifying Southern whites who believed firmly in their theology of segregation. Because civil rights activists identified *their* side of the race issue as the Christian one, some historians have dismissed segregationists’ theological arguments as inconsistent, lacking in biblical support, and generally unimportant to clergymen.⁵ In effort to consciously avoid considering segregationists simply as “dupes” who misunderstood the Christian

³ “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” 10.

⁴ G. T. Gillespie, *A Christian View on Segregation*. Pamphlet. “Citizen’s Council: 1949-1962.” Mississippiana Collection, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi; Joseph Crespino, “The Christian Conscious of Jim Crow: White Protestant Ministers and the Mississippi Citizens’ Councils, 1956-1964,” *Mississippi Folklife*, vol. 31, no. 1 (Fall 1998), 39; Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 82.

⁵ David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 8.

faith, historians such as Charles Marsh and Jane Daily devote attention to the struggles that segregationist Christians faced in their efforts to support segregation using biblical themes or figures. Marsh, in his compilation of narratives from both integrationist and segregationist Christians, demonstrates the complexity of biblical interpretation during the Civil Rights Movement.⁶ Historian Jane Dailey explains that the religious argument for segregationists would have held little weight if not for interwoven “language of miscegenation” within Christian sermons.⁷ By appealing to believers’ fears of sexual and marital mixing of races, church leaders, whether intentionally or not, had a role in transforming segregation from a Southern “social practice” to a biblically prescribed design.⁸ Carolyn Renée Dupont has also made a significant contribution to the study of Southern white evangelicals; Dupont argues that not just civil rights activists, but segregationists, too, saw “their quest as a moral one.”⁹ She explains that a hard-fought, gradual shift in Southern culture changed religion, not vice versa.¹⁰

Of all the tradition-clinging, segregationist Southern factions, none appear more antithetical to their supposed purpose than the Mississippi Protestant Church. As Marsh argues in his study of religion in the Civil Rights Movement, a great gulf existed between preaching and practice in Mississippi’s white churches.¹¹ In the same way that the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission declared themselves the state’s protectors against excess encroachment from the Federal Government, while simultaneously

⁶ Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, 82-112.

⁷ Jane Dailey, "Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after Brown," *Journal Of American History* 91, no. 1 (2004): 122.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Carolyn Renée Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, 6.

expending a tremendous amount of effort and tax funding to secretly spy on Mississippi citizens, the Protestant Church leaders were committed to protecting their individual congregations from engulfment in social affairs, yet went to great lengths to incorporate strategic language into their sermons which would encourage a fear of societal amalgamation.

William Douglas Hudgins, Baptist minister of the prominent and respected First Baptist Church in Jackson, is a prime example of a clergyman who wrongfully claimed to be dedicated to keeping his congregation “autonomous” and apolitical. Hudgins reacted to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in two key ways: first, he began focusing his sermons on “individual salvation;” and second, he advocated the “autonomy” of his local church.¹² Hudgins’s first tactic, to emphasize the “individual” nature of Christian salvation, shares commonality with many other segregationist ministers in the South. Leaders like Hudgins knew that if they successfully assured lay churchgoers that they could avoid grappling with the moral issue of social equality altogether, with their personal salvation intact, then Christians would be less affected by pressure from Civil Rights advocates. For Hudgins, the Supreme Court’s decision warranted no response from clergymen because of its political nature.¹³ The extreme irony, though, is that the tactic of ensuring believers that they should prioritize their personal salvation as a separate entity from social reform was a calculated, and most of all, political decision.

It is important to emphasize the irony involved in Christian segregationist politics. Multiple articles in the *Citizens’ Council* newspaper, along with editorials in the *Citizen*, were devoted to condemning progressive Christians who had become too involved in

¹² Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, 88, 98.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 101.

politics.¹⁴ Ministers, too, claimed to consider the church separate from social and political affairs, often criticizing integrationist clergymen for mixing the spheres that Christ himself separated.¹⁵ “Christ made it clear that He thought God and Caesar operated in separate spheres,” Baptist layman D. B. Red wrote in correspondence with the Mississippi Citizens’ Council, and “our Constitution was drawn on that theory.”¹⁶ At the same time, though, the Citizens’ Council endorsed and published sermons that were often more political in nature than biblical.

This trend among ministers to camouflage their political conservatism in the name of Christianity is especially clear in Reverend G. T. Gillespie’s *A Christian View on Segregation*. Instead of adhering to Protestant ministers’ own warning that the pulpit is no place for politics, Gillespie actually *prioritizes* preaching anticommunism over theology. He mentions “Soviet Communism,” “Karl Marx’s Doctrine of Internationalism,” and the “Communist goal of amalgamation” before ever referencing the Bible once.¹⁷ As a prominent advocate for the Citizens’ Council and minister in Jackson, Gillespie intertwined his two vested interests, Christian faith and white supremacy.¹⁸ Gillespie’s sermon, which the Citizens’ Council distributed as a pamphlet, indicates that the church pulpit was never simply a neutral site for reading the Bible. When *Brown* challenged Southern white supremacy, ministers often allowed religious teaching to take a backseat to political warning.

¹⁴ “Pinkos in the Pulpit,” *Citizens’ Council*, Dec. 1956; “The NCC’s Delta Project: Experiment in Revolution,” *The Citizen*, June 1964; “Southern Churches Urge Mixing,” *Citizens’ Council*, May 1955.

¹⁵ Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, 101.

¹⁶ “Should Some Church Leaders Repent?” *Citizens’ Council*, 1949-62, McCain Archives.

¹⁷ G. T. Gillespie, *A Christian View on Segregation*.

¹⁸ Crespino, “The Christian Conscience of Jim Crow,” 40.

Similarly, in a 1963 edition of the *Citizen*, the Citizens' Council published an editorial from the *Jackson Daily News* in which the author references a sermon by influential Presbyterian pastor, Dr. Walter R. Courtenay. Courtenay taught that just as the Jews took responsibility for caring for the poor, yet never suggested their "equality," today's Christians had no business advocating social reform.¹⁹ Furthermore, Courtenay argued that the notion of social equality between races was a relatively new idea. "Not until the French Revolution" did men from across social boundaries claim "equal[ity] in respect to their rights," Courtenay taught.²⁰ This argument allowed Christians to believe that some factions of humanity were naturally meant to advance and rule, while other, less worthy factions were meant to submit, even if submission meant repudiating some of their equality.

Not unique from other segregationist ministers, a key theme of Courtenay's sermon was his attention to the "function of government" in relationship to the Church.²¹ If a government could take on the role of equalizing its citizens, Courtenay argues, individual states would see a shift "from Democracy to either socialism or Communism." The Church, therefore, should have no part in attempting to "solve the basic problems of mankind," because clergymen are often unaware of the "socialistic processes" guiding the legislators who advocate equality.²² By integrating politically pointed language, Courtenay instilled a protective attitude among Christians. His article encouraged readers to ensure that the ministers in their individual churches remain as politically neutral as

¹⁹ "The Myth of 'Equality,'" *The Citizen* 8, November 1963, 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15. Dr. G. T. Gillespie, William Douglas Hudgins, and Rev. T. Robert Ingram are among the other ministers who claimed to see no place for politics within Christianity.

²² "The Myth of 'Equality,'" 2.

possible. In the case of the Protestant South, though, political *neutrality* simply translated to denial to comply with racial progress. After all, Courtenay argues, the only product of church involvement in liberal politics would be “encouraging Christians to envy, to covet, to be class-conscious, and to foster class conflict.”²³

Part II: Political Gap Between Local Ministers and National Leaders and “Concern for the Poor”

Unfortunately for local level pastors who vehemently opposed congregationally forced integration, national leaders of the Protestant denominations often advocated an end to segregation in the Church. Following the *Brown* decision, Mississippi Southern Baptists entered into a decade-long struggle against the progressive leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).²⁴ Only local Methodists rivaled this severe gap in beliefs, with church members organizing to form the Mississippi Association of Methodist Ministers and Laymen (MAMML), once described as “a baptized Citizen’s Council.”²⁵ The MAMML not only worked closely with the actual Citizens’ Councils in Mississippi, but the organization also developed its own way of equating God’s ordained plan to conservative politics.²⁶

Because of the inconsistency of beliefs between national and local church leaders, “congregational autonomy” became increasingly important for ministers like Jackson Baptist church leader William Douglas Hudgins.²⁷ After the Southern Baptist Convention

²³ “The Myth of ‘Equality,’” 2.

²⁴ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, 105.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁷ Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, 99.

endorsed the *Brown* ruling in 1954, Hudgins's goal was to convince his local congregation that their church was not bound by decisions of the Supreme Court or Baptist national leaders. To ensure that members of his congregation remained unaware of Baptist integrationists, Hudgins simply lied from the pulpit. Rather than acknowledging the large majority of the Convention who voted in favor of supporting the *Brown* decision, Hudgins reported that a "very large" number of voters opposed compliance with the Supreme Court.²⁸ Charles Marsh calls Hudgins's strategic omissions an attempt to keep the Mississippi Baptist Church a "serene, self-enclosed world, undisturbed by the sufferings" of black Southerners.²⁹

In some cases, though, Mississippi church members remained "undisturbed" by civil rights violations not due to their pastor's will to keep the congregation unaware, but instead, due to their paternalistic attitude toward black Christians.³⁰ In his study of Presbyterians during the Civil Rights Movement in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Robert Patrick Rayner explains that white churches often allocated a portion of their budget to black Presbyterian congregations.³¹ Financial donations to black churches were not unique to Hattiesburg First Presbyterian; the First Baptist Church in Jackson allocated \$1,500 each year for the African American Baptist seminary, until the church's leaders ultimately made a quiet decision to cease donations in 1963.³² In the Hattiesburg First Presbyterian case, the church budget allowed for "Negro Work" donations, including

²⁸ Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 100.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

³⁰ Robert Patrick Rayner, "On Theological Grounds: Hattiesburg Presbyterians and the Civil Rights Movement," MA thesis, University of Southern Mississippi, 2009, 25.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

³² Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 102.

their partnership with Preston Chapel, a local black Presbyterian church.³³ First Presbyterian Church even solicited financial donations from Bay Street Presbyterian, another white local church, and the South Mississippi body of Presbyterian elders to help fund Hattiesburg's black Presbyterian congregations.³⁴

In the same way that Presbyterian minister Dr. Walter Courtenay cites Jews as an example of a biblical demographic who were "concerned for the poor, but not for equality," members of southern churches like Hattiesburg First Presbyterian often saw their relationship with black churches as patriarchal.³⁵ The evidence that Rayner describes in his study of Hattiesburg Presbyterians demonstrates the church's will to aid the city's black churches, as long as their particular congregation was not forced to allow black churchgoers to sit in their white-only pews.³⁶ The allocation of finances and resources to black churches reflects three key themes of white southern Protestantism: first, that segregated church facilities were neither sinful nor discriminatory; second, that activists from outside of Mississippi were essentially attempting to fix a racial relationship that was never broken; and third, that biblically prescribed "concern for the poor" did not necessarily entail the intermingling of races.³⁷

The Citizens' Council delivered another element to southern Protestant leaders' battle for segregated churches: the idea that integration was not only un-Biblical, but also un-American.³⁸ Consistent with the paternalistic relationship that white church leaders maintained with black churches through meager monetary donations, the Citizens'

³³ Rayner, "On Theological Grounds," 22-23.

³⁴ Rayner, "On Theological Grounds," 22-23.

³⁵ "The Myth of 'Equality,'" 2.

³⁶ Rayner, "On Theological Grounds," 23.

³⁷ "The Myth of 'Equality,'" 2.

³⁸ "Drive for 'Equality' Was Born in Russia," *Citizens' Council* (Jackson, MS), April 1956.

Council spread the idea that Christians could be “equal” in “God’s sight” without being equal on earth.³⁹ On the front page of the April 1956 edition of the *Citizens’ Council* newspaper, the Citizens’ Council strategically juxtaposed an article claiming that segregationists had “God’s word on integration” beside an article claiming that the equal rights campaign was a Russian idea, not an American one.⁴⁰ “If God intended the races to be one,” one article prompted, “then why did He create them different?”⁴¹ Propaganda material like the *Citizens’ Council* newspaper helped southern Protestants justify segregation not only by endorsing the idea that Christians can, and *should*, deny integration, but also by inducing a fear that racial equality would aid a Russian agenda at the expense of American democracy. The Citizens’ Council portrayed southern civil rights activists as “Negro Soviets,” duped by an international campaign to “mongrelize” the United States.⁴²

The Citizens’ Council took full advantage of Southern Protestant clergymen who advocated a split from their national councils. Both groups benefited from employing anticommunist rhetoric when describing progressive denominational leaders. The Citizens’ Council began publishing editorials that denounced organizations like the National Council of Churches (NCC) as communistic, while local pastors used Citizen’s Council publications to reach a larger audience than their Sunday morning congregations. In many ways, the relationship between the Citizens’ Council and local clergymen perpetuated the tendency among lay Mississippians to fear “outside agitation,” whether the outside influence came from their denomination’s national leadership or communist

³⁹ “Who Has God’s Word on Integration,” *Citizens’ Council* (Jackson, MS), April 1956.

⁴⁰ “Who Has God’s Word on Integration,” *Citizens’ Council* (Jackson, MS), April 1956.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1956.

⁴² “Drive for ‘Equality’ Was Born in Russia,” *Citizens’ Council* (Jackson, MS), April 1956.

conspirators.⁴³ For southern believers susceptible to Citizen's Council propaganda, though, National Church Councilmen and communist agitators were one in the same.

Part III: Redbaiting Tactics of the Citizens' Council

The tactic of denouncing national church leadership was common because it allowed local level church leadership to justify the maintenance of segregation. Both the Citizens' Council and local leaders understood that southern Christians valued national authority, and as a result, they redbaited the NCC and attempted to biblically justify their refusal to comply with the *Brown* decision. Portraying civil rights sympathizers as dupes to communism became key to the segregationist campaign, especially considering the paranoia that came with the Cold War.⁴⁴ "The international conspirators, socialists and communists in America are calling the tune," one *Citizens' Council* article declared, "and loyal Christian Americans are dancing to it."⁴⁵ After characterizing integrationist Christians as naïve and "unthinking," the Citizens' Council subtly warned lay churchgoers of the consequences of racial equality by equating black civil rights to eventual "usurpation" of religious liberty for all Americans. "Remember, good folks," the Citizens' Council urged, that the same people who want to abolish the Christmas holiday from public schools "are the people who are telling you that segregation is un-Christian."⁴⁶ Finally, the article warns churchgoers that the previously respected NCC

⁴³ John H. Knight, "A Minister Protests—The NCC's Delta Project—An Experiment in Revolution!" *The Citizen* 8, June 1964, 6-9.

⁴⁴ Mary L. Dudziac, "Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative," *Stanford Law Review* vol. 4, no. 1, (Nov. 1988), 63.

⁴⁵ "Beware of Christ-less Christianity: A Warning to Thoughtful Americans," *Citizens' Council* (Jackson, MS), June 1956.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

authorities may have renounced not only their democratic ideals, but key tenets of Christianity as well. The article accuses NCC Reverend Harry Emerson Fosdick of atheism, quoting his book; “I am not deeply concerned whether you believe in the Virgin Birth of Jesus,” Fosdick wrote, “although as you know, I cannot believe it.”⁴⁷ The article concludes that “false” reverends like Fosdick in the NCC “believe in integration, but do not believe in Jesus Christ as the only begotten Son of God.” This article illustrates typical Citizens’ Council propaganda, designed to perpetuate the belief that local churches should stay as disassociated from the NCC as possible.

A pointed attack on the NCC appeared on the front page of the April 1956 edition of the *Citizens’ Council*, the organization’s monthly newspaper published in Jackson, Mississippi. Titled “Strange Affinity for Russian Goals,” the article explicitly denounced the NCC in two ways: first, by equating progressive leaders to communists, and second, by perpetuating the friction that existed between Protestant authorities and local practitioners.⁴⁸ The article states that the NCC consciously involved itself in “highly controversial” political activities, despite “strong condemnation by a committee of laymen.” While members of the committee encouraged the NCC not to adopt an official integrationist stance, the article states, the Council committed itself to “carrying out proposals sponsored by the Reds, and which are against the unity... of the United States.”⁴⁹ By linking the NCC to “Russian goals,” the Citizen’s Council promoted the

⁴⁷ “Beware of Christ-less Christianity: A Warning to Thoughtful Americans,” *Citizens’ Council* (Jackson, MS), June 1956.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

paradoxical belief that *integrationists* devalued “unity of the United States,” not vice versa.⁵⁰

Citizens’ Council criticism was not limited to national church leadership; the organization also used their newspaper to scare local ministers into refusing to integrate. In a 1956 article titled “Pinkos in the Pulpit,” the Citizens’ Council advertised the “2109” report, in which a group of segregationist Methodist clergymen exposed “sympathetic” ministers for their involvement with communism.⁵¹ The article concluded that ministers who were open to integration were also guilty of “socialistic activities,” distributing left-wing “propaganda” within the church, and “attempting to keep the Communist Party on the election ballots in the United States.”⁵² By insinuating that all southern integrationist ministers were working for a “secular, and often international, propaganda project,” the Citizens’ Council diminished the authority of pastors who advocated desegregation on moral grounds.⁵³

Part IV: Biblically Ordained Segregation

Some lay church members believed that they had effectively exposed the NCC for their “iron curtain methods;” others worried that by continuing segregation, they were not adhering to the Bible’s instruction to obey government authority.⁵⁴ In order to dispel some of the latter belief, Baptist pastor and Citizens’ Council Vice Chair Carey Daniel

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ “Pinkos in the Pulpit,” *Citizens’ Council* (Jackson, MS), April 1956.

⁵² “Pinkos in the Pulpit,” 1956.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ “Should Some Church Leaders Repent?” D. B. Red to Citizens’ Council, *Citizen’s Council: 1949-1962*. Mississippiana Collection. McCain Library and Archives. University of Southern Mississippi.

delivered a sermon on defending segregation. Reprinted into a pamphlet in 1955 and distributed by the Citizens' Council, Carey's sermon became one of many propaganda items which shared a single theme: that God ordained segregation, and the Supreme Court would be wrong to ignore divine instruction.⁵⁵ Convincing Southern Protestants that the *Brown* decision was more motivated by left-wing conspirators than biblical instruction became increasingly important, especially for segregationists like Daniel, who was personally invested in both the Citizens' Council and the Protestant Church.

In "God The Original Segregationist," Daniel refuted the idea that the Bible teaches Christians to "live in obedience" to government authorities. He explains that many misguided "patriotic Americans" believe to be "duty-bound to submit" to the Supreme Court, without actually deciding for themselves if the *Brown* decision contradicts the Bible.⁵⁶ The only real duty that Christians have, Daniel argued, is to rank their "allegiance to God Almighty" over their allegiance to "human legislators."⁵⁷ Therefore, because the Supreme Court contradicted its "FIVE previous decisions" on racial segregation, Christians are bound to remind their government of both the Bible and the Constitution's safeguards. Daniel even refutes the idea that all believers meant to be "one," unified and indistinct, through their belief in Christ. He argues first, that the "oneness" prescribed in John 17:11 is "purely spiritual," and therefore *physical* disunity cannot be sinful. Second, and most importantly, Daniel explains that blacks in the South do not wish for *physical* "oneness" with their white brothers.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-64*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 175.

⁵⁶ Carey Daniel, "God The Original Segregationist," (by author, Dallas, TX, 1955), 6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 5, 8.

In the same way that many segregationist pastors viewed the choice between Supreme Court compliance and Southern cultural preservation as “a choice between God’s way or the way of Satan,” Daniel defended segregation by arguing that the Negro’s truest enemy is the liberal politician.⁵⁹ “We had no Negro problem,” Daniel says, until “Communist-inspired pressure groups decided to create one for us here.”⁶⁰ He claims that the only integrationist blacks in the South are those who had been convinced by “outside troublemakers” trying to “mongrelize... and enslave” the United States. By convincing churchgoers that blacks in the South actually wanted to maintain segregation, pastors like Daniel offered relief to Christians who struggled over the immorality of white supremacy. Daniel strategically told Christians that “the Negroes themselves have their own Councils for Segregation,” in order to prove that outside agitators were meddling in a custom which both races wished to maintain.⁶¹ Finally, Daniel equates “communistic” integrationists to atheists, urging lay churchgoers to withdraw their church membership if their pastor refuses to recognize that the “only Christian stance to take” is segregation.⁶²

By examining the relationship between the Citizens’ Council and southern clergymen, the paradox of segregationist theology becomes visible. The Citizens’ Council strategically involved ministers in their campaign to preserve white supremacy in the south, realizing that church leaders were a “prize catch,” due to their respectability and moral authority.⁶³ Although many ministers claimed to be officially apolitical, their

⁵⁹ Joseph Crespino, “The Christian Conscious of Jim Crow: White Protestant Ministers and the Mississippi Citizens’ Councils, 1956-1964,” *Mississippi Folklife*, vol. 31, no. 1 (Fall 1998), 39.

⁶⁰ Daniel, “God The Original Segregationist,” 8.

⁶¹ Daniel, “God The Original Segregationist,” 9.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶³ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, 93.

reluctance to comply with the *Brown* decision, coupled with their unwillingness to compromise with National Church Councils on the race issue and association with the Citizens' Council, prove otherwise. Furthermore, the Citizens' Council was widely criticized for being anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic, yet the organization jumped at the opportunity to praise Jews for their racial purity and geographic exclusivity, and published Catholic sermons that denounced integrationists as communists and "pseudo-Christians."⁶⁴ Finally, while ministers like Douglas Hudgins attempted to sidestep politics by remaining silent, they actually sent a strong message to southern Christians: that their salvation could remain unblemished even if they ignore social injustice. This disregard for black inequality, coupled with the equation of civil rights activism with communism, allowed southern Christians to "feel comfortable" with segregation.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ John H. Knight, "A Minister Protests," 6-9.

⁶⁵ Erle Johnston, *Mississippi's Defiant Years: An Interpretive Documentary with Personal Experiences*, (Lake Harbor Publishers, 1990), 25.

Chapter 3: Magnolia State Menace: The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and its efforts to uphold white supremacy, 1956-1973

In a 1964 exclusive story by Ramparts Magazine, Louis Lomax, J. H. Griffin, and Dick Gregory charged the United States government with possessing the authority to eradicate Civil Rights injustices, but lacking the desire to do so.¹ The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission took advantage of their relationship with national agencies, including the FBI and CIA, in order to uphold white supremacy in the state. The organization was able to intimidate both black and white Mississippians, actively implementing fear tactics, including the publication of names of citizens who were suspected of interracial rapport. Despite the Sovereignty Commission's self-proclaimed dedication to defending their state's rights, many believed that their efforts were in vain, considering the Federal Government's inaction against racial injustices in the South. In almost all cases, the citizens whose names appeared in the publications were accused of Communism, even if the allegations were fruitless.² The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission was successful in scaring white Mississippians into Civil Rights inaction through appealing to the doctrine of interposition, but the Commission faced limitations due to their reliance on anti-Communist rhetoric and cooperation from local Mississippi officials.

In his essay, "Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View From the Trenches," African American historian Charles Payne explained that the Federal

¹ Magazine Exclusive, *Mississippi Eyewitnesses: The Three Civil Rights Workers— How They Were Murdered*, 1964, box 142, folder 8, Coll. M191, Johnson Family Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

² J. Eugene Cook, *The Ugly Truth About the NAACP*, pamphlet, box 2, folder 24, Coll. M99, Citizen's Council/Civil Rights Collection, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

Government often did little to ensure liberty and equality for all Americans. Instead of acting as an advocate for justice, Payne explained “American institutions have always played an important role in the creation and maintenance of racism.”³ Payne’s claim proved especially true when examining the role that the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission played in maintaining white supremacy between 1956 and 1973, when, in the spirit of defending the state’s right to interposition, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission was established. Its creators promised that the agency would work to safeguard the state “from encroachment upon its rights by the Federal Government or any branch, department or agency thereof; and to resist the usurpation of the rights and powers reserved.”⁴ Ironically, though, the Sovereignty Commission itself encroached on the rights of Mississippians, actively seeking out civil rights proponents and labeling them as communists.

Part I: Background of Redbaiting in the South

The claim that racial equality would lead to communism, used to slow the progress of liberals in the Jim Crow Era South, was nothing new to Mississippians. Since before the 1940s, redbaiting threatened any union activity, progressive organizations, and interracial coalition throughout the South. The Southern Conference for Human Welfare, once called “the most red-baited, interracial enterprise on the 1930s,” assembled the

³ Charles Payne, “Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View From the Trenches,” in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 115.

⁴ Mississippi Official and Statistical Register, 1956-1960, Mississippiana and Rare Books Collection, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

South's progressives who sought both economic solutions and Civil Rights.⁵ In 1938 in Birmingham, Alabama, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) was created to inform Southerners about labor unionization, to denounce the poll tax and racial inequality, and to endorse President Roosevelt's plan to close the economic gap.⁶ Not surprisingly, the SCHW's location in Birmingham worked to attract a diverse group of both impoverished white farmers and black industrial workers. The interracial nature of the organization provoked a degree of paranoia among white southerners, which was only exacerbated by the SCHW's refusal to deny membership to American Communists. At the SCHW's founding, a meeting which Eleanor Roosevelt attended, President Roosevelt sent his acknowledgement of support. Showing his optimism for the organization's success, Roosevelt encouraged that "the South will long be thankful" for the day that the SCHW was born.⁷

Roosevelt's optimism proved to be a naive confidence in a region whose racial persecution and anti-Communist paranoia would undermine progressive organizations. Mississippi Representative John E. Rankin, who served as an early link between Southern racism and "Americanism" on Capitol Hill, became a member of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1945.⁸ Through his seat on the HUAC, Rankin could promote his ideals of maintaining white supremacy in the South by portraying organizations like the SCHW as Communist-led. The HUAC's persecution of the SCHW led to their fall in 1948. More importantly, though, this instance of redbaiting would

⁵ Yasuhiro Katagiri, *Black Freedom, White Resistance, and Red Menace: Civil Rights and Anticommunism in the Jim Crow South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), 3-4.

⁶ Katagiri, *Black Freedom, White Resistance, and Red Menace*, 4.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 6.

serve as the model for officials seeking out other progressive groups in the South. By early 1956, a full-fledged attack on the NAACP had developed, with Southern white officials targeting the group for threatening white constitutional liberties. HUAC's claim that the NAACP had "true intent to spread communism" circulated throughout the South in a pamphlet by the Citizens' Council, an organization which accepted funding from the Sovereignty Commission.⁹

Part II: Connection to the Citizens' Council in Mississippi

Despite its founding in the wake of the *Brown* decision, the Citizens' Council claimed officially that their organization was apolitical in nature. Just one year after the group began meeting regularly, though, the state government in Mississippi was already heavily guided by Citizens' Council influence.¹⁰ In part, the group's political power resulted from the prestige of its individual members. Because the Citizens' Council included physicians, lawyers, and other wealthy and socially powerful Southerners, the organization was more "respectable" than violent forerunners like the Klu Klux Klan.¹¹ Klansmen attacked with brutishness and physical cruelty, while Citizens' Councilors attacked with propaganda and strangled black Southerners with their political pull.

In its 1954 session, the Mississippi legislature introduced an amendment that would allow public schools to close instead of integrate. The resolution passed easily

⁹ "The Ugly Truth About the NAACP," 1956, Citizen's Council/Civil Rights Collection; Typescript, "Amount of Appropriation for June 30, 1962-June 30, 1964 Biennium," box 135, folder 10, Coll. M191, Johnson Family Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

¹⁰ Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council*, 319.

¹¹ Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States' Rights* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), xxx.

within the legislature, and Mississippians widely supported the idea of temporarily closing schools to oppose the *Brown* decision. Historian Yasuhiro Katagiri explains that when the resolution was brought to public vote, the Citizens' Council had established official chapters in "twenty-six counties," although more chapters may have existed unofficially.¹² In the counties where Citizens' Council chapters had been established, public support for the amendment was the highest. This spike in public support demonstrates the influence that the Citizens' Council had on Mississippi voters; the organization "provide[d] the state legislature" with a support system of wealthy local leaders who white voters knew and respected.¹³

The relationship between the Citizens' Council and the Mississippi legislature was strong before the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission was created, and grew even stronger after its establishment. After Governor James Coleman won the election in 1955, he proposed a series of statutes that would further secure white supremacy in Mississippi.¹⁴ Coleman envisioned a segregation program, led by a select group of men who would serve as Mississippi's protectors of southern tradition and state sovereignty. To show their support for the new governor's plan, the Citizens' Council in Jackson immediately "endorse[d] the seven proposals" that Coleman suggested.¹⁵ With strong support from powerful segregationists like William J. Simmons, one of the leaders of the Jackson Citizens' Council, state politicians gained confidence in their creation of the Sovereignty Commission.¹⁶

¹² Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission*, xxxii.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xxxiv.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xxxv.

¹⁶ Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission*, xxxv.

Once the Sovereignty Commission was created, the relationship deepened; the Citizens' Council evolved from a segregationist support system to a financial partner. The leaders of the Sovereignty Commission understood how crucial the Citizens' Council was in maintaining segregation, which led to their allocation of tax funding to Citizens' Council chapters across Mississippi. For the fiscal years between July 1, 1960 and June 30, 1965, the Sovereignty Commission paid an approximate total of \$169,500.00 to the Citizens' Council.¹⁷ In monthly increments, the Citizens' Council received between \$2,000.00 and \$5,000.00 from the Sovereignty Commission's account, which was comprised of Mississippi taxpayers' money.¹⁸ With financial help from the Sovereignty Commission, Citizens' Council chapters could better impact Mississippi residents. The funding helped equip the Citizens' Council to publish their monthly newspaper, the *Citizens' Council*, their monthly journal, *The Citizen*, along with other propaganda outlets that the organization utilized to reach readers.¹⁹

Part III: Relationship with Northern Anticommunists and State Duties

After the 1954 Warren Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Mississippi authorities strengthened their close relationship with Northern anti-Communists, who helped Deep South segregationists find a renewed use for red labeling. By the "blending of race-baiting with red-baiting," Mississippi segregationists used political backing from northern anti-Communists to support organizations like the

¹⁷ Schedule of Payments Made to Citizens' Council Forum, box 2, folder 9, Erle Johnston Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Citizen's Council/Civil Rights Collection, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

Sovereignty Commission. In return, the outside supporters took advantage of Mississippi as a new stage on which to launch their campaign for Americanism.²⁰ The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, which taxpayers funded and key northern conservatives assisted, was a product of an intricate link between the American anti-Communist agenda and the battleground for black Civil Rights in Mississippi.

The Sovereignty Commission, then, was created on the backdrop of the post-*Brown* paranoia. Cloaked in vaguely-addressed authority, the agency accepted the duty “to do and perform and all acts and things deemed necessary and proper to protect the sovereignty of the State of Mississippi... from the encroachment thereon by the Federal Government.” The Mississippi Legislature also endowed the Sovereignty Commission with the power to “subpoena and examine witnesses,” to require “the production of any books,” and to issue monetary punishments to any person who “refuse[s] to appear” before the investigators.²¹ Despite its broad range of liberties, the Sovereignty Commission was led by a relatively small, yet powerful group of men. Governor J. P. Coleman took the title of Chairman, with Lieutenant Governor Carroll Gartin following as Vice-Chairman.²² With only eleven other original investigators, Governor Coleman used the Sovereignty Commission more conservatively than his successors would; he focused the agency’s early efforts on demonizing the NAACP and soliciting black informants.²³

²⁰ Katagiri, *Black Freedom, White Resistance, and Red Menace*, 22.

²¹ “House Bill No. 880,” *Laws of the State of Mississippi: Appropriations, General Legislation, and Resolutions*, 1956, Mississippiana and Rare Books Collection, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

²² Mississippi Official and Statistical Register, 1956-1960, Mississippiana and Rare Books Collection, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

²³ Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission*, 36-37.

During the first years after the Sovereignty Commission's inception, the agency was often criticized for being a "stand-by force with most of its powers and resources unused."²⁴ In 1959, when segregationist leaders in Mississippi decided that the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission had not been "vigorous enough" in persecuting Civil Rights activity, another vigilante group was created to serve as a more active authority against integration. The newly established agency, the Mississippi General Legislative Investigating Committee, would be the first to establish the connection with J. B. Matthews, a leading anti-Communist investigator from New York.²⁵ Although the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission eventually saw incalculable benefits from J. B. Matthews's support, the Mississippi General Legislative Committee was the more proactive agency in seeking outside connections. Once onboard with the Committee's agenda in Mississippi, Matthews served as a pivotal witness in the hearings of 1959, whose goal was to erode the NAACP's influence in the state.²⁶

The Mississippi General Legislative Investigating Committee commissioned Matthews to travel from New York to deliver his testimony before an audience of Citizen's Council officials and Sovereignty Commission investigators.²⁷ At the two-day hearings, the link between Northern anti-Communist and Southern anti-integration advocates was, in essence, handed to the Sovereignty Commission. J. B. Matthews testified, claiming to possess evidence proving that the NAACP was "the most heavily infiltrated" Communist front in the United States.²⁸ After the hearings, the Sovereignty

²⁴ Ibid, 35.

²⁵ Katagiri, *Black Freedom, White Resistance, and Red Menace*, 174.

²⁶ Ibid., 175.

²⁷ Ibid., 178-179.

²⁸ Katagiri, *Black Freedom, White Resistance, and Red Menace*, 182.

Commission pursued relationships with both J. B. Matthews and a second nation-leading anti-Communist, Myers Lowman. Lowman, who made his initial appearance in Mississippi at the hearings, would eventually accept Sovereignty Commission payments for his work in “educat[ing] Mississippi.”²⁹ The Sovereignty Commission utilized Lowman as an asset to their redbaiting campaign, hiring him to work in the “subversive field,” and to launch a series of talks against outside agitators at schools and colleges.³⁰ Thus, although the Mississippi General Legislative Investigating Committee made the initial connections with Northern-born anti-Communists like Matthews and Lowman, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission enjoyed the acclaim that the outsiders brought to their anti-integration crusade.

Anti-Communist smearing did hinder the NAACP’s influence in Mississippi, but the Sovereignty Commission’s and Citizen’s Council’s tactics proved to be somewhat overstated. In an NAACP publication, “Dixie Dynamite,” author and activist Stan Opotowski called for both black and white readers to recognize that legislative officials have stripped both races of their freedoms. Opotowsky listed a number of constitutional rights, addressing “Freedom of Speech,” for example, and followed the presumed “liberty” with an occasion of that freedom being denied in the South. Under the publication’s “Breakdown of Civil Rights” section, Opotowski charges that state legislators have stripped both black and white southerners of their “Freedom to Assemble;” worse yet, the Federal Government has failed to alleviate their strife. “Most southern states have passed laws specifically banning interracial meetings of any kind,”

²⁹ Typescript, “Amount of Appropriation for June 30, 1962- June 30, 1964 Biennium,” box 135, folder 10, Coll. M191, Johnson Family Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

³⁰ Ibid.

Opotowski writes; “The NAACP is either outlawed or under investigation by the legislatures of all but two southern states.”³¹

In the same publication, Opotowski explained that the South’s liberals and moderates refused to speak against segregation because of widespread fear. Liberal Southerners are “in hiding,” due to repeated instances of job loss, social ostracism, and death threats.³² Opotowski cites the case of Hazel Brannon Smith, a famous journalist from Lexington, Mississippi, who denounced her local sheriff for killing an innocent black man. After her criticism, Smith experienced such egregious repercussions that liberals all over Mississippi considered her case an example of what could happen if they challenged the state’s racial order.³³ Finally, one of the most important features of the NAACP publication is its appeal to conservatism. Throughout “Dixie Dynamite,” the NAACP employed anti-Communist rhetoric, claiming that segregationists had duped “one fourth of the nation.” Opotowski alleged that white supremacist officials were equivalent to a “brigade of bigots” whose regional deception was “matched only by the Communist Party within Russia.”³⁴ This claim exemplified the flexibility of redbaiting tactics, yet proved its shortcoming. In Mississippi’s atmosphere of Cold War paranoia, both the integrationist and the segregationist campaigns attempted to gain credibility by comparing their foes to Communists.

Aside from their dependence on anti-Communist allegations, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission also relied on city officials to both provide information on

³¹ Stan Opotowski, “Dixie Dynamite: The Inside Story of the White Citizen’s Councils,” box 1, folder 25, Citizen’s Council/Civil Rights Collection, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

black activists and to economically pressure integrationists into silence. This alliance between the Commission and city officials is especially evident in the beach desegregation case of Harrison County during the late 1950s and early 1960s. In May of 1959, Dr. Gilbert Mason led a small group of black swimmers to the segregated Gulf Coast beach. Upon noticing the group, police officers immediately ordered them to leave the public beach. Mason and Murray Saucier, one of the other swimmers, then followed the officers back to the police station, asking whether or not “the public” included black swimmers.³⁵ Unable to answer, the police chief sent the two men away. When they returned to the police station the next day, the mayor of Biloxi, Laz Quave, met the two men at the door. Demonstrating his full cooperation with the local police, Quave simply told the men that if they returned to the public beach in Biloxi, they would be arrested, and “that’s all there is to it.”³⁶

Part IV: Harrison County Case

Investigator Zack Van Landingham helped the Sovereignty Commission capitalize on Harrison County officials’ opposition to integrated beaches. Working together, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and the city officials hoped to thwart beach integration. While investigators could conduct interviews and spy on anyone who signed a petition to integrate the beaches, local officials “used economic coercion” to force blacks to comply with the segregated beach plan.³⁷ The Sovereignty

³⁵ J. Michael Butler, “The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and Beach Integration, 1959-1963: A Cotton-Patch Gestapo?” *The Journal of Southern History* 68, (Feb., 2002), 114.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Butler, “The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and Beach Integration, 1959-1963,” 118.

Commission and local officials strategically decided to focus on coercing blacks who they deemed most cooperative. Instead of targeting Dr. Gilbert Mason, the leading activist for beach integration, they turned their attention to Gulfport NAACP President, Dr. Felix Dunn. While both doctors relied primarily on black patients for their businesses, Dunn attributed more of his “financial success” to whites than Mason did. Dunn shared ownership of “jukebox and cigarette machines” in the area with Harrison County Sheriff Curtis Dedeaux, which led the Sovereignty Commission to conclude that Dunn would respond more strongly to financial threats.³⁸

The investigators’ assumptions about Dunn proved to be true; “economic pressure” led Dunn to not only renounce his position on beach integration, but also to promise to convince other Gulfport Negroes to back down.³⁹ Although Dunn’s concession to the local leaders’ arm-twisting in the Harrison County investigation was disappointing to many local blacks, his case is representative of a multitude of black informants to the Sovereignty Commission. Black cooperators were often hired to attend NAACP meetings, collect information on Civil Rights activists, and report back to the Sovereignty Commission. Although Felix Dunn became an informant because his own financial security was at stake, some African American informants volunteered out of pomposity. B. L. Bell, for example, became an informant because he believed himself to fall in a different “social class” than working class blacks. Other black agents volunteered as spies in order to alleviate some financial struggles, because the Sovereignty Commission could often pay them higher wages than their daily jobs.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid., 122-123.

³⁹ Ibid., 123; 125.

⁴⁰ Rick Bowers, *Spies of Mississippi: The Campaign to Stop Freedom Summer’s Civil Rights Movement of 1964*, documentary, directed by Dawn Porter (2014.)

Nonetheless, the Sovereignty Commission's reliance on grassroots cooperators demonstrates a weakness of the agency. While the Commission presented itself as Mississippi's protector against racial uprising, it actually "did little to curtail beach integration."⁴¹ The Commission failed to actively recruit white support, but instead, depended on local leaders like Sheriff Dedeaux, Mayor Quave, and Mayor Meadows to intimidate blacks. In some cases, the most evident reason that black informants ceded to the Sovereignty Commission was because city officials threatened to terminate their jobs.⁴² Without the combination of intimidation from local leaders and black informants, the Sovereignty Commission would not have been as successful in deferring Harrison County beach integration.

Between 1964 and 1966, the Sovereignty Commission continued its roles of employing agents from outside of Mississippi, working alongside sheriffs, and relying on the black community to cooperate. The Commission appealed to local police officials during Freedom Summer, asking them to "identify COFO workers in their respective areas." In return for the names of activists, the Commission provided sheriffs with "suggestions" of laws under which "agitators" could be arrested.⁴³ That same year, the Sovereignty Commission worked alongside two federal agents from the United States Secret Service. Returning to their early allegations of Communism against Civil Rights

⁴¹ Butler, "Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and Beach Integration," 146.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴³ Manuscript, "Report on Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, 1964-1967," Mississippiana and Rare Books Collection, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

activists, the Commission presented the agents with “a number of documents” proving Communistic activity among “agitators” in Mississippi.⁴⁴

The Sovereignty Commission devoted much of its efforts to finding a justifiable reason to maintain segregation, often leading the agency to reach out to the black community. In effort to disguise racial discord, the Commission paid a “responsible Negro group” to obtain “thousands of Negro signatures,” pledging their opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Once complete, the petition was sent to Washington, D.C. to “prove” that race relations in Mississippi did not need fixing.⁴⁵ Officials desperately wanted to keep Mississippi’s racial problems confined to Mississippi; Sovereignty Commission investigators tried to assure both federal officials and local officials that they could control any “agitation” that ensued from Freedom Summer.⁴⁶ In addition, the Sovereignty Commission tried to portray both Negroes and “agitators” as unclean and un-American. Historian Jenny Irons explains that the Commission’s success can sometimes be attributed to their willingness to make fraudulent claims against black Mississippians. For example, the Sovereignty Commission conducted a series of meetings with doctors, trying to acquire medical backing for segregation. In a futile attempt, the Sovereignty Commission grasped for proof that black students with “sickle-cell anemia” would transmit the disease, threaten[ing] white school children.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Manuscript, “Report on Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, 1964-1967,” Mississippiana and Rare Books Collection, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Report, Virgil Downing to File. “Invasion of Mississippi by Northern College Students,” July 1, 1964, box 136, folder 1, Johnson Family Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

⁴⁷ Jenny Irons, *Reconstituting Whiteness: The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010), 95.

By examining the tactics, successes, and shortcomings of Mississippi's tax-funded spy agency, historians may begin to answer why average white Mississippians so vehemently endorsed the state's stronghold of segregation. The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission played on an atmosphere of Cold War paranoia, insisting that any progressive or interracial alliance was Communist-led. In 1964, Governor Paul B. Johnson characterized Mississippi as "the most law-abiding state in the nation."⁴⁸ His appeal to "law and order," despite the blatant denial of black Mississippians their right to organize and to vote, provides insight into the segregationist mindset. Nonetheless, the Sovereignty Commission strategically downplayed racial friction, appealed to anti-Communism to scare both Negroes and white moderates, and worked with local officials to ensure that white supremacy was maintained. During the existence of the Sovereignty Commission, many Mississippians succumbed to the agency's tactics for maintaining segregation in the Magnolia State; as Stan Opotowski reminded his "Dixie Dynamite" subscribers, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ "Report on Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, 1964-1967," Mississippiana and Rare Books Collection.

⁴⁹ Opotowsky, "Dixie Dynamite," 18.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This study of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and the Citizens' Councils in Mississippi demonstrates some of the effects that communist allegations had on the Civil Rights Movement. Although the link between civil rights activists and the Communist Party was often a difficult point for segregationists to prove, some of the equation was predicated on the idea that some African Americans in the south had dabbled in communism before the movement even began. As a result, segregationist groups in Mississippi took advantage of the paranoia that the Cold War brought, distributing anticommunist literature, financially threatening African Americans who were too outspoken about equality, and actively seeking out civil rights workers that they could label as communists.

This thesis also attempts to determine how the South's fear of outside interposition affected Christian theology during the racially turbulent years after *Brown*. On one hand, protestant pastors often adopted an attitude of political detachment. After the Supreme Court's decision in 1954, protestant pastors like William Douglas Hudgins claimed that political matters had no place within the Christian church, and thus refused to address integration from the pulpit. On the other hand, though, the pastors' attempt to remain apolitical was indeed a political stance. Refusal to address the race issue did not ensure that Mississippi's protestant pastors remained neutral. Instead, indifference among clergymen allowed churchgoers to ignore the inherent inequality of African Americans and neglect to confront the goals of the Civil Rights Movement.

While Mississippi's clergymen preached that racial segregation did not deny biblical instruction, state politicians proclaimed that refusing to integrate would not be

unlawful. Despite their blatant denial of equality for black Mississippians, politicians like Governor Paul B. Johnson appealed to law and order to convince white Mississippians that racial discrimination was perfectly legal. The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission was instrumental in circulating this idea, using propaganda and false claims to equate integrationists to communists.

The research is grounded in a number of collections in the McCain Archives, including the William D. McCain pamphlets, the Mississippiana Collection, the Erle Johnston Papers, and the Citizen's Council Papers. The McCain Library also holds the full collection of the Citizen's Council periodical, *The Citizen*, which was useful in exemplifying some of the key tactics the group used to maintain segregation in Mississippi's Protestant churches. This thesis is also based on correspondences between the Citizen's Council and the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, found in the University of Southern Mississippi digital archives.

While the correspondence between the Citizen's Council and the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission indicated the financial relationship between the two groups, further research is required to determine the full extent of the alliance. An objective of this thesis is to explain how the two groups appealed to anticommunism to scare Mississippians away from civil rights activism. Although historians have determined that at least some working class blacks and union members did identify with the Communist Party, further research could determine whether or not segregationist leaders actually believed the allegations they spread. With regard to the Church, additional research could encompass the Catholic response to worship integration. Some Catholic clergymen actually appealed to anticommunism and paternalism to convince churchgoers to

integrate, but further research could determine the extent to which the Church was successful.

The late-1950s relationship that emerged between Protestant church leaders and Citizen's Council members had a significant impact on the way white evangelicals thought about integration. In the same way, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission used anticommunism to justify a denial of privacy rights to many Mississippians. Finally, because biblical theology and the fear of communism, both widespread in the post-*Brown v Board* South, were malleable themes, integrationists and segregationists both strategically constructed their arguments around religion and politics to propound their respective viewpoints. In short, appeals to Christianity and democracy were used both for and against integration in the South, and segregationist groups like the Citizen's Council and the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission worked assiduously to keep Mississippians as politically conservative and numb to civil rights negotiators as possible.

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