

Chapter 12 Post War Civil Rights

Most black soldiers returning to the Delta from World War Two had no idea of the existence – or even the importance in their lives – of the private Delta Council and the National Cotton Council (NCC). Both institutions came about several years before World War Two began and affected the lives of many inside and outside of Mississippi, as powerful enemies of civil rights, labor, and social reforms.ⁱ

Consolidation, mechanization and diversification were causing huge shifts in Delta agriculture during the late 1940s and on into the 1950s. As farm sizes tripled, the number of farms actually fell by one-third. And while the decade began with 7 percent of the Delta's cotton picked by machine, it ended with mechanical pickers harvesting half the crop.ⁱⁱ

One Delta Council member, Coahoma County planter Richard Hopson, in 1947 tested a new mechanical cotton picker in his fields, and “strongly advocate[d]” its use by Delta farmers “as rapidly as possible” since it required only a fraction of the amount of labor used by the sharecrop system and would “equalize the white and Negro population which would make our racial problem easier to handle.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Displaced sharecroppers were being shifted into full-time wage-hand work; their dependents worked as seasonally employed cotton choppers and pickers. Dramatic cuts in cotton acreage and other improvements in fertilizers and herbicides were also bringing enormous changes to the Delta.

The largest producers could achieve higher productivity and dramatic savings in production costs with these changes. Planters like Eastland further benefited from government price supports.

But laborers who remained in the Delta would face a lifetime of destitution; the Delta Council even successfully lobbied the federal government to classify the few remaining sharecroppers as self-employed persons, thus eliminating their Social Security coverage.^{iv}

AS SOLDIERS CAME home, President Harry S. Truman was facing his own battles in Washington, D. C. Cold war rivalry with the Soviet Union was under way, and the revolt of former colonies around the world such as Kenya seemed to be taking Marxist form. Truman needed to act on the race question quickly to mollify the growing anger of black veterans and to demonstrate that the United States of America could deal with its own race issues. “The strongest country in the world should be able to counter the “continuous Communist thrust at the most flagrant failure of American society.”^v

In late 1946, the President appointed a Committee on Civil Rights that recommended he expand the civil rights section of the Department of Justice, create a permanent Commission on Civil Rights, pass anti-lynching and voter discrimination laws, and create new laws to end racial discrimination in jobs.

A. Phillip Randolph^{vi} had already organized the League for Nonviolent Civil Disobedience Against Military Segregation and the league's efforts prompted President Truman in 1948 to issue an executive order banning segregation in the armed forces. Truman actually issued two orders: one instituted fair employment practices in the civilian agencies of the federal government; the other provided for equality of treatment and opportunity in the armed forces without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin, attempting to

maintain black morale in the armed forces. Even so, the order to halt segregation took over a decade to implement.

A walkout of the Mississippi delegation from the Democratic National Convention – the Dixiecrat Revolt of 1948 – signaled to Truman how the white South felt about his racial policies. The revolt was aided by a bloc of Delta planters led by Walter Sillers, the state’s powerful Speaker of the Mississippi House and lifelong Democrat setting the stage for the eventual mass movement of Southern segregationists into the Republican Party.^{vii}

In the next election, Sillers, a Bolivar County planter, threw his support to the 1952 Eisenhower-Nixon presidential ticket. Sillers said he could not in good conscience support the “vicious, anti-Southern socialistic, civil rights, FEPC [Fair Employment Practices Commission] Democratic platform.”^{viii}

Sillers would remain one of the leading opponents of any true changes in race relations that would have benefited his state.

Hundreds of officials at the state level, like Sillers, vowed to defeat any anti-segregation, anti-lynching, or anti-poll tax laws and pledged to withhold any financial backing for a Truman re-election bid. Mississippi Governor Fielding L. Wright spoke to “my black constituents” directly in a radio address: “If any of you have become so deluded as to want to enter our hotels and cafes, enjoy social equality with the whites, then kindness and true sympathy requires me to advise you to make your home in some state other than Mississippi.”

With half the twentieth century over, blacks in Mississippi did not vote, did not serve on juries, and held no offices in local government. Their schools were still inferior; most lived in slum housing or worse; they received unequal treatment in the courts, sat in the back of the bus, and were segregated in illness, worship, and even in death.

If blacks were ever allowed to vote, a substantial black vote “would embarrass any white candidate” in Mississippi, historian James Silver wrote, “...but it is well to remember Senator Bilbo’s remark to an organizer for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers: ‘Son, when you can show me that you control any sizable number of voters, I’ll be the damndest champion you’ve ever had.’”

HORRID TREATMENT OF fellow blacks and the lack of basic freedoms greatly troubled Medgar Evers who dedicated his brief life to doing something about it. After using his GI Bill to get a degree in business from Alcorn A&M College in 1950, Evers moved to Mound Bayou, working for Dr. T.R.M. Howard as an agent for the newly formed Magnolia Life Insurance Company.

Facing the poverty and violence of the Mississippi Delta that would not go away, no matter how hard he and others tried, Evers experienced a deep, personal transformation that black Southerners sometimes call a blues moment. Observed historian Clyde Woods:

Here on the edge of the cotton fields, life was being lived on a level that Medgar, for all his acquaintance with the poor of both Mississippi and of Chicago’s teeming black ghetto, found hard to believe. In a way, a horrified fascination with it drew him back again and again even as the sight of that long-ago pile of bloody clothing had drawn him to the place in the woods near

Decatur where a negro had been lynched.... It was a long time before Medgar was able to piece together all of the elements of this vicious system.... All during that long unbelievably hot summer of 1952, Medgar sold insurance and gathered information. He was like a student driven by horror to hear more.... Sometime during that summer his anger reached a peak, and he began organizing chapters of the NAACP.... And for a time Medgar himself flirted intellectually with the idea of fighting back in the Delta. For a time he envisioned a secret black army of Delta Negroes who fought by night to meet oppression and brutality with violence ... a Mississippi Mau Mau.^{ix}

Amzie Moore, Aaron Henry and Evers all worked with Dr. Howard, a self-made entrepreneur and surgeon, to build the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL), hoping the group would provide a combined voice on economic interests of the Delta.^x

Congressman Charles Diggs of Detroit, NAACP leader Thurgood Marshall, and Congressman William Dawson of Chicago were among those who spoke before the Regional Council addressing issues of police brutality, voting rights and economic boycotts.

By the 1950s, Moore claimed a membership in RCNL of 100,000 in forty counties, and the organization sometimes held mass meetings with as many as thirteen thousand persons in attendance. Supported by dues and contributions from around the country, RCNL represented the ability of local black people to organize, a tradition later built on by the national civil rights organizations.^{xi}

Yet the more that postwar America changed, the more Mississippi pulled back into its own “self-contained little world,” historian Neil R. Peirce observed. The state allowed many important events to pass by, failing to see the connection between itself “... and all the new things going on – the UN, Marshall Plan, NATO, welfare measures at home.”

Mississippians were not in the mood for anything that looked like a centralized government since states rights “were the very heart of the South's solution to the race problem.”^{xii}

Officially, Mississippi observed Confederate Memorial Day, Robert E. Lee's, and Jefferson Davis' birthday but ignored national celebrations such as Lincoln's birthday and Memorial Day. “Confederate flags hung from porches all over the state; and in case anyone ever needed reminding, there was always the reproachful gaze of the noble stone soldier who stood atop the Confederate monument in every courthouse square.”^{xiii}

Mississippi could not remain in this self-imposed time capsule once lawyers of the NAACP in New York and Washington began winning cases against segregated universities in the border South. By 1950, the time had arrived for taking on the public school system on the doctrine of "separate but equal," used to separate blacks and whites since the end of the 19th century.

Plaintiffs from four states were involved, none from Mississippi, when *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, calling for integrated schools, was finally handed down on May 17, 1954 by the United States Supreme Court.

Sillers: "Abolish the public schools!"

One of the first official reactions to *Brown* came from Walter Sillers Jr., who represented Bolivar County from 1916 to 1966 and served as Speaker of the House for twenty-two years. Sillers wrote a five-page letter to Georgia's Attorney General Eugene Cook after Cook had called a meeting of attorneys general from several Southern states to strategize over the Supreme Court decision; Sillers wanted the group to "effectively meet the decision ... and at the same time preserve intact segregation in our schools."^{xiv}

The Supreme Court decision, Sillers wrote, was "not supported by reason or law." In this case, the Court had "gone the limit in its sympathy and concern for the feelings of the negro children and the effect it will have on their hearts and minds." While Delta blacks still made up the majority, the Court had not considered the impact on whites, he stated.

Since the decision was directed against public schools, the legislator offered the only way to meet the court's decision "fairly" was to abolish the public schools entirely, "and sell the buildings, grounds, buses, and equipment and other property to private individuals and/or corporations and let the state get entirely out of ... public education."

Once achieved, the government could be authorized to grant scholarships to "the educable children" allowing them to attend any school of their choice that would agree to their admission.

The question of public versus private school funding would come up every so often over the years, particularly in the Delta, where most of the segregated private (i.e., white) academies exist.

As late as 1972, both Aaron Henry and Rev. Emmett Burns of the NAACP were put on alert by a Jackson attorney that the Inverness public school system "intended to transfer a public school building to a private academy." Henry and Burns were told that the North Mississippi Rural Legal Services had agreed to challenge the practice.^{xv}

In 1974, a Noxubee County academy received from the State an award of approximately \$600 per student over the next three years "for the purpose of conducting special programs for mentally retarded children" – a "clearly unlawful" expenditure of funds.^{xvi}

Mississippians in 1954 could not have been surprised with *Brown* since two years prior, the state legislature created a program of teacher and school facility equalization as an alternative to ending segregation. Alternatively, the state had seriously considered proposals to abolish entirely public education very early on.^{xvii}

Brown was the zenith of a long-term strategy of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational, Inc. Fund (Inc. Fund) to secure the end of *Plessy v. Ferguson's* "separate but equal" doctrine of racial segregation^{xviii} To the black community and other supporters of civil rights, the landmark decision "was lauded with the status of a Magna Carta; to segregationists, it was a rallying cry for massive resistance," historian Woods stated.^{xix}

As the *Brown* decision neared, Greenville publisher Hodding Carter attended a meeting in New York to decide when a research report sponsored by the Ford Foundation should be released. In the end, the study of black education by forty scholars was released one day before *Brown* was announced: "The Negro and the Schools" was an indictment of separate-but-equal education.

By the following year, however, white opposition grew into massive resistance. Constance Baker Motley, one of the Inc. Fund's leading litigators during this period, recalled the response to *Brown*:

Southern states had resurrected the basic political themes that guided the South during the Civil War-- that is, nullification and interposition, which affirmed that a state had the constitutional right to nullify the effectiveness of any federal law or federal court decision with which it disagreed and to interpose its sovereignty between the decision or law and the federal government. Every Deep South state had enacted massive resistance laws. The North, East, and West were too far removed from the bitter afterglow of the Civil War fully to comprehend this threat to national unity. In some state capitals in the Old South, the Confederate flag was still flying or had been raised anew.^{xx}

Compared to the reaction of other Southern states, Mississippi's response to *Brown* was unparalleled. The Delta plantation bloc fought *Brown* from the start, and so did the state legislature.

Senator James O. Eastland gave his own opinion of what to do about *Brown* – ignore it: “On May 17, 1954, the Constitution of the United States was destroyed because of the Supreme Court's decision. You are not obliged to obey the decisions of any court which are plainly fraudulent [and based on] sociological considerations.”

John C. Satterfield, a litigator from Yazoo City and president of Mississippi's Bar Association (and later a two-term head of the American Bar Association) offered a Greenville dinner audience his “three methods” for continuing segregation, after *Brown*, one being “the gun and torch.” Satterfield also predicted bloodshed over the decision.

Despite the violent aftermath, *Brown* was critical to the black movement. Motley, later a U. S. District Court judge in New York, recalled that Roy Wilkins, NAACP executive director from 1955 to 1976 and the grandson of a Mississippi slave, complained in the 1940s that no matter how hard he tried, he could not get African Americans to join the struggle.

But with this Supreme Court decision, "they knew that something had happened when the Brown decision came down, that the world would be changing, and they felt that they could then do something."^{xxi}

After *Brown*, the messages from Wilkins and other NAACP leaders began to “make more sense” to African Americans. An NAACP official told the *New York Times* in 1956: "We've had a long way to go. We've had to overcome a lot of apathy built among the colored over the years."

Later, in 1961, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said the new wave of African-American militancy had developed because "the Negro has seen the exit sign to freedom" in the school desegregation decision, adding: "The whole nation put itself on record then as saying that segregation is wrong."^{xxii}

Aaron Henry would have no trouble recalling “our day” that came on May 17, 1954. “We were elated when we heard about the Supreme Court decision – a second emancipation. . . . Few of us dreamed we were setting out to battle with no weapons and no protection.

“The relatively quiet years of the early fifties were only the calm before the storm. The Supreme Court had given us a beautifully wrapped gift, but when we removed the shiny wrappings, the box was empty.”^{xxiii} Change, in other words, was destined to be slow.

In June, Clarksdale and Coahoma County school boards gathered for a biracial meeting, and Henry could see how the problems under discussion came from maintaining a segregated school system.

“Negro children had to get up so early in the morning to catch the school bus, since the bus had to make several trips to get all of them to school on time. It was the same in the evening when some children

didn't get home until seven or eight. I pointed out that if they used all of the buses to carry all of the children, the problem would vanish."^{xxiv}

A discussion on feeding children "who were too poor to eat in the school cafeteria" frustrated him, when the board "politely asked our consent to use leftover food to feed them. I argued that if we had all of the children in one school, food management would also be easier."

Segregation was the root of all school problems; Henry and other black leaders knew this and the Clarksdale leader finally made it clear he would no longer "go along with it" and intended to devote all of his energies to implementing the Supreme Court decision.

What happened next established once and for all the position of Black leaders on the question of implementing *Brown*.

Sillers called for a statewide meeting of black leaders, promising the governor that blacks would support segregation in the schools, despite *Brown*. Sillers, apparently misconstruing his own political power with blacks, promised endorsement by 100 state black leaders and got the governor's approval for the first statewide interracial meeting since Reconstruction, set in Jackson on July 1954.

Blacks were assured in advance of receiving a *promise* of massive state efforts to equalize white and black schools. Black segregationist Percy Greene, a Jackson publisher who was a segregationist, assisted both Sillers and Dr. T.R.M. Howard, a passive civil rights leader, with the compilation of the list of invitees. James Silver tells best what happened next:

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE Sillers opened the momentous conference. Governor White spoke of the *amicable* race relations of the past. As planned in the caucus [meeting the night before], Charlie Banks got the floor and argued for the abolition of segregation five or six others quickly follow suit. A conservative Negro publisher made a last stand for the old regime, but was roundly denounced by a woman delegate as being a classic example of the effects of segregation

In desperation, Sillers called on another known friend of the white man, the Reverend H.H. Humes. The minister was the center of all attention. 'Gentlemen,' he began, 'you all should not be mad at us. Those were nine white men that rendered that decision. Not one colored man had anything to do with it. The real trouble is that you have given us schools too long in which we could study the earth through the floor and the stars through the roof.'

At this point, Governor White, mumbling that you couldn't trust Negroes any more, called the meeting to an end. It was also the end of an era. As one of the *untrustworthy* related almost a decade later: 'For the first time I was really proud to be a Negro in Mississippi.' Since that day Mississippi has watched other Negroes whose courage, intelligence, and integrity fill many with awe and inspiration.^{xxv}

Governor Hugh White later followed up with a press statement: "I am stunned. I have believed that the vast majority of Negroes would go along. Now I am definitely of the opinion you can't put faith in any of them on this proposition."^{xxvi}

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- ⁱ Woods, 192.
- ⁱⁱ Cobb, 205. Cites Mississippi State Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 667 (State College, Miss., 1963) 5-6.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Woods, 154. Cites Cobb, 204.
- ^{iv} Cobb, 205. Cites *Wall Street Journal*, July 3, 1957.
- ^v Howard Zinn, "The People's History of the United States," (New York: Harper Perennial, 1980), 440.
- ^{vi} Randolph organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925, the first union of predominantly black workers granted a charter by the American Federation of Labor. The early civil rights leader also played a key role in persuading President Franklin D. Roosevelt to establish the Fair Employment Practices Committee in 1941. He wanted to stage a civil rights march on Washington that year, but Roosevelt was concerned about potential violence.
- ^{vii} Woods, 156.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, 157. Citing the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, October 24, 1952. Sillers was a planter, lawyer and former president of the Delta Council from tiny Rosedale, and was a powerful legislative figure in the state for many years.
- ^{ix} Woods, 176. Cites Myrlie Evers, 78-9, 84-5, 91-2.
- ^x Henry, 79; Woods, 176-177.
- ^{xi} Woods, 177.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.* "Lord God of hosts, Be with us yet, Lest we forget, Lest we forget," reads the carved inscription on the monument at the Kosciusko Courthouse promising "the South will live forever in the glory of your world." Nearly every county courthouse in Mississippi has such memorials to its confederate dead.
- ^{xiv} Letter dated May 21, 1954, by Walter Sillers to Hon. Eugene Cook. From the Walter Sillers, Jr. papers at the Charles Capps, Jr. archives at Delta State University.
- ^{xv} Letter to Aaron Henry and Rev. Emmett Burns, dated March 20, 1972, from Melvyn R. Leventhal. Part of the Aaron Henry collection.
- ^{xvi} Letter to Obie Clark, dated May 15, 1974, from Melvyn R. Leventhal. Part of the Aaron Henry collection.
- ^{xvii} Woods, 156.
- ^{xviii} Margaret M. Russell, "Cleansing Moments and Retrospective Justice," *Michigan Law Review*, March 1, 2003. Cites *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U. S. 537 (1896).
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxi} Watson, Denton L., "Assessing the Role of the NAACP in the Civil Rights Movement," *The Historian*, March 22, 1993.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.* Cites NAACP Annual Report, 1935; interview with Judge Constance Baker Motley, *New York Times*, September 17, 1991; *New York Times*, March 18, 1956, and May 14, 1961, 76.
- ^{xxiii} Henry, 85.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxv} Silver, "Mississippi: The Closed Society," 88.
- ^{xxvi} Henry, 91.