

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Letter on the Civil Rights Movement

LEON R. KASS

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In the summer of 1965, while the Voting Rights Act was being enacted, the editors of this volume, Amy Apfel Kass (b. 1940; then a high school history teacher in Lincoln-Sudbury, Massachusetts) and her husband Leon R. Kass (b. 1939; then a graduate student in biochemistry at Harvard University) spent a month in Mississippi doing civil rights work. They lived with a farmer couple in the Mount Olive community of rural Holmes County, in a house with no telephone, hot water, or indoor toilet. They visited many families in the community, participated in their activities, and helped with voter registration and other efforts to encourage the people to organize themselves in defense of their rights. In November of that year, Leon wrote a long letter, sent individually to many family members and friends, describing what they had learned and urging people to donate to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the fledgling organization that was building for the first time a significant indigenous political, and not just protest, movement in the state. The letter bears personal witness to the necessity of such a local political movement, the concrete obstacles that stood in its way, and the spirit of hope that its emergence was generating.

The letter seems to imply that the sheriff and the cotton-acreage allotment were more important for the day-to-day life of black Mississippians than their congressmen and senators in Washington. What can be said for and against that view? What, according to this letter, were the most urgent and important goals for the Movement, and how might they best be achieved? Is Kass right when he says, near the end, that “even a guaranteed failure should not dissuade us from the necessity of the battle”? Imagining yourself in receipt of such a letter, how would you have responded?

During this past summer, Amy and I spent a month in Holmes County, Mississippi. We went down to do “community organization” under the auspices of the Medical Community for Human Rights, but found ourselves of necessity and also by choice working closely with the Holmes County branch of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Since returning to the North, we have been confronted with questions (fewer than I would have hoped for), most inquiring “what did *you* do?”, “what did *you* accomplish?”, “were *you* beaten up or threatened?” We were troubled by these questions, since they revealed a lack of awareness of the indigenous nature of The Movement and

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also revealed a lack of identification with the people who are The Movement. We find this lack of identification particularly disturbing because we feel that our fate, indeed, the fate and viability of all that is potentially good in our society, is inextricably bound to the fate of the Mississippi Negro. He is fighting *our* battle as much as he is fighting his own, more than we are fighting his. At the risk of offending those of you already involved and identified, we would like to offer observations out of our personal experience in the hope that you may more clearly see The Movement and its obstacles, and especially your own relationship to it.

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Although intimidation through violence remains crucial to the white Southerner's domination of the Negro, the real stranglehold is fundamentally economic: the Negro, in his present unorganized condition, is at the mercy of the white community for even the sub-subsistence living he ekes out. Economic blackmail is often threatened, often carried out against Negroes who try to assert their political rights. In Holmes County, there are many so-called "independent farmers," owners of their own land, who are nevertheless completely at the mercy of the white bankers and loan companies. Almost all of them are in debt to such loan companies, having borrowed to pay for the land or their house, to tide them over the winter and spring when income is lacking, to pay for a second-hand tractor or team of horses, etc. The interest rates are fantastic, the monthly payments outrageously high, guaranteeing that no one will be able to keep up with the payments. One man, earning an annual income of about \$900, bought a house and the lot on which it stood for \$800, with a verbal agreement that the payments would be \$25 per month. However, this amount was not written into the contract he was told to sign; when the contract was returned to him, it called for complete payment of \$1,680 in two years, in monthly installments of \$70. (Note the interest of \$880 on an \$800 loan—a usurer's rate of 55% per year.) When this man tried to register to vote, the loan company threatened to foreclose on him. (The names of Negroes who register to vote are printed in the weekly newspaper, exposing them for reprisals.) Of course, the company is within its rights since the man is behind in his payments. He elected to forego registration. Housefuls of furniture, even houses and farms are demanded as collateral for even a \$25–\$50 loan. Foreclosure is always effective, since the Sheriff, for a small percentage of the take, serves as the collection agency. If the person borrowing has been active in The Movement, you can be sure that the Sheriff will be at his door on the day the note is due.

Why do the "independent farmers" have to borrow? They wouldn't if the cotton acreage allotments were justly distributed. Each county receives a share of the state's cotton allotment, which the all-white county officials distribute to the individual farmers.

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It is not accidental that white farmers are permitted up to 150 acres of cotton on a 200 acre farm, whereas Negro farmer owning 200 acres is granted only 5–8 acres in cotton. The inspectors who check for “overplanting” are notoriously discriminatory. If they claim that a farmer has planted more than his allotment (even if they are mistaken), the farmer must plow up the extra acreage at his own expense, and in addition, pay a fine to the county office. These inspectors have been known to use short measuring chains when measuring Negro farms, longer chains when inspecting white farms. It is a rare person who will go to the county office and claim that he has been cheated by the inspectors. Since cotton is the only cash crop, the procedures of under-allotment and over-inspection guarantee that the Negro farmer will always be in the red. In our community, only two out of several hundred Negro farmers said that they did not need larger cotton allotments merely to break even; the rest were forced to borrow.

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I should emphasize that the cotton distribution is a Federal program handled by the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) of the Dept. of Agriculture. All the inspectors and county officials mentioned above are federal employees. Even the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has not moved the Dept. of Agriculture to eliminate the discrimination in its own programs. Numerous complaints have been filed; the Dept. of Agriculture cannot plead ignorance for its inaction. Last year, The Movement organized Negro farmers to put up local candidates for the ASCS offices (an essential move, it seems to me; if Negroes are ever to get a fair share of the cotton allotments, they will have to do the allotting). The white officials gerrymandered the ASCS districts, kept most of the Negro candidates off the ballot, and intimidated and harassed Negro farmers who turned out to vote. (Despite all this, one Negro was elected in Holmes County.) The Dept. of Agriculture did not even investigate the complaints filed.

By comparison with other Negroes, however, the independent farmer is well off. Most of the Holmes County Negroes work as day-laborers on the white plantations (for \$2.50 to \$3 for a ten-hour day) or as domestics in white homes (for \$10 to \$15 for a six-day week). Why do they work for such outrageous wages? Because \$2.50 a day is better than nothing. In some areas, including Senator Eastland’s plantation, the plantation workers have organized their own strikes, but these have been largely unsuccessful thus far. The many Negroes on welfare are still poorer and even more vulnerable. The state of Mississippi refuses its fair share of the Federal Welfare program; therefore, the services provided are inadequate, and those provided for are but a small number of those qualified to receive welfare. Needless to say, there is rank discrimination in the administration of funds and services, particularly against those Negroes active in The Movement. People

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have been dropped from Old Age Assistance for attempting to register to vote; Federally-supplied food surpluses have been withheld from people participating in a demonstration. It is not easy for someone to decide that a vote is more important than the food provided to keep his kids from starving.

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Health services for Negroes are truly unbelievable. The eight white doctors in Holmes County all have segregated waiting rooms, and all of them empty the white waiting room *completely* before seeing *one* Negro patient. A visit to the doctor for a Negro takes literally all day, the first seven or eight hours of which are spent in the waiting room. (The one physician who committed the crime of taking Negro and white patients in the order of arrival was run out of the county, first by threats of violence, finally by a police barricade of the two roads leading to his office.) State-supported Public Health Clinics (“state-supported” means that only 80 cents of each dollar is supplied by the Federal government in direct aid to the state health program) offer prenatal care and also immunizations for children. In one such clinic in Holmes County, the women are forced to undress out-of-doors; the clinic has no toilets or running water. The County Hospital demands a \$50 down-payment before a patient can be admitted (a practice not foreign to Northern *private* hospitals). Negro patients are prevented from leaving the hospital until the entire bill is paid; in such cases, the patient remains in his bed, the bill mounting from day to day. In maternity cases, an exception is often made: the mother is permitted to go home, but the baby is kept as a hostage until the bill is fully paid. The hospital has segregated wards, which are of course of unequal quality. The Negro wards are staffed largely by poorly trained Negro personnel. When asked if this staff assignment did not mean that Negroes got inferior treatment, the hospital administrator replied: “The Negro help are less hygienic, and the Negro patients don’t mind.” In order to avoid compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the County Hospital is now refusing to accept patients on welfare, thus avoiding any overt contact with Federal money. In view of these conditions, it is no wonder that many Negroes will not even seek medical aid: many would sooner die at home, in dignity.

Education is another facet of the same story. The elementary school in our community was a crumbling frame building, built during Reconstruction. “Teaching,” during the winter, consists of sending children out to gather firewood. No Negro school in this county has a library. Books come to these schools only after the white schools finish with them. (No Negro is permitted to *enter* the County *Public* Library; arrests have followed attempts to do so.) The Negro “high schools” are known as Attendance Centers rather than as high schools. The inference is quite clear: the *best* one can expect from a

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Negro is that he will show up; therefore, attendance should be rewarded. The Attendance Centers are not accredited; graduates can attend college *only* in the state of Mississippi. The teachers in the Negro schools are by and large poorly trained. Afraid for their jobs (they make the highest salaries in the community, at about \$2,000 to \$2,500 per year), threatened and intimidated by the school board, they have remained outside The Movement. Less than ten percent of the Negro schoolteachers have registered to vote.

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The official harassments by the Law are much more prevalent and insidious than the few publicized murders and beatings would suggest. The white society extends its powers into the smallest aspects of daily life. It is in these areas where one can really appreciate the call for “Freedom Now.” A Negro runs the risk of arrest or worse merely by walking down the main street of town, especially at night. One man in Lexington, the county seat, was shot by a policeman following a casual remark made while witnessing the arrest of another man. People we knew well and who were friendly to us in the privacy of their own homes were afraid to say hello to us on the streets in Lexington. A Negro lacks the right of privacy in his own home; he has not the freedom to refuse entry to any white man, from sheriffs to salesmen. The state had prepared two official written tests for people seeking driver’s licenses: a short test for whites and “good” Negroes, a longer test for Movement people. This latter test demands verbatim quotations of long sections of traffic ordinances; spelling mistakes lead to failure. Thus a significant number of Negroes drive without licenses, a fact known to and tolerated by the Law until such time when it becomes convenient to put pressure on these people.

Roads in the Negro sections of Lexington are unpaved and lack street lights. Following complaints, the city fathers, concerned about the image of their town, decided that all streets in the city should be paved and lit. Immediately afterwards, they altered the city limits to place the Negro sections out of town.

In the eyes of the local Justices of the Peace, all interracial traffic accidents are the fault of the Negro, unless the white person is an outside agitator.

Two years ago, the people of our community petitioned Southern Bell Telephone Company to have telephones installed. There are several hundred families in the area, almost all are Negro. Telephone lines were put up, but phones were given *only* to whites. The nearest public telephone is fifteen miles away.

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Fear of violence is always present, even if unexpressed. Violence takes many forms, most of them insufficiently sensational to make the Northern newspapers (most of the sensational cases reported murders of Northern whites; brutalization of local Negroes is largely unreported). Homes are firebombed, cars booby-trapped, etc. Just last week, nightriders shot into the home of a Holmes County family that had sent two children to the recently desegregated school, injuring the woman of the house. The husband returned the gunfire, and was subsequently arrested by the sheriff and kept in jail overnight without formally being charged. Such incidents have been more frequent of late due to the order for school desegregation (despite the fact that all the white children originally enrolled in the desegregated schools have now been withdrawn, many under threats of violence from the same white rednecks). Should the Negro ever wish to relax his guard, the community won't let him. One incident will illustrate. An insurance salesman, riding through the shack-dotted country hills in his air-conditioned car, stopped at the house where we were staying. He unsuccessfully tried to sell our host fire insurance on his house. It took little genius to appreciate his parting message: "Well, if your house burns down *tonight*, tomorrow you'll be sorry you didn't have fire insurance." Making the same point, he sold a policy to the people down the road. It is a difficult rhetoric to resist. Paranoia is a necessity for survival.

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Given this pervasive system of oppression, it is perhaps of some surprise that the Mississippi Negro was not yet mounted the barricades. The reason is clear: *anger* has been an unacceptable response for a Negro. Not too long ago, it resulted in his hanging from a tree. Today's methods of preventing an outcry are slightly more subtle and almost as effective. The economic chain strangles almost as well as the ordinary braided rope. Let no one conclude, therefore, that the Negro is pleased with his lot; he is merely cautious in expressing his dissatisfaction. This caution is without question justifiable in terms of his reality; he must overcome this caution *by himself* if that reality is to be changed. And there are signs that he is beginning to overcome his caution, his fear.

Whites in the North, ourselves included, have a difficult time understanding and working with this *apparent* lack of anger. White civil rights workers are too often overeager in pushing local people into activist roles. We often fail to remember that it is *they*, not we, who bear the brunt of the white retaliation. Would you, as Negro parents in Mississippi, send your child to the white school, running the risk of having him beaten and having your house bombed, for the sake of 'education' in a society where schooling never got a Negro anywhere? How would you react to the white summer volunteer who

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was pushing you to register your child at such a school? Would you not wonder if he would be so brave if he were not leaving for the North at the end of the summer?

I am not suggesting that outside civil rights workers are harmful or useless. My point is that the *major* impact on local Negroes *must* be made by other local Negroes who share the same reality, yet who have nevertheless overcome their own fears. This necessity for local political organization is the idea behind the MFDP. Started by COFO (Council of Federated Organizations) in the Summer 1964, the MFDP has become the largest civil rights group in the state. It is the *only* group in Mississippi that is engaged in community organization on a grass-roots level. In Holmes County, there are now weekly MFDP meetings in eight separate communities involving perhaps 1,500 of the county's 19,000 Negroes (total population of Holmes is 29,000). These meetings are run largely by local people, people who before 1964 had for the most part been completely silent. The local community action projects are decided on by the local MFDP membership. Current projects include a boycott on all the discriminatory stores in Lexington, recruitment of local candidates for the upcoming ASCS election, preliminary steps to form a farming-supplies cooperative, and of course, voter registration. The MFDP meetings were an inspiration to Amy and myself, both raised on the anonymity of the big city; neither of us had seen a more exciting instance of the democratic process in operation.

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The MFDP suffered a severe setback in September when the Challenge to the seating of the five Mississippi Congressmen was dismissed (see *Congressional Record* for September 17, 1965).¹ For many in the North, the MFDP *was* the Challenge, nothing more. This is not the case. The trip to Washington served a useful purpose: the Mississippians realized more clearly than ever that they cannot, should not depend on Washington to solve their problems. They returned home impressed with the need to build political power at home. Currently, the MFDP is in the process of setting up adult political education seminars throughout the state. Teachers (*i.e.*, organizers) are now being trained to teach elementary civics and politics, regulations and tactics. The goal is to involve the Mississippi Negro in the political process, to give him the know-how and the desire to exercise his political power. Without such political organization, the Voting Rights Bill will be another hollow victory.

Much ink has been spilt about the Voting Rights Bill and its presumed revolutionary effect on the South. The *New York Times* sanctimoniously proclaimed that the Federal

¹ Read the Congressional Record at <http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/manu/id/3649>.

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Government had now done its job. The fact of the matter is that Federal enforcement of the Voting Rights Bill has been as shoddy, as half-hearted as in other areas relating to Civil Rights (for a good analysis, see Haywood Burns' article in *Commentary*, Sept., 1965). Of the state's 83 counties, four have had Federal registrars since August; five more have just received such registrars. For the rest, nothing. Since passage of the bill, the number of registered voters has increased from 27,000 to 57,000; 383,000 eligible Negroes remain unregistered. But despite the deficiency of the Federal authorities, the major responsibility for the success of the Voting Rights Bill rests with the people themselves. No number of Federal registrars is going to convince the Negro borrower mentioned above that "the vote" is in any way going to extricate him from the mouths of the loan sharks. These people all have relatives in Chicago and Los Angeles: they do not romanticize about the power of the vote. Only a locally-based, locally-led political party can build the community identification and political force necessary to motivate these people.

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The MFDP is tackling this job. Its accomplishments in its 18 months of being have been truly amazing: accomplishments not in the sense that institutions have crumbled, but in the sense that people are moving, moving to help themselves. As one girl put it when I asked her if she was worried about taking over as manager of the local community center: "I'm not sure if I can do it, but, you know, before last summer, I didn't think there was *anything* I could do."

What can we in the North contribute to this movement? *The MFDP needs money, badly.* The major expenses for this program are for personnel, for staff to teach the adult education programs, to build political awareness. \$15 per week would liberate a person from a plantation job and enable him to work full time for The Movement. \$15 per week for four weeks means that a hundred new people can be brought into The Movement this month. Money is badly needed for other things as well. MFDP has filed a suit in Federal Court to prevent the Mississippi legislature from gerrymandering the legislative districts in its reapportionment plan. This suit costs money. MFDP plans to enter candidates in the Democratic Party primary for all five congressional seats and for Senator Eastland's seat next June. These primary fights will cost money. The voter registration drive costs money, money for paper, cars, gasoline, money for bail and for harassing traffic fines, money for emergency long-distance calls. Not very glamorous, by conventional standards, we admit. But our whole point is that the blood and guts of this movement is not 'glamorous,' but rather difficult, unsung day-to-day organizing, battling. We hope you respond to our appeal.



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You may argue, as others have, that the goals of the MFDP are utopian. If it is utopian to seek a grass-roots popular base for political power, if it is utopian to try to educate people to enable them to build a more just society, then MFDP is utopian—no more utopian than our democratic principles. The charge of utopianism is irrelevant here: the stakes are so high that even a guaranteed failure should not dissuade us from the necessity of the battle. Surely we can support this battle with our dollars if the Mississippi Negro has put his life on the front line.

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I apologize if my rhetoric has been offensive; please do not judge the merits of The Movement by my poor efforts to bring it to life for you. I also apologize for adding a new cause to the causes for which you now work. As men of conscience, we all support other good causes. But as men blessed with more than our share of freedom and luxury, can we honestly say we cannot do more?

Please make checks payable to MFDP and send to 926 Pennsylvania Avenue, S.E., Washington, DC. Ask to have yourself put on the MFDP mailing list to keep yourself informed on the Mississippi scene. If you have friends who might be interested in this letter, please have them read it.

Sincerely,
Leon R. Kass, M.D.



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