

Chapter 22 Medgar Evers

"People who lived through those days will tell you that something shifted in their hearts after Medgar Evers died, something that put them beyond fear.... At that point a new motto was born: After Medgar, no more fear."

Maryanne Voller, *Esquire*

It was Medgar Evers who first suggested that McDowell apply for law school at Ole Miss. Evers was proud of Meredith's success and wanted to see McDowell succeed, as well. McDowell kept his allegiances to the NAACP out of deference to his mentor, one day becoming the state NAACP head, himself.

In his death, Medgar Evers became a greater hero to those who knew him – Meredith and McDowell, certainly – and he became a national symbol of the black struggle in whole.

Cut down when he was leading a courageous battle against white supremacy, Evers had been forced to contend with NAACP leader Roy Wilkins, who it sometimes seemed as if he wanted to lead the Mississippi Movement from his office in New York. There was arrogance that only “they” – Wilkins and others from the national NAACP – knew what was best for Mississippi's progress. In Jackson, there were others who had pulled at Evers, as blacks were divided over questions of tactics and strategy.

Historian John Dittmer observed that Evers was never provided with true organization plans to follow and there was little money designated for Mississippi. Evers was not allowed to follow his own combative instincts; had this been allowed, the Jackson Movement would have been a very different experience. His was a life of elegance in leadership, a man who was worthy of the respect and support of those who later publicly identified themselves closely with him – some were the same people who had tried to control him, however, and never bothered to listen and take his advice.ⁱ

Charles Evers seized his brother Medgar's NAACP position before the funeral took place at the Arlington National Cemetery. It was a gutsy thing to do particularly since it appeared that Charles Evers received no invitation to do so; his brashness surprised and even angered NAACP leaders. One story is still told in Jackson, that Evers simply “stepped up to the microphone and announced he would be taking his brother's place.” Other versions propose there may have been an “agreement” struck between Charles Evers and Wilkins, beforehand.

Nothing would stop Charles Evers from honoring an agreement that he said was worked out between the brothers before Medgar was killed; each brother was to fill in for the other if something were to happen. NAACP officials may not have liked the arrangement, but Charles Evers could have cared less.

Many knew of Charles Evers, that he had drifted into the numbers racket in the military and then in Chicago, in his own words, “ran some girls for a while.” A bright, successful small business owner of several bars and a taxi service, Charles Evers quickly announced a major voter registration drive throughout the state and a boycott of all segregated business establishments. Later, he became the mayor of Fayette, ran for

governor, and become the first black placed on the National Democratic Party's major policy committee. And he became a friend of Robert Kennedy's.

A captivating storyteller, Charles Evers remembered his brother as the "saint of the Evers kids." "Slim and small boned, easygoing and quiet, with a real soft voice and a big, happy smile that warmed us all. He'd take long walks alone, kicking a tin can. Never wanted to hurt anyone.

"Smarter than the rest of us, but he studied more, too. He'd sit on our back porch for hours, reading some dog-eared book or the Negro papers. Medgar didn't like the rough and tumble, but when he set his mind to something he could be cold as ice. He was always on my butt about something. No one but me thought he'd do civil rights. Medgar always thought of other people's feelings. He always planned what he did, always measured the consequences."ⁱⁱ

The Evers were close." But Charles and Medgar were the closest. "We were not only roommates, but bedmates. Medgar shivered easily, always hated the cold. It was my job to keep him warm. At night, in the wintertime, those old sack sheets were cold. I'd lay down first, warm a spot, then shift over, give it to Medgar. Sometimes, I put my legs on him, just to keep my little brother warm."

The response of Southern politicians, as word of Medgar Evers' death spread throughout the U.S. Capitol, was to hold a special caucus to block upcoming civil rights legislation. Separately, the staff director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights called an FBI liaison, stressing potential violence that might erupt. "The shooting of Evers could be the spark that will set off the biggest and most violent racial demonstration this country has known," one civil rights commissioner warned.ⁱⁱⁱ

'...a Pawn in Their Game'

A few brave entertainers visited the Delta as murder and violence increased: Joan Baez performed several times in Greenwood, Batesville and Tougaloo College. Dick Gregory marched and led a major food program in Greenwood. One month after the murder of Medgar Evers, folksingers Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger gave a late-night concert at Silas McGhee's farm near Greenwood, featuring a song about Evers' slayer.

Greenwood, Miss., July 6: Three Northern folk singers led by Pete Seeger brought a folk-song festival to the Deep South this evening. They sang in the yard of a Negro farm home on the edge of a cotton patch three miles south of here. The song festival, or hootenanny, was sponsored by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which has been conducting a voter registration drive among Negroes in Mississippi delta towns for more than a year.

The festival was attended by 250 to 300 persons. Most of them were Negroes.... Three cars with white men in them were parked in a lane across the highway from the scene of the sing. There was also a highway patrol car with two policemen sitting along the road. There were no incidents. Joining Mr. Seeger in leading the songfest, in which most of the audience joined at one time or another, were Theodore Bikel and Bobby Dillon, who, like Mr. Seeger, are white.... One of the more popular songs presented by a local singer was one dedicated to Medgar W. Evers, the Mississippi field secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,

who was slain last month in Jackson, Mississippi.... The refrain of the song was that the man who shot Mr. Evers didn't know what he was doing and should be forgiven: "He's only a pawn in their game."^{iv}

A bullet from the back of a bush took Medgar Evers' blood.

A finger fired the trigger to his name.

A handle hid out in the dark,

A hand set the spark,

Two eyes took the aim,

Behind a man's brain;

But he can't be blamed --

He's only a pawn in their game."

Medgar Evers was assassinated first – five months before President John F. Kennedy, before Malcolm X, before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and before Sen. Robert F. Kennedy. While so many blacks were lynched and shot in Mississippi and the South, Evers was the first well-known civil rights leader who was killed in a way that would become far too familiar.

Bob Dylan's song "Only a Pawn in Their Game" focused on Evers' killing as an example of lowly workers, doing the dirty work for their malevolent masters: "Two eyes took the aim/Behind a man's brain/But he can't be blamed/He's only a pawn in their game."

Evers had struggled for almost ten years in his native Mississippi as the first field secretary of the NAACP, initiating voter registration drives, economic boycotts and sit-ins. He was exposed, more than any other black man ever had been in Mississippi, "to the collective wrath of the state's white population," Adam Nossiter wrote in his biography of Evers.^{vi}

Medgar Evers was first to assume a role never before held by a black Mississippian. He had become a public figure by the time of his death and was known about the state as a man directly challenging segregation.

It was one thing for a local leader to take a stand in his home county; that had begun to happen in Mississippi during the 1950s. But Evers was standing all over Mississippi, identified as the "head nigger" as one of the anonymous phone callers to his house put it. For more than six years, from the time he took over the NAACP job at the end of 1954 until March 1961 when nine black Tougaloo College students sat in at the public library in Jackson. ^{vii} Evers *was* the civil rights movement in Mississippi.^{viii}

ⁱ Dittmer, 169.

ⁱⁱ Charles Evers, "Have No Fear," (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1997), 8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Massengill, 141.

^{iv} "Northern Folk Singers Help Out at Negro Festival in Mississippi," *The New York Times*, July 7, 1963.

^v "Only a Pawn in their Game," Words and Music by Bob Dylan, 1963, *Special Rider Music*.

^{vi} Adam Nossiter, "Of Long Memory," (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 29.

^{vii} On March 27, 1961, nine Tougaloo College students [“the Tougaloo Nine”] sat down to read at the white Jackson Public Library. They were ordered to leave by police but refused and were taken to jail. The following day, undergraduates at all-black Jackson state College held a mass meeting and tried to march to the city jail. “This act of bravery and concern on the part of these nine young people has seemed to electrify Negroes [sic] desire for Freedom here in Mississippi, which will doubtless be shown in an increase in memberships and funds for 1961,” Evers wrote to Wilkins in March. (Nossiter, *Of Long Memory*, 49.)

^{viii} Ibid.