

James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss

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The Civil Rights Movement, which reached its peak in the 1950's and 1960's, was an epic struggle to gain equal rights for African-Americans. Under the United States Constitution, all Americans, whether black or white, are entitled to certain inalienable rights such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Throughout the nation, and in particular the South, many blacks were unable to enjoy rights which were virtually guaranteed to whites such as the right to vote, the right to a quality public education, and the right to sit at a lunch counter as a paying customer. Racial segregation was the rule, not the exception in the South until the mid-twentieth century. Groups such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were crucial in achieving equal rights for blacks. Events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the *Brown v. the Board of Education Case*, James Meredith's entrance into the University of Mississippi, and The Mississippi Freedom Summer were pivotal in reversing the policy of segregation and discrimination that had permeated the South for decades.

What causes a social movement like the Civil Rights Movement? What is sometimes called the classical model offers the simplest explanation. On this model, what is required is a structural strain, or weakness in society, which in this case was discrimination on the basis of race. The structural strain in turn leads to a disruptive psychological state, or the realization that discrimination on the basis of race is unethical. The structural strain then culminates in a social movement,

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in this case the Civil Rights Movement. Certainly the Civil Rights Movement had its origins in the feeling of inferiority pressed upon blacks throughout the nation, and particularly in the South. These feelings of inferiority caused many blacks to unite in their plight against racial discrimination, as many knew that racial segregation was morally wrong and felt a strong desire to end this period of racial discrimination. The classical model, however, explains only the “framing processes” through which individuals become aware of social problems; it cannot explain how individual psychology translates into collective action.¹ The practice of segregation, which led to feelings of inferiority, had been in existence for decades or even centuries without producing anything quite like the Civil Rights Movement.

For social change to occur, African-Americans also needed organizations such as churches, SCLC, SNCC, and the NAACP, which provided outlets for those who felt that the practice of segregation could be reversed. Through these organizations, a collective identity developed among the black communities throughout the country, and even more deeply in the Southern states. In this sense the Civil Rights Movement can be seen as an example of the resource mobilization model of social movements. The resource mobilization model implies that resources suddenly made available are put to use in a social movement. The resource mobilization method suggests that social movements are a tactical response to the unfair truths of a particular society or political system. The resource mobilization model requires an increase in the amount of resources available to support the social movement, and does not rely as heavily on the feeling of discontentment among the challengers to the status quo as does the classical model. The Civil Rights Movement had a significant increase in the resources available through churches, colleges, and the NAACP, all of which helped to organize the movement. The classical model of emphasizes internal aspects of social movements while the resource mobilization model stresses external factors that lead to social movements.²

But even these mobilizing resources are not sufficient to explain the Civil Rights Movement. Like segregation, a great many of the organizations mentioned above had been in existence for decades, throughout much of the twentieth century. But it was only in the

1950's and 1960's that significant social change occurred. To explain this, we also have to cite external events that allowed for expanding political opportunities. Events such as the Second World War, the *Brown* decision, and the election of John F. Kennedy as President each added legitimacy and steam to the burgeoning movement. Without these political opportunities, African-Americans would not have been able to mobilize their political resources against the forces of racial discrimination. Social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement thus arise from three key factors: political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes. Expanding political opportunities to challengers of the status quo can originate from war, economic crisis, political realignments, or industrialization. Mobilizing structures, whether formal or informal organizations allow people to mobilize and take collective action. And finally, framing processes allow for a collective identity that establishes a feeling of dissatisfaction among the challengers to the status quo about an aspect of their life and a feeling of optimism that this aspect can be changed. With these three factors in place, social movements can occur.³

Thus the Civil Rights Movement, while deeply rooted in both the classical model of social movements and the resource mobilization model of social movements, leans more strongly towards the political process model emphasized by Doug McAdam. The political process model takes into account what the classical and resource mobilization movements do not, and is a fusion of the two models. The political process model, according to McAdam, calls for indigenous organizational strength, or organized groups with a collective plan of action for challenging the status quo, cognitive liberation, or the recognition that an aspect of current society is wrong and can be changed, and expanding political opportunities, or new aspects arise in society that were previously unavailable to those challenging the status quo. In the Civil Rights Movement, indigenous organizational strength came from such organizations as the NAACP or SCLC. Cognitive liberation came from the idea that segregation and discrimination on the basis of race were unconstitutional and could easily be challenged. Expanding political opportunities such as Kennedy's election and the integration of Central High School in Little Rock proved to be pivotal

to the movement.

In this paper I want to apply this political process model to an important and dramatic episode in the Civil Rights Movement, the integration of Ole Miss by James Meredith. Meredith's victory was in one sense the result of one individual's moral outrage at the practice of racial segregation. But in another sense, his victory was a carefully timed and orchestrated political act, one that quite consciously took full advantage of the internal and external political resources available to African-Americans in the early 1960's. Meredith applied to the University of Mississippi after Kennedy's inauguration, at a time when organizations such as the NAACP and SCLC were enjoying peak membership, and the feeling that segregation could be overcome ran high; thus he can be seen as a fundamental example of the political process model. Meredith was able to fuse the shift in the structure of political opportunities, cognitive liberation, and the available indigenous organizational strength into a personal victory and a victory of the Civil Rights Movement as a whole.⁴

On September 8, 1957, James Howard Meredith heard of the integration of Little Rock, Arkansas' Central High School while stationed overseas. Meredith grew up in the heart of the Deep South, in an area where the doctrine of racial segregation was accepted and practiced with fierce enforcement. Meredith understood what a great step this was for African Americans in gaining equal rights and beginning to break down the racial prejudices and negative attitudes that permeated the South. Taught from an early age not to believe that anyone was superior to him based solely on skin color, Meredith understood the need for the integration of all public sectors before racially superior attitudes would be broken down. Meredith viewed the University of Mississippi as a symbol of white supremacy, and in a calculated move, applied for admission in early 1961. Meredith was determined to become a member of the student body. He was well qualified; he had been an ideal student at his previous institutions of higher learning and had recently finished serving nearly a decade of military service in the Air Force. A second factor in Meredith's favor had occurred in 1954 with the *Brown v Board of Education Topeka, Kansas* ruling, in which the Supreme Court declared that racial segregation in public schools was

unconstitutional. Meredith knew that he had a strong legal case to enter the university; he also knew that he was especially well-qualified for admission. Being older and more mature, he knew better than most potential undergraduates the significance of his action, and the legal and political obstacles he would have to face. He was also much better prepared to face those obstacles.

James Howard Meredith was born in 1933 in Kosciusko, Mississippi. The son of Moses "Cap" Meredith, a farmer who owned eighty-five acres of land, Meredith had nine brothers and sisters. Cap Meredith's father had been a slave, yet Cap Meredith was both a property owner and a registered voter. Cap Meredith taught his son order and discipline. He also kept the family isolated from the rest of the world by fencing off the family farm.⁵ Meredith grew up understanding the prevailing white supremacist mindset in Mississippi, but did not accept that he was inferior to anyone because of his skin color. Meredith was described as an intense loner, who early in his life developed a fierce pride in himself and his family. Meredith believed that the desegregation of the military was one of the greatest developments in the history of black Americans, and in 1951, he joined the Air Force at age eighteen. The Air Force had been recently established after World War II, and did not have the same legacy of racism as the other branches did. Meredith was sent to Japan shortly after joining the Air Force. In Japan, Meredith stated, he was never conscious of his racial identity as he was in the US. Meredith was amazed by the attitude of racial tolerance in Japan in the mid-1950s. Meredith spent lots of time following the news of racial strife within the US during the 1950s. He also began to study race relations while serving his military duty.⁶

Upon returning to Mississippi in 1960, Meredith enrolled in Jackson State College, where he quickly became a campus leader. Meredith was dissatisfied with the status of his race in society, and the South in particular. He wanted to overcome the attitude of white racial superiority in the South, and he saw his application to Ole Miss as a way of challenging the practice of discrimination. While at Jackson State, Meredith began to plan for his application to Ole Miss. Meredith saw several barriers in his way to integrating Ole Miss. In the letter he would write to Thurgood Marshall, Meredith stated he knew the

“probable difficulties involved in such a move as I am undertaking and I am fully prepared to pursue it all the way.”⁷ Meredith foresaw a long battle ahead, which he expected to include a series of court battles and a battle with Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett. Neither of those hurdles stopped Meredith from attempting his goals, for he recognized the potential for gaining admittance with the new possible opportunities from the newly elected Kennedy administration. Despite the long battle he saw ahead, Meredith was still firm in his decision to apply to and attend the University of Mississippi.⁸

The Kennedy administration was a huge factor in Meredith’s motivation. John F. Kennedy took the office of the Presidency in January 1961, amidst a nation that was struggling with racial inequality. Kennedy, who spent twelve years in Congress prior to being elected President, had not taken any action for civil rights. Kennedy, however, owed his narrow victory in part to the support of many black voters. While campaigning, Kennedy implied that discrimination in federally assisted housing would be eliminated by an executive order if he were elected. During the Democratic convention, Kennedy pushed a strong civil rights platform plank. During his first televised debate with Richard Nixon, he spoke sympathetically of the predicament of minority children. On October 20, 1960, Kennedy placed a call to Coretta King, who was pregnant at the time, offering support, as her husband Martin Luther King sat in a jail cell in Georgia.⁹ Kennedy had promoted himself to black voters in a way that no major presidential candidate had before. Kennedy’s election also marked a shift in black voting. In 1956, 60% of black voters voted in favor of the Republican Party, but in 1960, 70% of black voters supported the Democratic Party. From James Meredith’s standpoint, applying to the University of Mississippi in January of 1961 was perfect timing, because now the president of the United States was supporting civil rights. Meredith saw this opportunity as too great to pass up. A major United States presidential candidate had never campaigned with a civil rights plank in the way that Kennedy had. In waiting until a pro-civil rights president such as Kennedy was elected, Meredith recognized the expanding political opportunities, a crucial aspect of the political process model, available to him and to his race as a whole. Meredith’s timing was politically conscious and

entirely deliberate: on January 21, 1961, the day after Kennedy's inauguration, Meredith requested an application from the University of Mississippi.¹⁰

Registrar Robert B. Ellis promptly responded to Meredith's inquiry, saying, "We are very pleased to know of your interest in becoming a member of our student body...If we can be of further help to you in making your enrollment plans, please let us know."¹¹ Before returning his application, Meredith, predicting the bitter legal battles to come, wrote the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense Fund requesting legal assistance in the event an expensive court case was necessary to earn admission.¹² Meredith was keenly aware of the importance that such indigenous organizations as the NAACP would be to help his entrance into Ole Miss. Meredith did not wait for a reply from the Fund, but he submitted his application with a short but momentous addendum: "I sincerely hope that your attitude toward me...will not change upon learning that I am not a white applicant. I am an American-Mississippi-Negro citizen."¹³ Meredith explained to the registrar that he had not enclosed the required five letters of recommendation from Ole Miss alumni, but instead included five letters of recommendation from black citizens in his community. He also requested transcripts from the previous universities he attended to be sent to the University of Mississippi.¹⁴

Meredith's application then followed a procedure that had been in place since 1940 to discourage blacks from attempting to register at Ole Miss. The university sent copies of his application to both the board of trustees and to state officials, in order to come up with a strategy to deter Meredith's determination to break the color barrier at Ole Miss. On February 4, 1961, a telegram was sent from the registrar to Meredith, which stated that all applications received after January 25, 1961 were not considered for admission. The registrar informed Meredith that his application was received after January 25, and therefore it was not considered for admission. After receiving his first rejection, Meredith wrote the Justice Department, notifying the Civil Rights Division that Ole Miss had denied his application. In the letter, Meredith described the frustration of the disgrace he and his people had

experienced. On the same day Meredith had written to the Justice Department, he received a letter from Thurgood Marshall, director of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Marshall expressed the Fund's interest in what Meredith was trying to accomplish, and he requested that Meredith send the Fund copies of the University of Mississippi catalog and Meredith's college transcripts. With the aid of the Fund, Meredith had a nationally recognized and legitimate organization to back him up.¹⁵

On February 7, 1961, the board of trustees at the University of Mississippi had a meeting at which they planned a new set of admission requirements that would make it difficult for Meredith and other black applicants to be accepted into the University. The new admissions policy stated that a student could not transfer from one state institution into another unless "the student's work is acceptable to the receiving institution and to the Board of Trustees."¹⁶ The new policy also established that applications that may contain 'questionable or uncertain data' could not be considered for admission. While the University of Mississippi's board of trustees was changing their admission requirements, Marshall had examined Meredith's transcripts and credentials. The NAACP offered Meredith legal assistance and assigned Constance Baker Motley to the case. On February 16, 1961, Meredith received a letter from Motley that told him to make sure all his transcripts and other documents were satisfactory, and to send in his application for admission to the University for the summer term that was to begin June 8.¹⁷

As Meredith was preparing his application for the summer term, he received a letter, dated February 21, from the registrar that returned his housing deposit because he was not admitted. Meredith then immediately returned his housing deposit with his application for summer term. Meredith did not receive any response from the University concerning his summer application, and on March 21, he wrote a letter about his status. The University remained silent, however, and Meredith, ever persistent, wrote another letter two weeks later. Two weeks later, still not having received a response from Ole Miss, Meredith wrote a third letter, this time to the dean of the college of liberal arts, in which Meredith requested that the dean look over his

transcripts, review his application, and to advise him if he had met all admission requirements. While writing these letters and waiting patiently for a response from the University, Meredith maintained a constant correspondence with Constance Motley.¹⁸

On May 9, Meredith received a letter from the registrar informing him that only forty-eight of the ninety hours he had earned would be accepted at Ole Miss. The registrar explained that Jackson State was not accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges, and therefore, the University could not accept the credits Meredith had earned there. The hope of the University of Mississippi officials was that losing nearly half of his earned credits would discourage Meredith, and he would abandon all hope of ever attending Ole Miss. Despite the loss of the 42 credit hours, the registrar did ask Meredith at the end of the letter that to “please advise (the university) if you desire your application to be treated as a pending application.”¹⁹ This left the door open for Meredith’s admission to the University. Meredith, seeing this as an opportunity despite the heavy loss of credits, was as determined as ever to attend Ole Miss. After consulting with Constance Motley, Meredith notified the University on May 15 that he would accept the evaluation of his transcript as it was and wanted his application to be considered for summer term. Meredith also applied for married student housing for the summer term.²⁰

Also on May 15, the University officially changed its policy not to accept transfer credits from unaccredited schools, and said that it would deny admission to transfer students who had withdrawn from other institutions in the middle of a quarter or semester. Also officially adopted was the clause that stated that any applications that contained “false, contradictory, questionable or uncertain data”²¹ would not be accepted for admission. These changes were published in the 1962 catalog, along with the following statement regarding admissions requirements: “changes or revisions are sometimes made without prior notice in order to cope with changing conditions.”²² On May 25, 1961, the university rejected Meredith’s application of admission for the summer term, just ten days after the new standards were adopted. The registrar explained that the University could not admit Meredith because transfer students from unaccredited institutions were not admitted, and

also because Meredith did not provide his five letters of recommendation from alumni. The letter concluded saying that the registrar had closed Meredith's application file. Meredith, however, did not give up his fight to integrate Ole Miss.²³

On May 31, 1961, Meredith filed a lawsuit in the federal district court after receiving the formal written rejection. Meredith, knowing that segregation in public schools was declared illegal in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, knew he had a valid basis for getting the courts to allow his admission to Ole Miss. The Kennedy administration's promise of improving civil rights, along with the *Brown* decision and the backing of the NAACP, strengthened Meredith's powerful will. Constance Motley did not want Meredith to file a lawsuit at this point; she thought that Meredith should first exhaust all his internal options by appealing to the board of admissions at Ole Miss. Meredith preferred a lawsuit, however, because he believed the court would settle the issue more quickly. Judge Sidney J. Mize set a hearing on Meredith's case at Biloxi, Mississippi on June 12. After much legal squabbling, the district court rescheduled the hearing and it was transferred to Jackson, Mississippi. Judge Mize was a native Mississippian, a one-time state Democratic Party leader, and a member of the school board in Gulfport, Mississippi. Mize was also a firm believer in southern customs and tradition; he was not a likely advocate of breaking the color barrier of Ole Miss. Mize delayed the hearing until July 10, thereby effectively denying Meredith admission for the summer term. Mize also denied Constance Motley's request to take depositions of University personnel, though he allowed an Ole Miss lawyer to depose Meredith. Then Mize again postponed the hearing, this time until August 10.²⁴

During these court proceedings, Meredith and his lawyers tried to prove that Ole Miss had a general policy of segregation. Motley attempted to question registrar Ellis about the issue of segregation, but Mize prevented her from raising the issue, stating that these questions were not relevant to the issues at hand and that the questions would prolong the proceedings. The University lawyers focused on the trumped-up issue of Meredith's residency, arguing that Meredith was actually not a citizen of the state of Mississippi due to his long absences during his military service. The University's lawyers also suggested that

Meredith may have violated a voting registration law. Meredith was registered to vote in Jackson in Hinds County when he actually claimed residency in Kosciusko, in Attala County. The University's defense was trying to discredit Meredith and accuse him of voter registration fraud. Meredith claimed that the Hinds County clerk ordered him to register under Jackson, and later the clerk testified that Meredith was qualified to register and vote in Jackson. The University's lawyers attempted to discredit Meredith in another way, by suggesting that his motivations were coming from the NAACP, and that Meredith was encouraged by the association to apply to force a lawsuit. Registrar Ellis was claiming that Meredith was trying to get into Ole Miss "because he was a negro and not because he wanted an education."²⁵ The registrar stated that it was "insulting" that Meredith claimed he was denied admission because of race.

Meredith's hearing ended on August 16, but Mize did not actually rule until December 16 — even though the subject of the hearing was Meredith's request for a preliminary injunction to gain immediate admission to the university for the summer (and then the fall) term.²⁶ Having 'deliberated' for six months, Judge Mize ruled in favor of the University. Mize explained that the University did not deny Meredith admission solely on the basis of race. This ruling was based on the registrar's testimony that he "gave no consideration whatsoever to the race or color of the plaintiff."²⁷ Mize further ruled that the admission policies adopted by the board of trustees, even those adopted after Meredith had applied for admission, were not designed to discriminate against anyone solely on the basis of race or color. Mize also justified his decision by stating that the January cutoff date for applications was acceptable because of overcrowded housing conditions on campus. In actuality, the dormitories that were overcrowded were women's dormitories, not men's dormitories. In addition, Mize claimed that Meredith had lied about his voter registration, remarking that Meredith had pledged falsely because he registered to vote under Hinds County, not Atalla County, where he was actually a resident. Mize further set the date of January 15, 1962 as the day for a full trial on the validity of Meredith's claims that he was denied admission on the basis of race.²⁸

Motley immediately appealed Mize's order and filed papers with the US Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit on December 14, 1961, two days after Mize's ruling. Meredith and Motley clearly saw that Mize's ruling was weak on the basis of the Brown decision, and the fact that it was obvious that the University of Mississippi discriminated on the basis of race. Three circuit judges, Elbert Tuttle, Richard T. Rives and John Minor Wisdom, swiftly heard the appeal, and one month after Mize's decision on January 12, they issued their decision. The judges denied Meredith an injunction requiring his direct admission and ordered instead that a full trial of Meredith's claims begin contiguously. The judges also reprimanded Mize for his guidance of the hearing and gave him some guidelines for how to conduct the upcoming trial. Judge Wisdom, who wrote the appellate opinion, stated that the panel was taking "judicial notice" that Mississippi "maintains a policy of segregation" and that this was "a plain fact known to everyone."²⁹ The judges also reprimanded Mize for having a muddy record that was incomplete and full of facts that were so irrelevant that a clear comprehension of the issues was practically impossible. The appellate panel also disposed of the requirement of providing alumni references because it allowed for a disadvantage towards black applicants, and they noted that since Mize's ruling, Jackson State had been accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges.³⁰

The trial began on January 24, 1962 with a tense atmosphere revolving around the case. Despite the Fifth Circuit's strong assertion that segregation was a widely known truth in Mississippi, Mize ignored that comment. A series of University officials and witnesses claimed that race was not an issue at Ole Miss. Constance Motley had a difficult time while questioning school officials about whether or not they had seen a black student on school grounds. She was met with replies such as "I don't know the genealogical background of every person I meet" and "I'm not an expert in the field of anthropology,"³¹ when asking if officials had seen a black on campus or admitted a black to Ole Miss. Chancellor J.D. Williams explained that "no official of the University has the authority to deny the application of a qualified applicant to the University of Mississippi on the basis of race or color."³²

The key word was 'qualified,' and the University of Mississippi

was doing its best to find ways in which Meredith was not qualified. The first way in which the University attempted to prove Meredith was not qualified was to dispute his letters of recommendation from responsible Negro citizens. An assistant state's attorney went to Meredith's hometown and interviewed with those who had written Meredith's recommendations. Four out of five withdrew Meredith's recommendation, stating that they had thought Meredith was applying for a job, not to the University of Mississippi. Each of the four signed a retraction that read: "I could not now certify to his good moral nor could I recommend him for admission to the University of Mississippi or any other college."³³ Registrar Ellis reiterated that Meredith was a troublemaker and that his race had no bearings on his decision that Meredith was a troublemaker. On February 5, 1962, Mize issued his decision that the University of Mississippi was not a racially segregated institution and that Meredith was not denied admission due to his race. Mize went on to say that Mississippi had practiced racial segregation before the 1954 *Brown* case, but that the state has since changed its policies, and no practice prevented 'qualified' blacks from attending Ole Miss.³⁴

Meredith, knowing that Mize's ruling was clearly unconstitutional and had the great likelihood of being overturned, was as determined as ever to break the color barrier at Ole Miss. He appealed Mize's ruling and asked the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals for an injunction ordering his immediate admission to Ole Miss while his appeal was pending. Judge Tuttle of the Fifth Circuit urged the court to grant Meredith immediate admission because he thought that Meredith was certain to win on the merits. Furthermore, Tuttle commented that Meredith would either have to drop out of school or take courses that would prohibit him from graduating at Jackson State, because if Meredith graduated from Jackson State, that would make his crusade to attend Ole Miss completely unnecessary. Tuttle also argued that another delay would cause more time for resistance movements from the University of Mississippi. But the full appellate panel denied Meredith an injunction for immediate admission despite Tuttle's strong arguments. On June 25, 1962, however, the court ruled on the appeal itself, reversing Mize's decision and ordering that Meredith be allowed to enter Ole Miss. Judge

Wisdom commented that “a full review of the record leads inescapably to the conclusion that from the moment the defendants discovered that Meredith was a Negro they engaged in a carefully calculated campaign of delay, harassment, and masterful inactivity...a defense designed to discourage and defeat by evasive tactics.”³⁵ There was one dissenting opinion, held by Judge Dozier DeVane, which stated that he would have upheld Mize’s decision because he believed that Meredith might become a troublemaker, and he felt sensitivity to the effect of Meredith’s entrance into Ole Miss on the white citizens of Mississippi. DeVane feared that the situation in Oxford would escalate into what had occurred in 1957 in Little Rock, Arkansas. DeVane commented “his entry therein may be nothing short of a catastrophe.”³⁶ The Fifth Circuit not only ordered Meredith to be admitted, but also ordered the board of trustees and all University of Mississippi personnel in agreement with them to accelerate the actions taken on Meredith’s application and admission. Anyone who attempted to keep Meredith from attending Ole Miss would be held in contempt of the Fifth Circuit Court.³⁷

Judge Wisdom established July 18, 1962 as the date for transmitting the appeals court order of admission of Meredith to Judge Mize. However, on July 18, Judge Ben Cameron, a staunch segregationist, intervened and ordered a stay on Wisdom’s order until the Supreme Court could review the matter. On July 27, the court of appeals put aside his stay. On July 28, Cameron issued another stay, and in a matter of hours the appeals court set it aside also. Cameron issued yet another stay on July 31. The Fifth Circuit again responded with an order on August 4 that announced Cameron’s actions were “unauthorized, erroneous and improvident.”³⁸ Cameron issued yet another stay on August 6 and stated that his colleagues on the court of appeals could not act until the Supreme Court heard the case. Constance Motley, realizing Cameron was not going to back down, filed a petition with Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, who had jurisdiction over Mississippi, to disregard Cameron’s stays. On August 31, the US Justice Department entered the case, filing a friend of the court brief encouraging Black to support Meredith’s petition. On September 10, Justice Black threw out all of Cameron’s stays, ordered Meredith to be

admitted, and prevented any official from preventing Meredith's registration at Ole Miss. On September 13, Judge Mize issued an injunction that prevented anyone from interfering with Meredith's admission to Ole Miss. The court system had sided with Meredith, and it appeared that Meredith had triumphed and there were no other obstacles barring his registration at Ole Miss.³⁹

Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett had other ideas. During a statewide television broadcast, Barnett declared the state of Mississippi "will not surrender to the evil and illegal forces of tyranny" and that "no school will be integrated in Mississippi while I am your governor." Barnett went on to call Meredith's order of admission into Ole Miss "our greatest crisis since the War Between the States."⁴⁰ On September 14, Barnett held a conference with the trustees, who opposed closing the university in order to prevent Meredith from registering and they did not want to subject themselves to being held in contempt for defying Mize's orders. Tensions began to rise in Mississippi, with much of the state's white population agreeing with Barnett and few dissenting views being heard. The officials at Ole Miss were being pressured to deny Meredith his registration at the University, but none were willing to defy the order of the Supreme Court. On September 19, one day before fall registration, a county judge, acting on the behalf of the parents of forty-six students, issued an order barring Meredith's enrollment, apparently unconcerned with contradicting the Supreme Court's ruling.

On September 20, in a last minute effort to prevent Meredith from registering at Ole Miss, legislators finished work on a bill that would deny admission to any state school to a person "who has a crime of moral turpitude against him"⁴¹ or who had been convicted of any felony offense or not pardoned. Some laws were exempt, including drunk driving violations, violations of fishing laws, and violation of game laws. Shortly after this law was passed, a judge in Jackson found Meredith guilty of false voter registration in Hinds County. Meredith was sentenced to pay a hundred dollar fine and serve one year in the county jail.⁴²

September 20 was the day Meredith planned to register at Ole Miss, and on September 19, Robert Kennedy had sent a telegram to

the university officials advising them that he intended to make sure Meredith was registered at the college. Kennedy continued to warn that any action made to prevent Meredith from registering would be considered a violation of the law. On the afternoon of September 20, board members gave the governor full authority to act in all matters pertaining to Meredith. With his new power, Barnett secured a state court order that officially barred the board from registering Meredith. The order essentially declared that segregation was a part of Mississippi law.⁴³

Barnett went to Oxford on September 20 in order to personally deny Meredith entry to Ole Miss. Meredith arrived on campus at approximately 5 p.m. with Justice Department lawyer John Doar and several U.S. marshals. Barnett met with Meredith and his party inside a campus building. Meredith told Barnett he wanted to be admitted into the University of Mississippi, and Barnett in turn denied him admission. Meredith left shortly afterward.⁴⁴ On September 20, federal appeals court issued an injunction barring the prosecution of Meredith under the recently passed moral turpitude law. Judge Mize cleared all university officials of contempt of court in not registering Meredith because they had been robbed of the power to do so. The Justice Department wanted to find board members in contempt because they found the behavior of university officials and board members unacceptable. On September 24, a trial was set before the Fifth Circuit regarding the board and university officials. Instead of issuing a contempt order, the judges ordered university officials to register Meredith the next day, September 25, in Jackson. On September 25, the board followed the court's instructions, taking back Barnett's temporary power to act in lieu of the board, and prepared to allow Meredith to register. Barnett once more thwarted Meredith's attempt to register, saying, "I do hereby, finally deny you admission to the University of Mississippi."⁴⁵ Meredith tried again to register at Oxford on September 26, but was this time denied admission by Lieutenant Governor Paul Johnson. An attempt was to be made to register Meredith on September 27, but was called off for fear of Meredith's safety. In Washington, Robert Kennedy was preparing to send more federal officers to provide protection for Meredith's next registration attempt, as the students at Oxford were

becoming more boisterous and more like a mob. On September 28, Barnett was found guilty of civil contempt and given until Tuesday, October 2, to obey the court order. Barnett would be fined \$10,000 until Meredith was admitted.⁴⁶

On September 30, President Kennedy issued a proclamation that Barnett had not provided adequate assurances that Meredith would be admitted. Meredith had seen the potential for the Kennedy administration to further civil rights, and now the potential was being realized. Kennedy also federalized the state national guard and ordered troops to be sent. Initial plans were for Meredith to make his fourth try to enter Ole Miss on Monday, October 1, but at the last minute, it was agreed that Meredith should be brought onto campus on Sunday, September 30. Meredith arrived on campus at about 5:30 p.m. on Sunday, September 30. Meredith was escorted to Baxter Hall, his dormitory, by twenty-four federal marshals. Within an hour, a riot broke out on campus, with many of the rioters not members of the student body.⁴⁷ At 7:30 p.m., Governor Barnett went on statewide television to say that Mississippi was under siege by the armed forces of the US and that he would continue to fight for segregation. President Kennedy went on television shortly afterwards, urging Mississippians to comply peacefully with federal law. Kennedy told the state of Mississippi “the eyes of the nation and all the world are upon you and upon all of us...the honor of your university -- and your state — are in the balance.”⁴⁸ Rioting broke out all over the University of Mississippi campus. The next morning, two people were dead, many were injured, and thousands of dollars in damage had been done. The campus looked like a war zone. Meredith registered at the University of Mississippi on Monday, October 1, 1962, while more than 16,000 federal troops occupied the campus.⁴⁹

Meredith, though assailed with many setbacks, persevered and gained entry into Ole Miss. (He graduated in August 1962, less than a year after he was registered.) Although he did not always have the support of the court system, Meredith did not give up. Almost two years from his first attempt to integrate Ole Miss, James Meredith accomplished his goal, despite the string of court delays from racist segregationist judges such as Mize and Cameron. When Meredith finally

did win with a Supreme Court ruling, he was again faced with impediments, this time from the bureaucracy of the state of Mississippi. Meredith's incredible determination enabled him to remain calm and collected and eventually register at the University of Mississippi. Meredith saw a political opportunity in the election of President Kennedy, and with the help of such organizations of the NAACP, and his belief that the policy of segregation at Ole Miss was clearly and beyond a doubt unconstitutional, Meredith was able to gain admittance into the University of Mississippi.⁵⁰

It is this combination of individual perseverance and political skill that is distinctive about Meredith's case, and that makes both the classical and the resource mobilization models insufficient to explain this chapter in the Civil Rights Movement. The classical model can explain Meredith's own motivation, but it does not take into account all of the changes which were taking place before and during his battle to enter Ole Miss. The resource mobilization model is also insufficient in that it does not take into account Meredith's pervading feeling that he should not be discriminated against because of his race, as well as his own ability to take advantage of the political resources available to him. Only the political process model can explain how Meredith combined his knowledge that segregation at the University of Mississippi was unconstitutional with the resources of the NAACP and the newfound opportunities made available by the Kennedy administration to integrate Ole Miss, and eventually all state-supported institutions of higher learning. We need to understand Meredith as a shrewd, determined and opportunistic political actor if we are to understand his victory and the victories of the Civil Rights Movement.

NOTES

¹ Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970, Second Edition* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 5-19.

² McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*, pp. 20-35.

³ McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*, pp. 1-19.

⁴ McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*, pp. 36-59.

⁵ William Doyle, *An American Insurrection: The Battle of Oxford, Mississippi* (Doubleday, 2001), pp. 18-19.

⁶ Nadine Cohodas, *The Band Played Dixie: Race and Liberal Conscience at Ole Miss* (Free Press, 1997), pp. 58-59.

⁷ Doyle, *An American Insurrection*, p. 31.

⁸ C. Vann Woodward, "Look Away, Look Away," *The Journal of Southern History* 59 (1993), pp. 490-491.

⁹ Charles D. Lowery and John F. Marszalek, *African American Civil Rights: From Emancipation to Present* (Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 302.

¹⁰ Cohodas, *The Band Played Dixie*, p. 60.

¹¹ Doyle, *An American Insurrection*, p. 30.

¹² Doyle, *An American Insurrection*, p.31.

¹³ James Meredith, *Three Years in Mississippi* (University of Indiana Press, 1966), p. 57.

¹⁴ Meredith, *Three Years in Mississippi*, pp. 54-58.

¹⁵ Mitchell F. Crusto, "Federalism and Civil Rights: The Meredith Case," *National Black Law Journal* 10 (1989), p. 234.

¹⁶ David G. Sansing, *The University of Mississippi: A Sesquicentennial History* (University Press of Mississippi, 1999), p. 283.

¹⁷ Nadine Cohodas, "James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 16 (1997), p. 119.

¹⁸ Meredith, *Three Years in Mississippi*, pp. 70-75.

¹⁹ Meredith, *Three Years in Mississippi*, p. 73.

²⁰ Cohodas, *The Band Played Dixie*, p. 66.

²¹ Sansing, *University of Mississippi: Sesquicentennial History*, p. 286.

²² Sansing, *University of Mississippi: Sesquicentennial History*, p. 286.

²³ Meredith, *Three Years in Mississippi*, p. 77.

²⁴ Doyle, *An American Insurrection*, pp. 34-35.

²⁵ Crusto, "Federalism and Civil Rights: The Meredith Case," p. 235.

²⁶ James W. Silver, "Mississippi: The Closed Society," *The Journal of Southern History* 30 (1964), pp. 20-26.

²⁷ Crusto, "Federalism and Civil Rights: The Meredith Case," p. 239.

- ²⁸ Cohodas, *The Band Played Dixie: Race and Liberal Conscience at Ole Miss*, p. 68.
- ²⁹ Doyle, *An American Insurrection*, pp. 35-36.
- ³⁰ Doyle, *An American Insurrection*, pp. 35-36.
- ³¹ Sansing, *University of Mississippi: Sesquicentennial History*, p. 290.
- ³² Sansing, *University of Mississippi: Sesquicentennial History*, p. 290.
- ³³ Cohodas, *The Band Played Dixie*, p. 68.
- ³⁴ Doyle, *An American Insurrection*, p. 38.
- ³⁵ Crusto, "Federalism and Civil Rights: The Meredith Case," p. 241.
- ³⁶ Doyle, *An American Insurrection*, p. 39.
- ³⁷ Doyle, *An American Insurrection*, p. 39.
- ³⁸ Sansing, *University of Mississippi: Sesquicentennial History*, p. 295.
- ³⁹ David Callejo-Perez, *Southern Hospitality: Identity, Schools, and the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi* (P. Lang, 2001), p. 157.
- ⁴⁰ Meredith, *Three Years in Mississippi*, p. 174.
- ⁴¹ Cohodas, *The Band Played Dixie*, p. 70.
- ⁴² Cohodas, *The Band Played Dixie*, p. 70.
- ⁴³ Robert E. Cleary, "The Role of Gubernatorial Leadership in Public Higher Education," *Journal of Negro Education* 35 (1966), p. 47.
- ⁴⁴ Michael J. Klarman, "How Brown Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis" *The Journal of American History* 81 (1994), pp. 104-106.
- ⁴⁵ Cohodas, *The Band Played Dixie*, p. 72.
- ⁴⁶ Sansing, *University of Mississippi: Sesquicentennial History*, p. 298.
- ⁴⁷ Charles Moore and Michael S Durham, *Powerful Days* (Workman Publishing, 1991), p. 66.
- ⁴⁸ Doyle, *An American Insurrection*, p. 126.
- ⁴⁹ Marianne Welter, "Trouble at Ole Miss," *Transition* 8 (1963), pp. 47-48.
- ⁵⁰ McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*, pp. 36-59.