

Genocide

The most frightening and demonic thing done by the Mississippi State Legislature that Spring was to begin the public discussion of solutions to the race problem that had to be categorized as genocide, although most of the white lawmakers probably were surprised when black critics used that word.

The first method of population control just provided for the removal of unwanted blacks in the state. The idea was to send them to other parts of America not to destroy them. But inherent in such a consideration is always the "final solution." If the white majority could not have the kind of society and life it wanted if X number of blacks were present then, to save that white way of life, logic demanded that if X number of blacks could not be "persuaded" to become emigrants, then X number of blacks should be forced to flee the state; if X number of blacks were not removed by either of these means of population control, then logic demanded extermination. The reasonableness and the morality of the final solution is implicit in the first thought.

For several years the White Citizens Councils had promoted schemes of black population control. Black interest in Africa was praised. Black migration, voluntary or otherwise, to northern states was encouraged. In a publicity stunt the Council once paid the expenses for a black family to move to Hyannisport.

Richard Russell of Georgia introduced a bill in the U.S Senate as an amendment to the Civil Rights Bill. This was a provision to relocate Southern Negroes so that every state

in the nation would have an equal percentage of blacks. It probably was not a serious proposal by the Senator but it allowed Southern demagogues in Washington and local demagogues in Mississippi to make speeches and have fun with the idea. Some people probably did take it seriously.

Rep. Walter Hester of Adams County thought so much of the scheme that he brought it to the Mississippi Legislature. His modest proposal called for a first step appropriation of a half million dollars of state funds to help relocate the unwanted citizens of Mississippi. Wirt Yerger, state chairman of the Republican Party, supported the relocation plan and suggested that first priority for receiving Negroes should go to the states whose congressmen voted for the Civil Rights Bill. The Mississippi lawmen never set up such an agency, but they did enjoy the chance for the discussion. The distinguished representative from Adams County (Natchez) told his delighted colleagues that if Mississippi adopted his plan it would help President Johnson's new poverty program

... by providing the necessary finances for those
poverty-stricken people of Mississippi to travel
into the more prosperous areas of the nation seeking
employment, integration, and other desires of life. 49

In Washington the reputation of Mississippi's junior senator, John Stennis, as a man of integrity, moderation, and decency, was not tarnished even though he spoke on the Senate floor in language as disgusting as anything used the Mississippi State Senate. Stennis

presented the kind of elaboration and technical details that some white Southerners find delightful; all the points were reprinted in the Mississippi press. Stennis knew the exact figures for the perfect redistribution of Negroes to every state. Stennis suggested that, under this plan, Mississippi would lose 687,038 Negroes and Minnesota would gain 336,193. The goal of this speech and plan of Senator Stennis, according to the Southern press, was to "achieve a happy medium and ease racial tensions." 50 The Jackson Daily News was careful to point out the shortcomings of New York and New England, those ancient enemies:

... New York (needs) 334,631 more Negroes to achieve perfection. In assessing the situation, Stennis revealed that Vermont had only 519 Negroes, one-tenth of one per cent of its population, and needs 40,418 to be brought up to snuff.

This will reduce racial tensions, promote national unity and domestic tranquility and abolish poverty, Stennis told the Senate. 51

Hazle Brannon Smith wrote another of her perceptive and powerful editorials condemning the Negro Relocation Plan as "political demagoguery." 52 As usual she moved beyond the political and the practical nonsense involved to the moral issue:

Senator Russell... appears to believe that Negroes are not people and have no feelings. He obviously thinks it is perfectly proper to speak about them as if they were so many dumb cattle to be

moved around anywhere at the will of their masters.

Senator Russell's speech was cruel and inhuman, not to mention its lack of Christianity and good manners. It ill becomes a man who is supposed to be a Southern statesman. 5

The Mississippi Legislature never approved of a new state agency to redistribute the black population, equally or any other way to get them out of Mississippi. The white authorities soon realized there was no need for new funds or a new agency. The State Welfare Department was more than able to do the job of forcing blacks to leave Mississippi.

Genocide, as defined by the United Nations, includes:

imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group. 54

In a measure openly aimed at the black population the Mississippi Legislature considered sterilization as one way of reducing the welfare rolls and, as was obvious in the debate, of population control. The goal was still in the area of forcing Negroes to flee the state to avoid sterilization, rather than the actual reduction or extermination of the black population. Always present in such a discussion is the terrible logic that justifies a final solution as a reasonable extension of the first step.

The original Mississippi bill was presented a "ban on illegitimacy." 55 Supporters of the bill presented statistics showing a high rate of illegitimate births among poor blacks in Mississippi. That the bill was aimed at blacks was made clear when several representatives received reassurances that nothing would be done to "embarrass" 56a white girls who

already had "enough trouble." 56b The original bill provided for a one to three year prison term for the parents of any illegitimate child.

Some lawmakers thought this extreme and the plan was amended to remove the criminal offense provisions for the first illegitimate birth. The bill's sponsor, Rep. W. B. Meek of Eupora, accepted the amendment in this fashion, according to the Jackson press:

"I feel every person is entitled to one....,"

he said as the chamber burst into laughter. 57

Then came the most serious business. Rep. Todd McCollough of Panola County presented an amendment that, in lieu of the three year prison term, voluntary sterilization be accepted. The Movement understood just how "voluntary" such a plan was. What Mississippi black mother of a second illegitimate child would choose to abandon her family for three years in prison? She would "voluntarily" submit to sterilization. Or flee.

The white lawmakers again had a round of laughter when Rep. Stone Barefield of Forrest County supported the sterilization business, stating:

When they start to cutting they'll head for

Chicago. 58

A Hinds County member described the purpose of this bill as to get rid of Negroes. Black and white Mississippians alike could not fail to understand who the "they" was that would "head for Chicago."

There was already a problem with involuntary sterilization in Mississippi. Mrs.

Fannie Lou Hamer and many other Movement women in the Delta had reports of many cases where a black woman on welfare was in the hospital for the birth of another child, sometimes the third or fourth. The white doctors and welfare officials decided the black woman should be sterilized and did so without her knowledge. The Mississippi Movement did not oppose birth control but thought this had to be matter of community education and personal choices, not white decisions to prevent the birth of additional black children who were unwanted by the white authorities. That was genocide. The new "voluntary" sterilization proposal was also genocide.

There were some individuals in the Movement, like Mrs. Hamer, who did even question birth control as a tool of rich whites to reduce/control the population of undesirables, such as blacks in Africa or blacks in America or the poor in the developing nations. Fannie Lou Hamer, like a good SNCC field secretary, always made me think. She had told me horror stories of sterilization of black women in Mississippi hospitals. I did not agree with her on birth control but certainly did on abortion, not an issue in 1964; in the seventies, however, Fannie Lou Hamer was the key person who made me think of *Rowe v. Wade*, the legalization of abortion on demand in America, as, primarily, a white racist response by a conservative Republican dominated Supreme Court, to the national issue of black population control, of reducing the number of undesirable children on welfare without our kind of radical social change which gave the poor a chance at education, jobs, and hope. Once I moved beyond my SNCC-Movement response to abortion on demand I realized I also

believed as a Christian that it was wrong on religious grounds and a danger to the social and moral fabric of the nation.

Fannie Lou Hamer, from the start, condemned abortion on both Christian and black awareness grounds. She was the youngest child from a hard working black family of 21 children; for medical reasons, and, later, her own unwilling sterilization, she and Pap Hamer had been unable to have their own children, but they raised several adopted daughters. Hamer affirmed that "legal abortion is legal murder" and, "genocide." 58b Although, as she pointed out, a generation earlier, in slavery and slave-breeding times, whites encouraged blacks to have large families, she knows that no whites wanted to see more poor blacks at the time she was born. As was her style, she used a personal example to make the point:

Now they talk about birth control and abortion
for blacks. If they'd been talking that way
when my mother was bearing children, I wouldn't
be here now. 58c

What we faced in the Spring of 1964 with this "voluntary" sterilization plan publicly discussed frightened us more than terrorists starting to ride at night. The Atlanta SNCC office mounted a national publicity campaign against the Mississippi proposal. A pamphlet containing the strongest language ever used by SNCC up to that time was widely circulated. Its title: "Genocide in Mississippi." 59a It presented a careful study of the bill, its sponsors, and its purpose. SNCC noted, ironically, that the original sponsor of the sterilization plan

was a Southern Baptist Sunday School teacher and chairman of the Board of Deacons of his church. SNCC discussed the failures of the Federal government to use its powers and enforce the present voting laws. SNCC understood that the genocide bill was only the most visible sign of the hate and violence certain to come to black Mississippians if Washington continued to deny its responsibility. SNCC said:

Whether or not HB 180 (the sterilization law) reaches final passage in the Senate during the current session, the fact that a substantial majority of the elected representatives in the Mississippi House favored such a measure is an ominous portent for the future of the state, and of the Negroes who make up 40% of its population. 59b

The mood of SNCC and the Mississippi Movement was an ominous portent for the future of the whole nation. SNCC pointed out the failure of the Federal government to enforce the voting rights of black citizens in Mississippi; what would that government do to stop this more serious trouble? What would the black people do?

Now they (Black Mississippi citizens) are faced with action by Mississippi government which literally threatens their existence as a people. 60

SNCC suggested that in the face of such white violence it was time for black people to

question nonviolence and turn to self defence.

The sterilization law went into legislative committee and was modified in significant ways. The sterilization provision was omitted. Sen. E.K. Collins of Laurel, chairman of the committee which handled the bill, said that the new version

... does away with the sterilization and felony sections, all the bad features which shocked the country. 61

The final law, while not so shocking, hardly did away with all the bad features in the opinion of the Movement. The law still provided prison terms and fines for illegitimate births, although not as severe as in the original proposals. The effect would still be to drive unwanted Negroes out of the state. Or it could be used, like so many Mississippi laws, as an additional weapon for the arbitrary power of some local white official.

The lawmakers graciously allowed a ten month lapse of time before the law took effect. (In the summer of 1965 the law began to be used in Coahoma County. Several black mothers of newborn illegitimate children were jailed. The county officials sent out letters to all black mothers listed on the county birth records as having a second illegitimate child to appear in court and start their month in prison. Movement lawyers got federal court action to stop this and free the mothers already in prison.)

Although Mississippi never passed this genocide law, the policy of population control and driving the excess black population out of the state became widespread in the following

few years. The toleration, by Mississippi and by America, of the murder and church and home bombings of the klan let blacks know they were not wanted in Mississippi. Before the cotton plantations were mechanized the state was often afraid that its cheap black labor might leave. Now that the unemployed black people might actually become voters the state did everything possible to make them leave. The State Welfare Department and its local county branches had used welfare as a weapon to stop voter registration campaigns as early as 1962. Blacks who tried to become voters often lost their eligibility for welfare. Some proper technicality was usually given. In a widespread voter registration campaign, such as with SNCC in Leflore County, the whole county was punished as the white officials decided they did not "need" the surplus federal food program. Thus hunger (which in some cases meant malnutrition and even starvation) became a weapon against voter registration and, later, against school desegregation. This was certainly genocide, just decorated or camouflaged.

(The "War on Poverty" in 1965 brought another weapon for white power. Dangerous and unwanted blacks did not receive the rewards of the O.E.O. program. Power in most poverty programs was kept in safe hands, black or white. Mississippi had long had an ambivalent attitude about industrial growth, not wanting so many new jobs that the black population would stay in the state. Sometimes small towns turned down local industries that might have offered too many jobs to blacks. The heart of this unacknowledged and unofficial program to drive the blacks out of the state was the Welfare Department. In many

Delta counties the black welfare applicants (if they were literate) saw signs posted in the Welfare office that listed the meager allowance of Mississippi recipients and the amount of welfare they could be receiving in northern states, often four or five times as much money per month as in Mississippi. The welfare offices must have thought this was a community service. The favorite listings of high paying welfare areas were Los Angeles, New York and, of course, Chicago.)

However that 1964 Mississippi white lawmakers designed their "illegitimacy" legislation, it all amounted to the same thing. Population Control. Eugenics. Genocide. The white man had decided which black people could live in Africa and which black people would be brought to America as slaves; now the white man would decide that black people had to be moved again. In the Movement we wondered what would happen in America when there was no more place blacks were welcome to move or be moved -- or removed. Some black Mississippians spoke of what they knew white America had done to the Indians - - removal and genocide -- and their determination this not be the fate of blacks. Others did not need to look so far back. Nazi Germany was recent enough.

