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Joseph Crespino: In Search of Another Country

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Introduction

Everybody knows about Mississippi goddamn.

—*Nina Simone*

ON AUGUST 4, 1964, Federal Bureau of Investigation agents recovered the mangled bodies of three civil rights workers beneath an earthen dam near Philadelphia, Mississippi. Reports of the men's disappearance in rural Neshoba County and the federal manhunt that ensued occupied the nation's attention throughout Freedom Summer 1964, when hundreds of college-age volunteers flooded Mississippi to help run voter registration drives and "freedom schools." The almost daily reports of violence and harassment over the summer revealed a white population in Mississippi that seemed dramatically out of step with the rest of the nation. In electoral terms, Mississippi's isolation was encapsulated in its embrace of the 1964 Republican presidential nominee, Barry Goldwater. Lyndon Johnson defeated Goldwater nationally with the largest percentage of the popular vote in American presidential history. In Mississippi, however, with a voting population that remained almost exclusively white, a remarkable 87 percent of voters pulled the lever for the losing candidate.¹ Never before in American history had one state been so far removed from the voting mainstream.

Sixteen years later, the national spotlight shone on Philadelphia, Mississippi, for a much different reason. In 1980, Ronald Reagan launched his presidential campaign at the Neshoba County Fair. Addressing a crowd of more than fifteen thousand enthusiastic supporters, Reagan invoked a mantra that had sustained a generation of southern segregationists. "I believe in states' rights," he told the crowd. Reagan pledged that, if he were elected, he would "restore to states and local governments the power that properly belongs to them." The candidate's remarks were prepared beforehand and were not a part of his regular campaign speech; reporters following Reagan could not remember him using the term before Neshoba County. Republican officials in Mississippi had designed the visit to Neshoba County to reach out to what the Republican national committeeman in Mississippi described as "George Wallace inclined voters."²

Throughout the 1980 election, the Reagan campaign associated with former segregationists who fewer than two decades earlier had been dismissed nationally as political pariahs. At one Reagan rally in Mississippi,



Figure I.I. Ronald and Nancy Reagan at the Neshoba County Fair, August 1980.

U.S. representative Trent Lott, the head of Reagan's Mississippi campaign, lauded South Carolina senator and 1948 Dixiecrat presidential candidate Strom Thurmond with the declaration, "If we had elected this man 30 years ago, we wouldn't be in the mess we are today." At another Mississippi campaign stop, former arch-segregationist governor John Bell Williams joined Reagan onstage. Reagan trounced the incumbent Jimmy Carter in the general election, but in Mississippi he scratched out only a narrow win, 50.7 percent to 49.3 percent. The close vote, however, belied the fact that almost two-thirds of white Mississippians voted for the Republican candidate.³

The sixteen years separating the civil rights murders and Ronald Reagan's campaign stop in Neshoba County represented a sea change in the political fortunes of both white Mississippians and American conservatives more generally. In 1964, Mississippi whites were a derided minority in a nation that at long last had acted legislatively to end the legacies of slavery and racial discrimination. Conservatism seemed as discredited as a political philosophy as white Mississippians were as democratic citizens. Many Americans saw it, as Richard Hofstadter famously wrote, as part of a "paranoid style" in American politics, the viewpoint of crackpots and extremists. Only sixteen years later, however, American conservatives were triumphant. Ronald Reagan's election was the crowning achievement of a newly ascendant, ideologically honed conservative wing within the Republican Party. This faction would set the political agenda for the GOP and the nation for decades to come. And among conservative Republicans, white Mississippians—and other Deep South whites like them—were a carefully courted constituency.⁴

It was a remarkable transformation, one that would have been hard to imagine in the summer of 1964, when Mississippi racism seemed so galling and when protesters outside the Republican National Convention held up signs such as "Be with Barry When They Burn the Crosses" and "Goldwater for Governor of Mississippi."⁵ That year, Phil Ochs, one of the most prolific voices of the American folk revival, summed up both the outrage over Mississippi injustice and America's liberal consensus in his searing ballad "Here's to the State of Mississippi." The verses, framed around a rhymed quatrain, paid sarcastic tribute to the state. Each ended with a damning couplet and the same ringing refrain: "Mississippi find yourself another country to be part of." The irony is that this, in essence, is what white Mississippians did. This book is a history of how they did it, of how they went in search of another country, a more conservative America, a more—in the view of many Mississippi whites at least—Christian nation committed to principles that white Mississippians and conservative Americans had defended all along.

This book shows how, despite segregationists' popular pledges that they would never submit to racial integration, white leaders in the state initiated a subtle and strategic accommodation to the demands of civil rights activists and the federal government, one that helped preserve the priorities of white elites and that put white Mississippians in a position to contribute to a broad conservative countermovement against the liberal triumphs of the 1960s. Whites in Mississippi rearticulated their resentment of the liberal social policies that allowed for black advancement in ways that would come to resonate with white Americans far outside of the Deep South. They conceived of their struggle against civil rights activists and federal officials not merely as a regional fight to preserve white supremacy but as a national battle to preserve fundamental American freedoms. In doing so, they made common cause with a variety of conservative constituencies: with cold warriors concerned about an expansive federal state; with fundamentalist and evangelical Christians worried about liberalism "infecting" Protestant churches; and with parents opposed to federal school desegregation efforts, who wanted to determine where and with whom their children went to school.

Many white Mississippians were, to be sure, among the most hardened opponents to basic advances for African Americans in the 1960s. Certainly, not every self-identified conservative shared their racial views. But too often Mississippi has served as an icon of southern intransigence, the key setting for what has become the modern American melodrama in which the nation finally dealt with anomalous Deep South racists and made good on its promise of equality for all its citizens. It is important not to take American redemption and gothic southern racism as *the* story of the civil rights era. Doing so reduces history to a morality tale, it ignores ongoing struggles for racial justice, and it oversimplifies white reaction to the civil rights struggle both inside and outside of the South. Most crucially, it obscures important connections between how conservative white southerners and conservative white Americans responded to the civil rights revolution. The pages that follow, then, recover how many white Mississippians saw themselves: not as American pariahs but as central participants in a conservative counterrevolution that reshaped American politics in the closing decades of the twentieth century.

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Mississippi is an important place to examine modern conservative politics, but not because Mississippians were typical of either their fellow southerners or their fellow Americans. Mississippi is important exactly because it seemed so *atypical*. The poorest, least urbanized southern state with the highest percentage of African American population, Mississippi

initially lacked the moderating influence of business leadership that existed in cities such as Atlanta, Nashville, and Charlotte, and which appeared to be the natural home of a growing moderate southern Republicanism in the previously one-party South. It was the birthplace of the first significant organization of segregationist resistance, the Citizens' Council, and the first to use state tax dollars to organize an investigative agency committed to preserving white supremacy. From 1954 to 1964, whites in Mississippi also committed some of the most ghastly, high-profile acts of racial violence, including the murders of Emmett Till, Mack Charles Parker, Herbert Lee, Louis Allen, Medgar Evers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner.

In the 1960s, no single book better summarized Mississippi's status as a place set apart than James Silver's *Mississippi: The Closed Society*, published the day after the three civil rights workers disappeared in Neshoba County. Silver, a Civil War historian at the University of Mississippi, was an eyewitness to the Citizens' Council's reign of intimidation from the *Brown* decision through the mid-1960s; his outspoken denunciation of racial hysteria in the state led Mississippi officials to make repeated attempts to have him removed from his position at the university. *The Closed Society*, which began as the presidential address to the Southern Historical Association, described the rise of a profoundly undemocratic, racial authoritarianism in Mississippi that threatened the most basic American principles of free speech and rule of law. In the summer of 1964, as days stretched into weeks with no word on the whereabouts of the three civil rights workers who had disappeared in Neshoba County, Silver's book appeared on the best-seller lists of the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine.⁶

Americans were eager to understand the racial extremism of white southerners, and the image of the closed society helped explain what was at stake in the southern racial struggle. In a 1965 review of several books about the civil rights crisis in Mississippi, the novelist Walker Percy, who spent his young adult years in Greenville, Mississippi, noted how the fight against racism in Mississippi held a moral clarity that was hard to find elsewhere. Percy described civil rights volunteers in the state as "refugees from the fragmented and rootless cities of the North who seize upon Mississippi as the unequivocal evil which can give direction to their lives." For this generation of Americans, as ugly as Mississippi racism was, it was preferable to the quiet hypocrisy of the rest of America. "There is something wrong with Los Angeles too, but where is it?" Percy wrote. "There is nothing unlocated about [the white racists] of Neshoba County." For many Americans, the eagerness to consume accounts of southern racism seemed directly proportional to the outlandishness of the tales themselves: the more vulgar the racism in Mississippi, the more

interesting it was to American readers. This market effect was not lost on James Silver. When he found sales of *The Closed Society* flagging, he would wire friends still living in Mississippi with the facetious order, “Burn another church.”⁷

Critics of Silver must be mindful of Ronnie Dugger’s admonition: “Holding [Silver] up against ordinary standards of ‘book reviewing’ is trivial. . . . As well criticize *Common Sense*, when it came out, for an excess of fervor.” Yet by the time *The Closed Society* appeared in 1964, the forces of white racial authoritarianism that had arisen in the aftermath of the *Brown* decision—and which Silver so accurately described—were already beating a hasty retreat. When the revised edition of the book appeared in 1966, the additional chapter, “Revolution Begins in the Closed Society,” was more than two-thirds as long as the book’s original text.⁸

Silver’s account of the closed society resonated with Americans at a time when the racial crisis still seemed like a southern problem. By decade’s end, however, Mississippi racism seemed less like a blight on America’s character than a metaphor for all that was wrong with the nation. “The ghetto riots of the mid-1960s have weakened public belief in Mississippi’s singularity as a rural cancer-spot of bigotry isolated from an urbanizing, progressive America,” wrote one reviewer of the 1966 revised edition. “It is now clear that there is a bit of Mississippi in the heart of every metropolis, that the suburbs are still ‘closed societies.’” By 1971, Phil Ochs had stopped singing “Here’s to the State of Mississippi.” He rewrote the song and titled it “Here’s to the State of Richard Nixon.”⁹

Over the course of the 1960s, as more radical voices in the civil rights movement rejected the pieties of American liberalism, they also rejected the easy notion of Mississippi as an exception to American moral decency. Student protesters at Berkeley, some of them fresh from formative experiences fighting for civil rights in Mississippi, linked their struggle against liberal university administrators with the plight of Mississippi blacks. Mississippi was not a closed society; it was America writ small.¹⁰ The irony for many Americans whose political consciousness was formed in the 1960s was that instead of the closed society opening, it seemed that the reverse had occurred. National politics, in the phrase of the writer John Egerton, had become “southernized.”¹¹

This ironic framework of the liberal nation becoming more like the racist South has shaped much of our thinking about the origins of modern southern and American conservatism. Journalists and historians alike have argued that southern white racism has served as a cornerstone of modern conservative politics. Instead of rejecting southern racism on moral grounds, modern conservatives simply channeled the fury and repackaged the message. In this view, the Republicans pursued a “southern strategy,” using coded, racial appeals to win over southern white voters. Scholars initially traced this process through studies of political language

and by focusing on presidential electoral politics, from the Dixiecrat revolt of 1948 through the Goldwater campaign of 1964 and the conservative Reagan revolution of the 1980s.¹²

As powerful as this interpretation has been in explaining the lingering issues of racial division in American life, it has two shortcomings. First, the southern strategy thesis has failed to appreciate the dramatic social and economic transformation of the American South in the second half of the twentieth century and the implications for the southern political ruling class. The South's "bulldozer revolution" certainly did not end racial discrimination, but it changed the dynamics. By the 1960s, the plantation economy that had been preserved in Reconstruction and that had provided the economic rationale for the legalized subjugation of southern African Americans in the century since emancipation was in dramatic collapse.¹³ Desegregation in Mississippi both contributed to and was influenced by a decades-long transition during which political power shifted away from the rural Black Belt agricultural elite that had been tied to the national Democratic Party through the umbilical cord of New Deal agricultural policy and an atavistic cultural aversion to the party of Reconstruction. Supplanting the Black Belt elites was a group that Bruce Schulman has described as the "new Whigs," a modern, industrially oriented urbanized (and suburbanized) business class that aggressively sought federal dollars, advocated a pro-corporate, antiunion politics of small government and low taxes, and increasingly came to identify with the Republican Party. While it hardly suggests the full story, it is telling that as late as 1951, farmers outnumbered businessmen in the Mississippi state legislature nearly three to one. By 1983, the legislature contained ninety-five businessmen but only twenty-one farmers.¹⁴

Certainly Mississippi was behind the curve of modernization in the twentieth-century South. Still, the collapse of the plantation agricultural system led to a marked change in the state's political economy. In 1940, almost 60 percent of Mississippi workers were involved in some form of agriculture, and 80 percent of Mississippians lived in rural areas. Forty years later, only 4 percent worked in agriculture, and the population was equally divided between urban and rural. In the twenty years from 1959 to 1979, median family income in Mississippi improved from half to roughly three-quarters of the national average. Equally important was the transformation of the state's exclusionary political system. As late as 1964, only 6.7 percent of African Americans were registered to vote in Mississippi. By 1982, 75.8 percent of black Mississippians were registered voters, and the state boasted the largest number of black elected officials in the nation.¹⁵

A southern strategy thesis that draws a bold line connecting the politics of massive resistance and the politics of the modern Republican South fails to appreciate the extent of these changes. Those who posit the continuity

of white racial attitudes must be mindful of Barbara Fields's warning: "A historian looking for continuity in attitudes is likely to find it regardless of the set of attitudes selected, provided he is sufficiently imaginative in his construction of what constitutes evidence for the existence of an attitude."¹⁶ Undoubtedly, the protection of white privilege has remained a part of modern conservative politics in the South. Even today, race remains the central division in Mississippi, politically, culturally, and spatially. The challenge for scholars, however, is to reconcile the continuity of white racism with both the evolution of its expression and the dramatic changes that have swept the state and the region. It is not an easy task, but in failing to do so, scholars attribute to white racism a mystical, ahistorical quality that explains everything and, thus, explains nothing very well.¹⁷

If the southern strategy thesis has overemphasized continuity in southern politics, there is another inadequacy as well. It has made rural whites from the Deep South the cancerous, racist element within the modern Republican Party and, in the process, has vastly oversimplified how race operates in the modern conservative movement. Recent scholars of the urban and suburban South have provided an important corrective. They have argued that the story of massive resistance in the Deep South too often has been taken as the story for the region as a whole. Rural white southerners, they maintain, have not been as important in shaping modern conservatism as have white suburbanites—the white-flight refugees from desegregating inner-city neighborhoods, the new white-collar transplants who migrated to the region to participate in the expanding Sunbelt economy, or rural white southerners who moved not to southern cities but directly to southern suburbs. These Sunbelt southerners rearticulated the racially explicit appeals of massive resistance politics into a "color blind" conservative language of rights and responsibilities that protected racial and class privilege in the suburbs and contributed to the rights-based language of modern racial conservatism.¹⁸

In both the older southern strategy thesis and the more recent Sunbelt scholarship, the innovation of modern conservatives was in taking the explicit racism out of southern massive resistance while maintaining its essence, moving it from the rural Jim Crow South into the modern suburbs, and making it the basis for an emerging Republican majority. But in reality, segregationist politics in a largely rural Deep South state like Mississippi were never as simple as these accounts have implied. Conservative color blindness and racist code words were not the invention of Republican presidential political strategists or of white suburbanites. They had always been a part of segregationist politics in a Deep South state such as Mississippi. In the late nineteenth century, exclusionary provisions in the 1890 Mississippi state constitution—statutes that led to the systematic disenfranchisement of black voters and the social subjugation

of African Americans—were framed in language that made no explicit reference to race. Segregationists' most familiar defense—states' rights—was a color-blind argument as well, one that couched the defense of white supremacy in terms of political principle rather than racial superiority.

Certainly the furor over the *Brown* decision sparked a resistance movement across the region in the 1950s that made an explicit defense of white supremacy. Still, the emotional, overtly racist politics of massive resistance that flared up in the wake of *Brown* gradually gave way—even in Mississippi—to more subtle, color-blind political language.¹⁹ When they opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Mississippi segregationists who helped coordinate the lone lobby against the bill did not argue publicly that it threatened the South's segregated way of life—though they all privately believed that it did. Rather, they maintained that the bill represented a dangerous and unconstitutional expansion of federal powers. After Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, neither did Mississippi segregationists defend all-white schools in the name of preserving white racial superiority; instead, they framed the issue as the right of all parents, white or black, to choose which school their child attended. Laws passed by the Mississippi legislature in 1966 to dilute the effects of the 1965 Voting Rights Act gerrymandered legislative districts or employed tactics such as creating multimember legislative districts, but they made no mention of race. And in the 1970s, organizers of segregated private academies attempted to hang on to federal tax exemptions by defining their institutions as “church schools,” which, they argued, were protected from federal regulation under the First Amendment's separation of church and state.

Too often historians have thought of the racial conservatism of white Mississippians as different from that of other white southerners and of racial regimes that followed in the North or in the suburbs after the 1960s. “Southern society was closed,” writes Michael Klarman in a recent history of white resistance, “but Mississippi verged on totalitarianism.”²⁰ Given the violence and the vituperation among many Mississippi whites, this approach has been neither surprising nor wrong. It has, however, been incomplete. There are other stories to tell about white Mississippians, and it is important to tell them. The danger in previous accounts, as Charles Payne has written, is to reduce white southerners to “the ignorant, the pot-bellied, and the tobacco-chewing,” images that “easily supplant more complex and realistic images of racism.”²¹

There is another danger as well. If Mississippi was a closed society in the 1960s, then America, by implication, was an open one. The accomplishment of the civil rights movement, from this view, was in making the South more like the rest of the nation. Civil rights activists were ambivalent about how such a formulation exonerated nonsouthern white Americans. It allowed national policy makers to devise remedies that dismissed

racial inequality as a distinctly southern phenomenon, and in the process limited the kinds of antidotes for more subtle and pervasive forms of racial inequality. In American politics today, it is conservative activists and scholars who are most likely to preserve the image of the closed society, who are most likely to remember an American South that was fundamentally at odds with a larger nation committed to ideals of equality and justice. Doing so obscures a history in which American conservatives were deeply ambivalent about the principle of equality in modern politics. Conservatives today recall a religious-oriented, nonviolent civil rights struggle committed to racial color blindness, an effort that was primarily conservative in nature, that rooted out racist, retrograde, and un-American white southerners. Such a formulation has not only allowed conservatives to mistakenly anoint themselves as the true inheritors of the color-blind civil rights legacy, but also permitted them to make glib distinctions about the roots of modern conservatism. Thus, the conservative activist Paul Weyrich has asserted that New Right leadership “bears no resemblance to the reactionary Southern icons of the past.” A conservative scholar has recently denounced the idea of racist southern Republicans as a “myth.” And in a moment when an informal remark by a soon-to-be Republican Senate majority leader shed an unflattering light on conservatism’s past, a white Mississippian like Trent Lott—a man who in the past thirty years has been among a handful of the most powerful and successful articulators of modern conservative politics—could be unceremoniously dismissed as a “burden to his party,” an unrepresentative and unwanted holdover from long ago.²²

Whatever the shortcomings of the southern strategy thesis, on one score it has been exactly right: it has placed white reaction against the modern civil rights movement at the center of the conservative resurgence since the 1960s. This study, then, builds on earlier work on race and modern conservatism but with a number of adjustments. It shifts the focus away from presidential politics and code language. It looks beyond merely electoral politics in the southern Republican Party to examine the broader roots of conservative reaction. And it examines how white opposition mixed with other important developments in southern society, such as the economic transformation of the region and important changes that took place within southern churches.

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The eight chapters of this book proceed in rough chronological order, from the beginnings of organized white resistance in the wake of the *Brown* decision through the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Three interrelated themes guide the investigation. The first emphasizes the com-

plexity and diversity of white Mississippians' response to the changes demanded by civil rights activists. This emphasis departs from recent interpretations that have stressed the importance of white southerners' "backlash" against the civil rights movement. In this view, the severity and unanimity of white resistance was the biggest factor in its own demise. It provided a perfect foil for nonviolent African American protesters to dramatize southern injustice.²³

Whereas most accounts have focused on the unanimity of white Mississippians' massive resistance to civil rights, this study pays particular attention to their strategic accommodations. This was a path that Governor J. P. Coleman described in the 1950s as "practical segregation." Later, beginning roughly in 1964, the director of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, Erle Johnston, referred to a similar process of "racial troubleshooting." Few if any of these leaders experienced any profound change of heart. None of them became open advocates of an integrated society. All of them counseled grudging and measured compliance with civil rights laws because they all understood that the consequences of continued defiance were a loss of political power. Some form of strategic accommodation was the necessary precondition for white leaders to continue any number of political initiatives that were important to them, whether that was attracting outside industry, gaining control over local poverty boards established by the Office of Economic Opportunity, fighting federal school desegregation efforts, or rewriting state voting laws in ways that would dilute the power of black voters.

Examining the strategic accommodations of Mississippi's white leaders yields a variety of important insights. For one, it helps reveal important class divisions that existed among white Mississippians. By 1963, membership in extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and Americans for the Preservation of the White Race was on the rise. White elites feared that violence by these groups would draw unwanted outside attention, possibly leading to declarations of martial law and destroying the economic prospect of towns struggling to recruit outside industries. The potential for extremist violence made white leaders more willing to grant some concessions to political opponents. An accommodationist framework also allows us to appreciate the important role that black self-defense played in sparking changes among southern whites. In recent years, historians of the African American freedom struggle have debunked notions of a southern black community monolithically committed to nonviolent protest. Akinyele O. Umoja argues that in Mississippi, the year 1964 represented the "beginning of the end of nonviolence in the Mississippi Freedom Movement." By the mid-1960s, white elites in Mississippi not only feared violence by white extremists; they also feared that African Ameri-

cans in Mississippi would retaliate, leading to an escalation of violence for which local law enforcement officials were unprepared to respond.

Finally, strategic accommodation exposes important continuities in white racial authority in Mississippi. It is simplistic to see massive resistance simply as a unified racial regime that was defeated by the federal legislation of 1964 and 1965. Whites lost many high-profile battles, but they were often successful in preserving key aspects of the racial status quo at the local level. They did this by granting token concessions to black demands and by isolating more radical voices in the black community. They projected an image of moderation and emphasized to outside observers how much things had changed. And in some cases, they used low-profile acts of harassment and subterfuge against civil rights advocates who pressed for more far-reaching changes.

A second theme of this book argues that conservative religious and theological perspectives informed the racial and political conservatism of white Mississippians. Historians have disagreed over how important religion was in the defense of Jim Crow.²⁴ This book emphasizes that for white Mississippians the intersection between race and religion was complex, serving at times to reinforce the racial status quo, at others to undermine it, and at still others to provide an alternative framework for understanding the nature of social and cultural change in this period. This second theme is also one attempt to redress what the religious historian Jon Butler has rightly described as the “religion problem in modern American history.”²⁵

The civil rights movement was an attack not simply on segregated institutions but on the set of ideologies that supported those institutions and, by extension, on white southerners’ theological worldview. The religious nature of the southern civil rights struggle forced white southerners to explain anew the relationship between their Christian faith and their segregationist practice. Some Mississippi segregationists had little difficulty believing that segregation was God’s design for creation; others seemed to struggle with this notion. By the mid-1960s, however, a significant number of white Christians in Mississippi saw the civil rights drive as the leading wedge in a much larger and broader movement rooted in a modern liberal theology that was corrupting the mission of the church and threatening traditional practices in their communities and churches.

White Christians in Mississippi responded to the racial and religious demands of black Christians and civil rights activists in numerous ways. They could admit that Christian brotherhood should not be limited to whites, and by the mid-1960s many white Christians had openly rejected the violence of the Klan as an assault on the brotherhood of all believers. But these same whites rejected calls for a more fundamental questioning of the implications of Christian belief in modern American society. Con-

servative white Christians in Mississippi drew on their well-established opposition to the “social gospel,” shorthand for the liberal theology that white Mississippians believed overemphasized social regeneration at the expense of individual salvation. They deeply resented liberal Protestant ministers who headed national church bodies that issued antisegregationist statements or who came to Mississippi to participate in marches and protests. For most white Mississippians, these ministers adhered to a theology that threatened to tear Christian churches apart over social and political issues and that distracted Christians from their central mission of winning souls for Christ.

By the 1970s, the racial and religious conservatism of white Mississippians had converged in unexpected ways in the fight over federal tax policy toward southern private schools. This was a battle that grew directly out of civil rights struggles in the state in the 1960s. African Americans in Mississippi and their liberal allies saw Christian private schools as an obvious attempt to protect private all-white schools from state regulation, and in most cases in Mississippi they were exactly right. But even in Mississippi, whites could and did distinguish between white-flight private schools—or “segregation academies”—and schools founded by Christian parents trying to provide a holistic religious orientation for their child’s education. By the late 1970s, not only in Mississippi but across the nation, the fight to protect “Christian schools” emerged as one of several vital issues—including the pro-life movement and anti-ERA and anti-gay rights drives—fueling the mobilization and politicization of conservative white Christians. Conservative white Mississippians saw themselves on the front lines of this issue, protecting the interests of conservative Christians against a secular federal state that was hostile toward religious practice.

The final theme of this book traces how conservative whites in Mississippi linked their efforts with a broader, insurgent conservative movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In doing so, this book builds on local studies of the North and West that have provided more complicated portraits of conservative whites and have made important connections between local and national conservative political movements.²⁶ In Mississippi, segregationists who struggled to maintain white racial orthodoxy at home transformed their political goals into a conservative language of states’ rights, antistatism, and small government. Powerful Mississippi Democrats used their seniority status in the House and the Senate to raise high-profile objections to civil rights policies. U.S. senator John Stennis’s effort to undermine federal school desegregation policy—a campaign that directly fed the populist reactionary backlash against busing in the 1970s—is a good example of how one powerful Mississippi Democrat helped stimulate a broader national reaction against federal civil rights policies.

Of course, the growth of the Mississippi Republican Party would become the main vehicle for linking conservative Mississippians with the national conservative movement. In the 1950s, a “New Breed” of young, white professionals carried out a hostile takeover of the Mississippi Republican Party from the tiny band of Black and Tan Republicans that had controlled the party since Reconstruction. These GOP leaders were eager to build a modern ideologically conservative state party, and without hesitation they went after segregationist votes, or, as the saying at the time went, they “went hunting where the ducks are.” But in the 1960s, these efforts were feeble. Only one Republican candidate was able to outflank Mississippi Dixiecrats on segregation in the 1960s. In fact, Dixiecrats constantly reminded voters that Republicans had been the architects of Reconstruction, and they warned that a revived GOP threatened white supremacy by dividing the white vote and allowing a minority black population to play a kingmaker role.

Mississippi Republicans expected that the election of Richard Nixon would offer new help in the fight to preserve segregation. GOP officials in Mississippi vigorously tried to exploit political connections with the Nixon White House to turn back civil rights advances in the state. Despite sympathetic rhetoric along with a high-profile delay in court-ordered school desegregation, the Nixon administration offered little actual relief. Mississippi Republicans gained important House seats in the 1970s, but they had trouble defeating populist Democrats who depicted Republicans as silk-stocking candidates for the country-club set. As Merle and Erle Black have observed, “Greater white support for Republican presidential candidates commenced in 1964, but the more fundamental Republican advantage in partisan identification emerged two decades later.” In the end, the growth of the Republican Party in Mississippi stemmed less from top-down strategies of political leaders in either the state or the national party than from a broader confluence of racial and religious politics in the 1970s. The conflict over federal tax policy toward racially discriminatory private schools is one important example of how white Mississippians gained a new platform from which to denounce fundamental principles of constitutional governance against what they saw as meddling liberal elites.²⁷ In the 1980s, an increasingly mobilized and politicized conservative Christian vote—along with suburban voters in Jackson, the southern suburbs of Memphis, and along the Gulf Coast—provided the most significant growth for the Mississippi GOP.

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Mississippi seems an unlikely place to study *American* history, given how isolated the state has often been portrayed. Moreover, for most Americans, the conservatism of white Mississippians has seemed self-explana-



Figure 1.2. Ross Barnett blocking James Meredith from enrolling at the University of Mississippi, September 1962. James McShane is to Meredith's right. John Doar is to the right of McShane, with his back to the camera.

tory: the murder and mayhem of the 1960s were clear enough, and the memory of those events has been preserved in any number of ways, from history books to Hollywood films. Perhaps Nina Simone put it best: "Everybody knows about Mississippi goddamn." But, in fact, because Mississippi and its racism are so familiar, there are important things that we have missed about the state.²⁸

A well-known story about Ross Barnett, the segregationist governor of Mississippi from 1960 to 1964 and one of the iconic figures of the white South's massive resistance to civil rights, is a good example. In his effort to block James Meredith from entering the University of Mississippi in 1962, Barnett achieved a level of infamy rare in American politics. The confrontation at the federal building in Jackson is one of the more familiar scenes from the southern civil rights struggle. Thousands of white onlookers had gathered outside the building to cheer Barnett on. Hundreds more had packed the hallway inside. Meredith walked up to Barnett surrounded by federal officials and U.S. marshals; he was the only African American among a sea of white faces. With television cameras rolling and the entire assemblage tense with anticipation, Barnett's opening line brought a roar of laughter from the supportive crowd: "Which one is Meredith?"²⁹

The story has usually been told as an example of Barnett's comic ineptness.³⁰ This was the same man, after all, who was nearly killed when, after exiting his campaign aircraft, he walked directly into a whirling air-

plane propeller; a man who once began remarks at a Jewish synagogue in Jackson by saying, "There is nothing finer than a group of people meeting in true *Christian* fellowship." But, in fact, Barnett's seemingly dull-witted comment was intentional, even rehearsed. He had used it two weeks earlier when he had blocked Meredith's attempt to enroll on the campus of the university.³¹

Barnett's apparent flub was really an inside joke, a verbal wink to Mississippi segregationists. There are at least two ways to read the joke. The first hinges on the legal argument Mississippi officials made to block Meredith. In the weeks leading up to the riots at Ole Miss, Barnett had stoked the fires of white racial pride shamelessly. These appeals, however, differed sharply from Mississippi officials' argument before the federal court. There they did not mention Meredith's race; state officials claimed that they denied Meredith admission because he did not have the required number of recommendation letters. In other words, it was not because of the color of Meredith's skin but because of the alleged content of his character. It was a color-blind argument, one that the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals easily rejected as being argued "in the eerie atmosphere of never-never land."³²

Ross Barnett, however, did not want a single white voter in Mississippi to mistake his defiance for anything other than a defense of white racial integrity itself. Everyone in the building, the state, and the nation knew that the reason James Meredith was not admitted was because he was black. The joke for Barnett was that he was feigning color blindness; he acted as though he could not pick out the African American Meredith from the other white faces in front of him. In doing so, Barnett not only called attention to his real reasons for blocking Meredith but also mocked the notion of color blindness itself, denouncing it as a fiction that in Barnett's mind was as outlandish in its presuppositions as the idea that a black man was the moral and intellectual equal of a white man.

The other way to read the joke revolves around the white federal officials who accompanied Meredith. By pretending that he could not distinguish Meredith from the others, Barnett was like the members of a white mob that attacked the author and civil rights activist Anne Moody and the biracial group of protesters at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Jackson in 1963. Hooligans there derided Joan Trumpauer, a white civil rights activist, as a "white nigger."³³ Barnett was not as explicit as the mob, but this was more or less what he meant with his joke. John Doar, James McShane, and the federal marshals surrounding Meredith had sided with the forces that would destroy southern white supremacy. Barnett knew which one James Meredith was. The joke was an indirect, public way of saying what Barnett might have said privately to his Citizens' Council supporters—that, as far as he was concerned, they were all niggers and

he could not tell between them. In this reading, Barnett intended the line as an insult to Meredith's white supporters, about as vicious an insult as a white supremacist like Ross Barnett could conceive.

Politically speaking, these two different readings are not mutually exclusive. Barnett himself would not have cared why people laughed. The fact that they laughed was the important thing; the humor made him seem in control. It reassured his supporters that Barnett would not be intimidated by the assembled might of the federal government. While it is impossible to say exactly how the joke operated, one thing is for certain: the joke was not on Ross Barnett. The joke, then and now, is on those who conceive of Ross Barnett only as an incompetent fool, a political dinosaur who represented a people whose time had passed. Barnett articulated white Mississippians' sense of being misunderstood, unappreciated, and forgotten. He represented for a moment their rage at a federal government that would undermine cherished social values. He captured their sense of being left out in a country that had ignored their voices, mocked their traditions, and impugned their honor. And of course he embodied their sense of entitlement, a notion of supremacy based on the fiction of racial superiority.

If Ross Barnett's showdown with James Meredith was more complicated than historians have previously imagined, so too is Mississippi's relationship to the larger nation. It is important that we conceive of white Mississippians' resistance to the moral and political challenge of the civil rights movement as a vital part of modern American history. In the 1960s, the triumph over legalized racial inequality in Mississippi confirmed for many Americans the essential goodness at the heart of this nation's ongoing democratic experiment; justice may have been long delayed for African Americans in Mississippi, but it was no longer denied. Fights over the meaning and legacy of the civil rights struggle continued, however, and Mississippi remained at the heart of liberal efforts to make good on the nation's commitment to civil rights. Conservative white Mississippians did not simply accept their political defeat with equanimity and good cheer. They fought for issues that they believed were central not merely to a southern way of life but to American values and American political traditions. By the early 1980s, conservative white Mississippians, many of whom wore their Christian identity in the political realm as a badge of honor, battled what they viewed as a liberal, secular elite over issues that grew directly out of civil rights struggles of previous decades. In the process, civil rights politics gave way to an important new cultural fault line among Americans, one that would define American politics for the remainder of the twentieth century.