MEDGAR EVERS AND MISSISSIPPI:
THE ANATOMY OF MARTYRDOM

by Norman G. Kurland

At 12:30 a.m., Wednesday, June 12, 1963, Mississippi and the South lost a leader. Medgar W. Evers had been assassinated by a sniper's bullet as he was entering his home in Jackson. Civilized people throughout the world expressed shock, protest, regret and sympathy. Governor Ross R. Barnett called the shooting "a dastardly act."[1/] Jackson Mayor Allen C. Thompson said that "along with all of the citizens of Jackson, the commissioners and I are dreadfully shocked, humiliated and sick at heart that such a tragedy should happen in our city."[2/] Similar sentiments were expressed by Jackson business leaders and Mississippi members of Congress, Senator John C. Stennis, Senator James O. Eastland and Representative William Colmer.[3/]

WHO WAS HE?

The world knew the 37-year old Evers as the Mississippi Field Secretary of the NAACP. He was the leader of a band of freedom fighters in Jackson, Mississippi, the heartland of what to the world is characterized as the great paradox on the American scene--institutionalized racism. To men concerned with the future of mankind, he symbolized a life dedicated to the attainment of a single principle--that Man will always struggle for individual dignity and freedom.

As a man, Evers embodied in classic proportions many attributes needed by a leader in the freedom movement. He felt a strong revulsion against injustice which he manifested through a non-violent yet militant battle with the existing mind of Mississippi. Shunning feelings of bitterness and rancor for the indignities Negroes had to endure in a racist society, he was warm and

personable to whites and Negroes alike. He often expressed his love for Mississippi, and told one reporter: "One day, you know, whites and Negroes will live here in Mississippi side by side in love and brotherhood. . . [W]e know each other better in the South, that's why it should work better here than anywhere else."[4/] Though not a fiery orator, he was able to articulate the objectives of his work with simplicity, directness and eloquence. When asked about death threats which he frequently received, Evers would reflect: "If I die, it will be in a good cause. I've been fighting for America just as much as the soldiers in Vietnam."[5/]

His mission, Evers felt, was to encourage all Mississippians, Negro and white, to become more aware both of fundamental human rights and, even more important, of each human's moral obligation to promote human dignity for all men and seek affirmatively to eliminate every trace of racism. Thus, he symbolized in life the essence of the magnificent principles espoused in the encyclical "Pacem in Terris" (Peace on Earth) of the late Pope John XXIII. Confronted by a hostile and dangerous environment, he mustered all the intelligence, sense of dedication, stamina and vision at his command in attempting to rally all Mississippians to the cause of Freedom. In short, had he been born of white ancestry, Medgar Evers would probably have been Mississippi's greatest contribution to the political world. But Medgar Evers was a Mississippi Negro.

Medgar Evers was an enigma to white Mississippians. He was outspoken and treated whites as his equal, the most unpardonable sins a Negro can commit in a racist culture. Born and educated in Decatur, a town in eastern Mississippi, Evers had an early baptism to the evils of racism. Of the so-called "separate-but-equal" school system, he remembered that he and other Negro children had to walk muddy roads to school, dodging school buses carrying white children who spat at and shouted insults at them as the buses drove by. When he was 14 years old, a family friend

was lynched for allegedly insulting a white woman and his bloody clothes were left behind as a gory reminder of the incident. Evers also recalled many instances where white gangs sadistically chased and beat Negroes who came into town to shop.[6]

A MAN CHALLENGES A SYSTEM

In 1946, after he returned to Mississippi as a war veteran, Evers decided to assert his rights and attempt to vote. A large group of hostile whites threatened violence if he persisted. Evers found the odds too great and made a tactical retreat. However, this incident set the future course for Medgar Evers. In 1952, he graduated from Alcorn A&M in Lorton, Mississippi, where he received a degree in business administration and played halfback on the football team. He then proceeded to the task of challenging racism in Mississippi.

THE WORK OF SHAPING A NEW SYSTEM

Evers worked in the insurance business and in his spare time voluntarily organized several NAACP chapters in the Mississippi Delta. In 1954, after the School Desegregation Cases, he applied for admission to the University of Mississippi Law School but was turned down. On December 14, 1954, he was hired by the NAACP as their full-time Mississippi field secretary, which made him the first person to receive pay for promoting civil rights in Mississippi. After that, Evers, the NAACP, and other civil rights groups began a broad-scaled attack on racism in Mississippi. His name became anathema to segregationists.

When he boarded a bus in Meridian, Mississippi in 1958 and refused to sit in the rear, the local police took Evers to the station for questioning. When he returned to the bus and sat in the front seat again, a white man punched him in the face.[7]

As NAACP field secretary, he helped bring to the attention of the world the infamous Mississippi lynching of Mack Charles Parker on April 24, 1959 in Poplarville[8] and the murder of Emmett [9]

the assistance of Clyde Kennard, a former University of Chicago student who was sentenced to 7 years in the State penitentiary in 1959 for allegedly conspiring to steal $25 of chicken feed after he unsuccessfully attempted to enroll at the all-white Mississippi Southern University.[10/] When Evers publicly described the trial and conviction as a "mockery of justice," he was cited for contempt of court.[11/]

It is well-known in Mississippi that Evers played a leading role in helping James Meredith become the first Negro to enroll at the University of Mississippi, the first crack in the color barrier of the Mississippi educational system. When over 300 Freedom Riders came to Jackson in the summer of 1961, Evers again was on hand.

He supported the first civil rights protest demonstration in Jackson on March 27, 1961, when 9 Tougaloo College students were arrested following a sit-in demonstration at a public library.[12/] Other students who protested these arrests were dispersed by police with dogs, clubs and tear gas bombs.[13/] He then helped organize peaceful demonstrations to protest against police brutality and the arrest of the students. On the day of the trial, about 120 Negroes remained outside the courthouse. As the students were being led into the building, Evers and others in the group applauded them. The police reacted. Using clubs and police dogs, they waded into the group of Negroes. One minister was bitten on the arm, a scene which was photographed and displayed throughout the world. Evers also was beaten on the head with a snub-nosed revolver; as he tried to leave, several policemen hit him several times in the back with billy clubs.[14/]

Evers also helped organize and supported many other demonstrations and protests against segregation: the sit-in demonstration on a Jackson city bus on April 19, 1961;[15/] the sit-in's on "white" benches at Livingston Park Zoo in July 1961;

Jackson's first lunch counter sit-in demonstration in July, 1961;[17] the picketing of the southern governors' conference on segregation held in Jackson on July 19, 1961;[18] the boycott of the Mississippi State Fair for Negroes on October 17, 1961;[19] the NAACP-supported suit filed on January 12, 1962 to integrate Jackson public libraries, auditoriums, golf courses and the zoo;[20] the city bus boycotts in Jackson of April, 1962;[21] the picketing and boycott of downtown Jackson merchants before Christmas of 1962;[22] the petition filed on August 12, 1962 by 9 Negro families, including the Evers, to desegrate Jackson public schools;[23] and the intensive 1963 campaign of boycotts and protest marches aimed at desegregating stores and public facilities.[24]

He also became the main channel to Washington for complaints ranging from discrimination in federal programs[25] and by federal contractors[26] to police brutality and requests for federal protection for Negroes attempting to exercise constitutional rights.[27] As a spokesman for integration, he once complained to the FCC that he was refused TV time to reply to a weekly program of the Jackson Citizens Council.[28]

Evers' routine also included traveling to all parts of the State, including places like Greenwood, Clarksdale and Ruleville, to support voter registration activities and protest demonstrations.

THE ATMOSPHERE IN THE SYSTEM CHALLENGED

Hodding Carter, Pulitizer Prize winner and editor of the Greenville, Mississippi Delta Democrat-Times, accurately described the atmosphere permeating the system challenged by Medgar Evers:[29]

> Jackson is a town obsessed with a determination to maintain existing relationships between the races. Its politics and social order are monolithic. One can count on two hands those Jacksonians who are willing to speak out against any status quo. It is the seat of a state government whose legislature, which meets too frequently, represents probably the lowest common denominator of any political assembly in the United States.

> Almost the sole source of the city's newspaper information comes from a morning and afternoon combination owned by a family whose animation can only be described as an admixture of fundamentalism, furious racism and greed.
>
> Rare is the Jackson citizen of any prominence, or even if no consequence, who does not belong to the Citizen Council.

Even after Evers was murdered, representatives of the system continued to resist such criticism. Tom Ethridge of the Jackson Clarion-Ledger, after expressing the City of Jackson's shock at the murder of Evers, wrote on June 14, 1963:[30/]

> Unquestionably, this murder has given Jackson a black eye and strengthens the forces of nationwide agitation . . .

Ethridge then casually suggested:

> . . .[I]t is barely possible that desperately ruthless forces may have used him as a sacrificial offering, to rekindle the flames of unrest here and spur their drive for "victory" everywhere.

ESCALATION TO THE CRISIS

As Negroes quickened their pace toward equality during 1963, and as national and international leaders of government, the major religions, and the various professions had begun to give moral, financial and political support to the non-violent efforts of Negroes, and as the federal government expanded its activities in the civil rights area, tensions heightened within the white communities of Mississippi. Birmingham, following the protest demonstrations which ended in May, 1963, retreated from its former reputation as the most rigidly segregated large city in the country and displayed signs of moderation. Similar demonstrations in other parts of the country were reported daily. In Mississippi, however, men of public stature and self-proclaimed "responsible" newspapers continued to stir the emotions of the unstable and volatile racists.

When Evers announced that a petition had been filed with the school board to desegregate Jackson schools, the Jackson

Daily News gave the names, addresses, and directions to the homes of each of the petitioning parents.[31] To locate the Evers' home, (the address not being in the Jackson telephone directory) the newspaper related: "Guynes Street is off Ridgway in Northwest Jackson . . ." An editorial in the same newspaper the following day, after reciting the high quality of the Jackson school system, continued as follows:[32]

> With a fanfare of beating drums and bleating bugles a professional racial agitator [Medgar Evers] called a press conference yesterday and announced his intention to destroy Jackson, its school system and create hate and fury if his demands were not met.

These emotion-generating epithets are a constant diet for the readers of Jackson's two newspapers. Referring to picketing during December, 1962, Jackson Mayor Thompson warned, "we are not going to have any picketing in this city, and we are going to continue this way."[33] During the boycotts and marches in May, 1963, Mayor Thompson refused to talk to any member of the NAACP, CORE, or "any other outside agitator as such."[34] He later repeated his stand on a 30-minute TV address.[35] Medgar Evers was granted TV time to reply to Mayor Thompson's stand. Evers stated his belief that desegregation is inevitable and urged an "honest effort to bring fresh ideas and new methods to bear" to avoid racial disturbances, announcing that otherwise demonstrations would continue.[36] The Jackson Women for Constitutional Government announced their support for State and local officials fighting "the sinister forces seeking their destruction" and warned that there can be no compromise "with the burgler who enters the house."[37] Governor Barnett also announced his support against "agitators and troublemakers" threatening the city,[38] as did the Jackson Junior Chamber of Commerce.[39] An editorial in the Clarion-Ledger deplored the "rise of un-American methods of agitation, the goal of which is the breakdown of local law enforcement" and the promotion of"the cause of international communism."[40] After the mayor agreed to meet with

Negro leaders, he pointedly deleted the name of Medgar Evers from a list of Negro leaders selected to meet with him.[41] After 13 Negroes walked out of the May 27, meeting with the Mayor when he announced an uncompromising position, Medgar Evers predicted "direct-action" demonstrations and stated:[42] "We have been trying in good faith for two weeks to get some kind of negotiations started in Jackson. Now the last hope seems to be gone." The following day, 8 persons participated in sit-in demonstrations at the lunch counter of a downtown Jackson Woolworth store. One Negro was kicked and beaten on the floor by an ex-policeman while the store manager and a crowd of whites watched. The police waited outside, according to M. B. Pierce, Chief of the Jackson Detective Bureau, because they had orders not to prevent violence inside the store "unless asked to do so by the management." Such a request never came.[43] Early the following morning a "Molotov cocktail" was thrown into the carport of Evers' home, but did no damage.[44] On June 1, 1963, Evers was arrested for picketing and released on bail after being charged with restraint of trade, a felony under Mississippi law. Others arrested that day brought the 5-day total of arrests to 672.[45] On June 4, Dave Perkins, a candidate for Lieutenant Governor announced that Bennie Oliver (the ex-policeman who kicked the Negro demonstrator at the Woolworth lunch counter on May 28)had been added to his campaign staff, commenting that he chose Oliver as one who "knows how to handle the racial problem."[46] Tom Ethridge, the Jackson columnist mentioned earlier, referred to an alleged posting of Army sentries on the roofs of buildings at the University of Mississippi during the enrollment of Cleve McDowell at the Law School and commented:[47]

> One also wonders what the national and international "reaction" would be if the City of Jackson posted trained marksmen with high-powered automatic weapons atop local buildings to intimidate "non-violent" demonstrators bent on disturbing the peace?

On June 7, 1963, 47 more demonstrators were arrested for violating a State injunction against further demonstrations when the group refused to disperse after using a previously all-white playground.[48/] That night three shootings occurred:[49/] the Jackson store of Robert L. T. Smith, a Negro leader, was shot into for the third time; in Clarksdale, Aaron Henry, the State president of the NAACP, reported that three bullets were fired into his home from a passing car (a firebomb also had recently been thrown into Henry's home while his family and his guest, Congressman Charles Diggs of Michigan, were sleeping); and a single shot was fired into the home of Mrs. Vera Pigee, another Clarksdale NAACP leader.

On June 9, 1963, 22 Negroes, most of them unsuccessfully, attempted to enter white churches in Jackson.[50/]

On June 11, 1962, Governor George C. Wallace of Alabama, a close friend of Mississippi's Governor Ross R. Barnett and fervently admired by all racists in Mississippi for his campaign promise to "stand in the door" to resist desegregation, was directly confronted with a federal court order not to interfere with the admission of two Negroes to the University of Alabama. Thus, Alabama, the last State whose schools were completely segregated, faced a dangerous crisis. Nationwide television coverage added to the drama. Segregationists and integrationists listened intensely to this climatic event. Governor Wallace, after a seemingly well-rehearsed display of hostile defiance to the federal government, dramatically bowed to the order of the court.[51/] To the arch-segregationist, the myth of white supremacy and the institution of racism seemed to have been drawn into a corner.

That evening President Kennedy on a nationwide broadcast expressed his relief that the University of Alabama was desegregated without violence. He then outlined the plight of the Negro in America and described the issue as a moral one, urging all

Americans to help with the problem. Recognizing that protest demonstrations were inevitable until other remedies became available, the President announced a request for the enactment of new and far-reaching civil rights laws, including a public accommodations measure.[52/]

Later that evening, Medgar Evers attended a civil rights rally. Before returning home, he met with NAACP lawyers to discuss plans regarding Jackson's desegregation drive. While Evers was returning home, a sniper, holding a high-powered rifle with a telescopic sight, hid in a weed-covered vacant lot about 155 feet from Evers' home. Evers parked his car in his driveway and walked toward his home. The assassin shot Evers in the back.[53/]

AFTERTHOUGHTS

An editorial in the Greenwood Commonwealth, the local paper of the town in which the accused murderer of Evers lived, had this to say the day after Evers was killed but before the accused killer was known:[54/]

> We detested what Medgar Evers was doing to Mississippi. We were aware that he was a reverently hated man, that his name was an epithet on thousands of lips.
>
> But we would have argued until doomsday that what happened to the NAACP leader early this morning wouldn't happen.

The fact remains, Medgar Evers was the first major Negro leader murdered since Negroes accelerated their drive for equal rights in 1954.[55/]

The important unanswered question, however, is why was Medgar Evers so "reverently hated?" The answer to this question can only be found by analyzing the peculiar mind of Mississippi.

Since the School Desegregation Cases of May 1954, it is common knowledge that persons in positions of political influence in Mississippi have openly and hostilely defied all three branches of the federal government; have consciously and deliber-

Negroes to overcome segregation policies; have resorted to racist emotionalism and sloganeering in attacking all such efforts by Negroes; have ignored leaders of other states and of other countries who urge more reasonable consideration of racial issues; have violated with impudence the spirit and letter of the federal Constitution and law and court decisions outlawing segregation; have unashamedly ridiculed "human rights" as being something inferior to "states rights;" and, in opposing Negroes' efforts to be treated as full-fledged members of the general community, have taken every other step short of openly seceeding again from the Union. All these steps and more have been taken in the name of White Supremacy, the god to whom all racists must pay tribute. With religious fervor, the unorthodox have been suppressed. But romantic platitudes about the "Southern way of life" have not obscured the underlying sickness of a system which has forceably relegated Negroes to an inferior position in its racist social order.

Lacking support from supernatural, moral and legal sources against mounting threats to their system, the priests of racism have turned to the only watchdogs whose behavior they can predict and control--the "lunatic fringe." Thus, unstable individuals--who can be found in virtually all known societies--are turned loose in a schizophrenic atmosphere and subtly goaded into committing acts of violence. They have been permitted, actively encouraged and even directed by many Mississippi leaders to suppress all who advocate or seek to advance equal rights for Negroes in Mississippi. On the other hand, where race is not involved, Mississippi, like any normal society, seems to require non-violent behavior on the part of its unstable citizens. This double standard toward private acts of violence must certainly be dealt with before Mississippi can ever hope to become a mature and responsible society. Perhaps then well-read newspaper columnists will think twice before

approvingly reprinting copies of a letter such as the one sent to Chicago by a Mississippi legislator and one-time Sheriff of Coahoma County:[56]

> Chamber of Commerce
> Chicago, Illinois
>
> Gentlemen:
>
> Enclosed you will find newspaper clippings regarding some gangsters who killed a Negro up in Chicago who was offensive.
>
> Will you put me in contact with them? We might be able to get them a job down here.
>
> Yours very truly,
> /s/
> Tom L. Gibson
> Representative
> Coahoma County

In an epitaph to Medgar Evers, one white Mississippian wrote:[57]

> Surely the residual guilt [for the assassination of Evers] must rest with what any impartial poll would determine to be the most inflamatory newspapers, the sorriest legislature and the most weak-kneed citizenry in our nation. No one can know now whether their joint influence added to the compulsion of one man to kill another. But it is a fair supposition that it did.

The ultimate tragedy, however, is that many architects of segregation may still not understand how they helped load the rifle that killed Medgar Evers. The challenge that remains is perhaps best revealed by a remark made by Senator James O. Eastland when an interviewer suggested that the South had yielded to some extent on segregation since 1954:[58]

> That's token integration. A united south can win total and complete victory in the battle over segregation. We have seen the tides rise before and refused to be engulfed.

The interviewer noted that the Senator, with a sardonic glint in his eye, added:

> How long did it take the south to win the [civil] war?
>
> Eleven years, wasn't it?

NOTES: MEDGAR EVERS AND MISSISSIPPI

1. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, June 13, 1963, p.1.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Washington (D.C.) Post, June 13, 1963, p. 1.
5. New York Times, June 13, 1963, p. 12.
6. (Washington, D. C.) Evening Star, June 12, 1963, p. 8.
7. New York Times, June 13, 1963, p. 12.
8. See N. Y. Times, Jan. 4, 1960, p. 8; see also 5 1961 U. S. Commission on Civil Rights Report, Justice, pp. 41-42.
9. (Memphis, Tenn.) Commercial Appeal, Aug. 31 and Sep. 24, 1955, p. 1.
10. See Hollander, "One Negro Who Didn't Get to College," The Reporter, Nov. 8, 1962, pp. 30-34.
11. (Baltimore, Md.) Afro-American, Dec. 3, 1960, p. 28.
12. (Jackson, Miss.) State Times, Mar. 27, 1961, p. 1
13. New York Times, Mar. 28, 1961, p. 28.
14. New York Times, Mar. 30, 1961, p. 20.
15. Nashville (Tenn.) Tennessean, Apr. 20, 1961, p. 29.
16. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, July 7, 1961, p. 2.
17. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, July 14, 1961, p. 1.
18. Denver (Colo.) Post, July 22, 1961, p. 2.
19. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, Oct. 17, 1961, p. 1.
20. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, Jan. 13, 1962, p. 1.
21. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, Apr. 22, 1962, p. 8A.
22. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, Dec. 13, 1962, p. 11.
23. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, Aug. 13, 1962, p. 1.
24. (New York, N. Y.) The Tribune, May 13, 1963, p. 25.
25. (Jackson) Miss. Free Press, Feb. 23, 1963, p. 1.
26. (Jackson) Miss. Free Press, Jan. 26, 1963, p. 1.
27. Telegram to Att'y Gen. Kennedy, Feb. 2, 1963; reproduced in (Jackson) Miss. Free Press, Feb. 9, 1963, p. 1.
28. (Jackson) Miss. Free Press, July 21, 1962, p. 3.
29. Carter,"Mississippi Now--Hate and Fear," New York Times Magazine, June 23, 1963, p. 11.

NOTES: MEDGAR EVERS, continued

30. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, June 14, 1963, p. 8A.

31. Jackson (Miss.) Daily News, Aug. 16, 1962, p. 1.

32. Id., August 17, 1962, p. 6.

33. Id., Dec. 13, 1962, p. 6.

34. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, May 16, 1963, p. 2.

35. Jackson (Miss.) Advocate, May 18, 1963, p. 1.

36. Greenwood (Miss.) Commonwealth, May 21, 1963, p. 1.

37. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, May 16, 1963, p. 2.

38. Id., at 3B.

39. Id., May 21, 1963, p. 3.

40. Id., May 23, 1963, p. 8A.

41. Id., at 1.

42. Washington (D.C.) Daily News, May 28, 1963, p. 3.

43. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, May 29, 1963, p. 1.

44. New York Times, May 30, 1963, p. 1.

45. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger-Jackson Daily News, June 2, 1963, p. 1.

46. Id., June 5, 1963, p. 23.

47. Id., June 7, 1963, p. 4C.

48. Id., June 8, 1963, p. 1.

49. Greenwood (Miss.) Commonwealth, June 8, 1963, p. 1.

50. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, June 10, 1963, p. 1.

51. (Washington, D. C.) Evening Star, June 12, 1963, p. 1.

52. Ibid.

53. (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, June 13, 1963, p. 1.

54. Greenwood (Miss.) Commonwealth, June 12, 1963, p. 1.

55. Washington (D. C.) Post, June 13, 1963, p. A6.

56. "Affairs of State" by Charles M. Hill, (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, Mar. 4, 1963, p. 8.

57. Op. cit. supra, note 29.

58. Jackson (Miss.) Daily News, Aug. 30, 1962.