

# Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II

---

Volume 12

Article 8

---

2007

## Who Are We Now? Mississippi after the Murder of Medgar Evers

Christina Lynch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lynch, Christina (2007) "Who Are We Now? Mississippi after the Murder of Medgar Evers," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 12 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol12/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rschroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rschroggin@scu.edu).

## Who Are We Now? Mississippi After the Murder of Medgar Evers

Christina Lynch

On June 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy went on national radio and television and spoke to the nation about the importance of American unity. America was one nation that prided itself on freedom and yet all people within its borders were not free. Kennedy spoke of the urgency with which the changes that the civil rights movement sought should be brought about, because race should not delineate what rights one was given as an American. A nation should be one, yet even in this speech centered on unity, President Kennedy could not avoid using divisive language, "[w]e cannot say to 10 percent of the population...that your children cannot have the chance to develop whatever talents they have" Kennedy said, "I think we owe them and we owe ourselves a better country than that."<sup>1</sup> Kennedy sought to unite the two sides, the "we" and the "they," the white and the black, in hopes of forming the all inclusive "us," but less than twenty four hours later, a murder would take in Mississippi that would divide the nation even further, whites from blacks, Mississippians from Americans, that murder was the murder of Medgar Evers.

By June of 1963, Medgar Evers was the field secretary for and highest-ranking member of the

---

<sup>1</sup> John F. Kennedy. *Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights*, 11 June 1963, The White House, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/j061163.htm>.

NAACP in the state of Mississippi, making him a target for conservative, racist groups like the White Citizens Council.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after midnight on June 12, 1963 a proud member of the White Citizens Council, Byron De La Beckwith, shot and killed Evers in front of his home and then quickly fled the scene. De La Beckwith was put on trial in 1964 and again in 1965, but both trials resulted in a hung jury, and De La Beckwith was not convicted for Evers' murder until 1994.<sup>3</sup> The heinous manner of the murder, and the delayed justice that followed caused Americans of every skin color to turn their attention towards Mississippi and the injustices that were taking place within its borders.<sup>4</sup>

A question that has continuously surfaced among historians of the Evers case is how, between the years 1963 and 1965 following Evers' murder, the white population of Mississippi defended itself against the criticisms that the rest of the nation voiced with regards to their state? The trend among historians is to point to three critical defense strategies: an insistence that the Evers case symbolized a positive change in Mississippi, public defense of their actions, and denial of responsibility. The first strategy, as historian Flip Schulke points out, was backed by the idea that in Mississippi, any trial of a white man for a black man's murder was a good trial. In Mississippian mentality, even though the first two trials ultimately

---

<sup>2</sup> Sara Bullard, ed., *Free at Last A History of the Civil Rights Movement and Those Who Died in the Struggle* (Montgomery: Southern Poverty Law Center, 1989), 56.

<sup>3</sup> Claudia Dreifus. "The Widow Gets Her Verdict," *New York Times*, 27 November 1994, 69.

<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*. "Balance Sheet on Civil Rights," August 11, 1963, pg. 133.



resulted in hung juries, the fact that there was even a debate on the issue, and not an immediate “not guilty” verdict symbolized a positive change in their state.<sup>5</sup>

The second defense strategy, that of public verbal defense, is one which historian Willie Morris expresses. Following the civil rights movement, the people of Mississippi began to take on a new culture based on the defense of their actions became of increasing paranoia concerning what those on the outside thought of those within. What was once a deep sense of southern pride, Morris says was transformed into a deep sense of shame because of the nation’s clear disapproval. The shame that Mississippians felt would drive them to defend their ways and actions in every manner possible so as not to be the outcast of the nation any longer.<sup>6</sup>

Denial of responsibility, historian Hedrick Smith points out, is the final defense mechanism that Mississippi adopted in the wake of Evers’ murder. White Mississippi began to point a blaming finger at other states and the federal government; just about anyone whom it was even remotely possible to blame, was blamed. A media outlet that took to twisting the truth gave the every day citizens’ justification for this denial. When De La Beckwith was arrested in Jackson, the headline in the *Clarion Ledger*, the local paper, read “Californian Is Charged with Evers’ Murder,” because De La Beckwith had been born in California, the fact

---

<sup>5</sup> Flip Schulke, ed., *Martin Luther King: A Documentary...Montgomery to Memphis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976), 86.

<sup>6</sup> Willie Morris, *The Ghosts of Medgar Evers: A Tale of Race, Murder, Mississippi and Hollywood* (New York: Random House, 1998), 21.

that he had been raised in Mississippi and had spent the entirety of his adult life there was not made clear. The convenient fact that De La Beckwith had been born in another state made it much easier for white Mississippi to say that they had not killed Evers; clearly someone else from some other place was to blame.<sup>7</sup>

The institution of these defense mechanisms creates a new question, that being what do the defense mechanisms tell us about Mississippi's ability to come to grips with the new reality that the civil rights movement would bring about? One can arrive at the answer to this question by building upon the consideration that other historians have given related questions. After Evers' murder in 1963, white Mississippi's adoption of these defense strategies in the years immediately following demonstrates their belief that they had come to accept the new reality that would take hold post civil rights movement, but that it was a reality that they intended to define for themselves in which changes would come slowly and the extent of the changes would not be as drastic as America had envisioned.

Mississippi's insistence that the Evers' case symbolized positive change, like every defense mechanism employed, can be directly linked as a response to the actions and beliefs of the rest of the country. The murder of Medgar Evers revealed flaws within Mississippi's infrastructure to the rest of the nation, and the revelation of what is wrong with a system is the first

---

<sup>7</sup> John R. Tisdale, "Medgar Evers (1925-1963) and the Mississippi Press" (PhD diss., University of North Texas, 1996), 131-132.



step in breaking that system down and rebuilding.<sup>8</sup> Now that the flaws were exposed, America got a good glimpse of what Mississippi was really like in 1963, and didn't like what it saw. Mississippi became branded as a state incapable of righteousness and drastic intervention on the federal level was seen as not only justified but necessary. American popular culture began to critique Mississippi, with contemporary singers Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs writing songs about Evers' murder. Dylan, a hugely popular artist and influential figure for youth of the time, spoke of racism as the mentality of the state of Mississippi in his song "Only a Pawn in Their Game (The Ballad of Medgar Evers)." Though it was De La Beckwith's "finger [that] fired the trigger to his name," Dylan said "he can't be blamed he's only a pawn in their game."<sup>9</sup> Dylan's public disapproval of the murder made such an impact on his audience that he soon became the voice for all of those who did not have such a public platform.<sup>10</sup> Singer Phil Ochs song "Too Many Martyr's (The Ballad of Medgar Evers)" discussed the impact that Evers' murder had on every heart in America; clearly America did not approve of this murder.<sup>11</sup> As

---

<sup>8</sup> Adam Nossiter, *Of Long Memory: Mississippi and the Murder of Medgar Evers* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Bob Dylan, "Only a Pawn in their Game (The Ballad of Medgar Evers)," *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. (New York: Warner Brothers Inc., copyright August 7, 1963).

<sup>10</sup> Robert Shelton. "Folk Songs Draw Carnegie Cheers Bob Dylan Appears as an 'Angry Recitalist,'" *New York Times*, 28 October 1963, pg. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Phil Ochs, "Too Many Martyr's (The Ballad of Medgar Evers)," (New York: All the News That's Fit to Sing, copyright 1964)

shock and disgust began to settle over the nation, the mood of blacks outside of Mississippi began to suffer.<sup>12</sup> Those who had not been paying attention before were now concerned about the extent to which racial violence was being tolerated if not advocated in the state of Mississippi. As the Tuskegee Institute's 1963 report on "Race Relations in the South" demonstrated, America considered 1963 to be the year in which the country took a stand on civil rights; the murder of Evers, to the eyes of the nation symbolized the hatred and resistance within Mississippi to racial equality.<sup>13</sup>

After a race murder and two acquittals of the only suspect, white Mississippi, in an effort to fend off this new image of being a state incapable of righteousness began to insist that the Evers case represented positive change. Their success at convincing America of this issue was critical; as Myrlie Evers, the widow of the slain man commented, with the two acquittals of De La Beckwith, "Mississippi had sent a message to the rest of the world that it was all right to kill a Black man" and that message would not be accepted by those on those outside. "De La Beckwith wasn't the only one on trial. So was Mississippi."<sup>14</sup> White Mississippi based its claim on the fact that the authorities had taken

---

<sup>12</sup> Gertrude Samuels. "Even More Crucial Than in the South," *New York Times*, 30 June 1963, pg. 143; Natalie Zacek. "Evers, Medgar," in *American National Biography Online*, American Council of Learned Societies, <http://0-www.anb.org.sculib.edu:80/articles/15/15-00212.html> (accessed October 4, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> *New York Times*. "63 Called Year U.S. Took Rights Stand," March 11, 1964, pg. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Myrlie Evers-Williams and William Peters, *Watch Me Fly: What I Learned On The Way To Becoming the Woman I was Meant to Be* (Garden City: Little Brown and Company, 1999), 6.



immediate action following the murder unlike past cases, when no one expected anything to be done about it, Mississippi had taken action in pursuit of a suspect.<sup>15</sup> White Mississippi felt that the nation really didn't need to make a big deal out of this murder because they recognized that it was a bad thing, and were doing something about it. White Mississippians had defined their own sense of the new reality that the civil rights movement would bring about in which change was going to come in time and this step seemed good enough for the moment. Every step towards justice was a step in the right direction, and as Flip Schulke pointed out, the fact that juries were debating the issue at all symbolized that change was already in progress in Mississippi.<sup>16</sup> What white Mississippi wanted desperately for America to realize was that they had to work with the people they had in their state, poor, white, traditional, racist people, and even this small step was in and of itself, a huge change for that kind of person. White Mississippi understood its own culture well enough to know that no big change was ever going to happen overnight in that kind of environment; minute steps towards change would, they hoped, keep the rest of the nation satisfied while still keeping white Mississippi comfortable.

The federal government was not satisfied with white Mississippi's version of reality where tiny steps towards democracy were sufficient, and the nation began to feel that it had a duty to react to Evers' murder by bringing about changes in Mississippi. As Bob Moses said before a House Committee, there was a great fear

---

<sup>15</sup> Schulke, *Martin Luther King*. 86.

<sup>16</sup> Schulke, *Martin Luther King*. 86.



that if nothing was done to bring change about, as ugly as things already were, it would only get worse, and no one wanted to see that situation manifest itself.<sup>17</sup> Congress considered the murder of Evers to be one of "blind hate and insane lawlessness," and the fact that it took place only hours after President Kennedy's speech about unity and equality for all Americans, reinforced the nation's desire to step in.<sup>18</sup> Congressman Ogden Reid from the state of New York stated to the House of Representatives on June 13, 1963, the day after Evers' murder, that it was the nation's "obligation to insure that Mr. Evers did not die in vain; to insure that we will have equality of opportunity for all Americans now."<sup>19</sup> The time for action was the present!

As the nation became more involved in Mississippi, the white citizens of Mississippi became increasingly defensive of their actions and paranoid as to what the rest of the nation thought of them.<sup>20</sup> This murder clearly wasn't going just to go away, as Bobby DeLaughter, prosecutor in the 1994 trial of De La Beckwith once said, "An uncleansed wound never heals. It just keeps festering... this case [is] an uncleansed wound in society."<sup>21</sup> If the Evers murder was

---

<sup>17</sup> John Lewis and Michael D'Orso. *Walking With The Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 203-204.

<sup>18</sup> Rep. Ryan (N.Y.). "Civil Rights Legislation." *Congressional Record* 88, pt. 8 (12 Jun.1963) pp. 10726-10727

<sup>19</sup> Rep. Reid (N.Y.). "The Late Medgar W. Evers." *Congressional Record* 88, pt. 8 (13 Jun.1963) pp. 10865.

<sup>20</sup> Morris, *The Ghosts of Medgar Evers*. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Bobby DeLaughter, quoted in Adam Nossiter, *Of Long Memory*. 13.

an uncleansed wound, white Mississippi's incessant defense of itself was their effort at putting the necessary band-aid over the wound. When the matter was brought before the House of Representatives, prior to anyone commenting in any fashion about Mississippians, Congressman William Colmer from the state of Mississippi felt the need to make sure it was understood that his people were good people; "knowing my people as I do, I can in all sincerity say to you that this thing is not condoned by Mississippians and southerners generally."<sup>22</sup> Colmer voiced white Mississippi's view of reality quite effectively; they understood that change was breaking through and were eager to express disapproval of the murder so that the nation would slow its abrupt call for reform.

Mississippians were already aware of how the nation planned to reconstruct their state, but the nation's course of action would be drastic and they preferred slow change on their own terms. To ensure change would take place on their own terms, white Mississippians began a campaign to show the nation that they were good people who could handle this matter on their own. If official white Mississippi could prove this to the nation, perhaps the nation would be more accepting of their slower incorporation of social change. In an effort to prevent this unresolved race murder from defining their state and ushering abrupt changes in every area, Mississippians began defend themselves and try to repair their state's tarnished image. State Treasurer William F. Winter once said

---

<sup>22</sup> Rep. Colmer (Miss.). "Area Redevelopment Act Amendments of 1963." *Congressional Record* 88, pt.8 (12 Jun. 1963) pp.10683



that if Mississippi was to "have [its] proper share of the great adventures and opportunities of today's world, we are going to have to junk some of the old slogans and shibboleths."<sup>23</sup>

What Mississippi really didn't want was to stand out; Mississippians wanted their state to change with time and being different would only bring more criticism and act as further justification of the necessity of drastic change.<sup>24</sup> White Mississippians saw themselves not as a group entirely opposed to change, for they truly saw themselves in the midst of change, but rather as a group that saw the scope and time frame of their change differently from the rest of the nation. White Mississippi felt that it had already come to grips with the new version of their state that would emerge from the civil rights movement, but that it was simply a different Mississippi than what others had envisioned. Slow changes seemed adequate for Mississippians because the racism that had engulfed them for so long prevented them from seeing the need for a complete redesign of society. The goal was only to change just enough to stop the finger pointing and calm the chaos that surrounded them so that they would continue to reap the rewards of being an American state, but no further. Mississippi was not fond of force and did not want to be forced by outsiders to change; Mississippi was determined to change in its own time and on its own terms.

---

<sup>23</sup> John Herbers, "Mississippi Busy Improving Image," *New York Times*, March 7, 1965, pg. 79.

<sup>24</sup> Hodding Carter, "Mississippi Now: Hate and Fear" *New York Times*, June 23, 1963, pg 182.

Americans soon began to realize that the values of the nation were in conflict with the values of Mississippi; as a result, Mississippi became a unique region considered separate from the rest of the nation, an isolated group that went against the norm. The isolation of Mississippi went to such an extent that *New York Times* writer James Reston compared Mississippi to a third world country because of its lack of industry, skill, leadership and education.<sup>25</sup> Being from the state of Mississippi became a stigma, and businesses began to relocate, the tourism industry fell and a migration from Mississippi began; a lot of people did not want or could not afford to be associated with such a seemingly backwards place any longer.<sup>26</sup> A distinction was being made in the minds of many: Americans were good, but Mississippians were bad. This distinction led so successfully to the view that Mississippi's history was and is separate from America's history, that even well respected historian Maryanne Vollers ends her book on the Evers matter not by saying that the nation is still troubled by its past but that Mississippi was "a place at war with its own history and destined to repeat its past, like a soul being born again and again until it gets it right."<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that if the nation is still uncomfortable calling Mississippian history American history, perhaps Mississippi-

---

<sup>25</sup> James Reston, "The Conflict of Memory and Ambition," *New York Times*, March 5, 1965

<sup>26</sup> *New York Times*, "Mississippi Hurt By Racial Strife," December 20, 1964, pg.1.

<sup>27</sup> Maryanne Vollers, *Ghosts of Mississippi: The Murder of Medgar Evers, the Trials of Byron De La Beckwith and the Haunting of the New South* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1995), 386.



ans are not the only ones who are still uncomfortable with their past, so are Americans as a whole.

Mississippi responded to being isolated and disappointed of by the rest of the nation the same way that many individuals respond when being attacked for their actions: denial of responsibility. The conservative citizens within Mississippi began placing blame for Evers's murder on every outside group or person that they could reasonably attach blame to. The headline that took front page in Jackson's *Clarion Ledger*, "Californian is Charged with Murder of Evers," gave voice to the denial that white Mississippi was going through; clearly it couldn't be Mississippi's fault that Evers was killed if De La Beckwith was born in California; a Californian was to blame.<sup>28</sup> White Mississippi did not want rapid change; if it could be made clear that De La Beckwith did not represent their culture, perhaps they would not be prosecuted for his actions.

Representative Colmer voiced another form of his states denial to Congress, stating that the murder was "the inevitable result of the agitation by the politicians, a biased press, and the do-gooders of this country under the false guide of liberalism."<sup>29</sup> His word choice was interesting, the murder was "inevitable" because of the agitation caused by outsiders; if outsiders were going to argue that De La Beckwith did not kill Evers alone, that the state of Mississippi had killed him, then Mississippi was going to argue that their state alone had not killed Evers, the nation had. Was Evers'

---

<sup>28</sup> Hedrick Smith, "Mississippi to Seek Death for Beckwith In Slaying of Evers," *New York Times*, June 25, 1963, pg. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Rep. Colmer (Miss.). "Area Redevelopment Act Amendments of 1963." *Congressional Record* 88, pt.8 (12 Jun. 1963) pp.10683

murder really inevitable? Both sides wanted to believe that the murder wouldn't have happened if the people on the other side had been different; no one wanted to accept the responsibility of this murder as their own.

For those within Mississippi, America was just as much to blame as they were, if not more so. When New York Times writer James Reston put out his article comparing the state of Mississippi to a third world country, he promptly received a letter in response from W.J. Simmons, a citizen of Mississippi. Simmons defended his state and scolded the nation and writers like Reston for perpetuating this false image of his state saying that Mississippians "have grown accustomed to distortions and misrepresentations in the liberal press campaign against our state," but, Simmons was quick to point out "Mississippi has the lowest crime rate in the nation" and "leads the nation in average educational level."<sup>30</sup> Simmons couldn't see why everyone felt it was so urgent for Mississippi to change so drastically, in his mind they were a great group of people. Mississippi was changing the way that it wanted to change, slowly and comfortably and for people like Simmons, denial served to reinforce the legitimacy of that manner of change.

Stephanie Rolph quotes Evers' brother Charles who to a certain extent defended white citizens of Mississippi when he said "[t]he better white people were not behind it. It was some crank or idiot who thought he'd

---

<sup>30</sup> W.J. Simmons, "Letters to the Editor of the Times: Mississippi's Social and Economic Status," *New York Times*, 20 March 1965, pg.26.



do something big.”<sup>31</sup> White Mississippi could not have agreed more, Mississippians felt they were good people who were being forced into rapid change because the nation had falsely labeled them based on one individual. Simmons response was almost a plea from the whites of Mississippi to the rest of the nation to stop labeling them because they were determined to change at their own pace and they wanted to be the ones to define how far that change would go. White Mississippi thoroughly believed that the civil rights legislation that was being processed and the changes that would be entailed with this legislation were changes that they would accept on their own terms because white Mississippi was still in control of the situation, not the nation.

Some would argue that America's public outrage over the assassination of Evers was driven by guilt over the fact that Evers was a black man killed in a southern state by a white man. Some members of Congress argued that the nation was being hypocritical and using Evers' death as a political weapon; people of all colors were dying for democracy yet Evers' case, because he was an African American murdered in Mississippi, received far more attention. Why was a black man's death “a blot on the conscience of the nation” while a white man's death for the same cause was deemed merely a “statistic?” Evers died trying to obtain justice for all people, so it was important to do

---

<sup>31</sup> Stephanie Renee Rolph, “In Unity There is Strength’: The Clarion Ledger’s Coverage of the Medgar Evers Murder” (M.A., thes. Mississippi State University, 2004), 54.

justice by all those killed for that cause.<sup>32</sup> White Mississippi would have agreed with this analysis, because in the same way that they did not want their state villanized they also did not want their skin color villanized. For Mississippi, changing would be hard enough, but no one really wanted to feel guilty after the change was complete.

Today, it seems as though neither the country nor Mississippi itself really wants to claim the history of Mississippi as its own. The fact that it took thirty years and three trials for Byron De La Beckwith to be convicted of first-degree murder in the state of Mississippi is evidence of the fact that the post civil rights Mississippi that white Mississippians had envisioned was in many ways the reality that took hold of their state. A lot more violence would occur in Mississippi before change would really take hold, and the changes that did occur happened slowly and continue to this day. On the other hand, the nation's justification for federal intervention was critical in starting the change process; De La Beckwith may not have been convicted if the outside had not stepped in. It took Mississippi thirty years to have changed enough to send a guilty white man to prison for the murder of a black man, and that was with outside intervention. If the outside had not stepped in, De La Beckwith may well have still been a free man when he died seven years later in 2001.<sup>33</sup> Historian Willie Morris began his evaluation of

---

<sup>32</sup> Rep. Alger (Tex.). "Equal Rights Means Equal Justice For All." *Congressional Record* 88, pt.8 (19 Jun. 1963) pp.11209-11210

<sup>33</sup> *CBS News*, "Medgar Evers Assassin Dies," January 22, 2001, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2001/01/22/national/main2>



contemporary Mississippi by saying that Mississippians feel as though the changes that they make will never be fully recognized by the nation because of a past that cannot be changed and would not be forgotten, yet in a way both groups are so proud of those changes that both sides would like nothing more than to take credit for them.<sup>34</sup> The trial and conviction of De La Beckwith that took place in 1994 was the first step in a long healing process not only for Evers' family but for the state of Mississippi and our nation, no one could afford to ignore the past any longer.<sup>35</sup> Justice delayed did not result in justice denied for Evers; after thirty years and three trials Mississippi did attempt to make right what had been done wrong.

---

65984.shtml (accessed October 30 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Morris, *The Ghosts of Medgar Evers: A Tale of Race*. pg. 21.

<sup>35</sup> Vern E. Smith, "The Ghosts of Mississippi," *Newsweek*, June 2000, no. 24, p. 39.