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THE SOUTH'S WAR AGAINST NEGRO VOTES

BY JOHN POPPY

LOOK SENIOR EDITOR

We have walked through the shadows of death. We've had to walk all by ourselves. But we'll never turn back, no, we'll never turn back. Until we've all been freed and we have equality.

That is part of a song Bertha Gober, a tense, fragile-looking girl of 21, composed not long ago for an organization known as the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. On paper, the song struck me as awkward, even a little pretentious. But it is a favorite of the student civil-rights movement in the toughest areas of the Deep South. To find out why, I asked Bertha to sing it. She looked around at her friends in the busy SNCC office in Atlanta and said, softly, "No." She is shy, I thought, because I am an outsider, the only white person here.

"Please," I said.
"Close the door," she said.
We sealed ourselves off from the others. Bertha began to sing hesitantly, hunched over, staring at the

floor. Then, as if she had found a way to tell a painful secret, she relaxed and forgot me as her own words set to her own melody took over. She stood very straight, tilting her head back so she could sing upwards in a strong, rich voice that warmed and overflowed the little room. When she finished, the office on the other side of the door was still. No talk, no footsteps, no typewriter sounds. There were tears in her eyes, and I understood the power of her song—part lament, part prayer, part battle cry.

A few hours later, I was talking with James Forman, SNCC's executive secretary. Bertha Gober's song came up again. "You see why this is a singing movement? The songs help. Without them, it would be ugly," Forman said. "Ugly."

The main job of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee is to persuade frightened, reluctant Negroes to register and vote. It is concentrating on two bedrock segregationist areas where Negroes account for over 50 percent of the population: southwestern Georgia and the Delta country of Mississippi.

Occasionally, there is well-publicized violence—for instance, the disorders that began in Greenwood, Miss., in March. Until then, there had been just two or three lonely voter-registration workers in Greenwood. When a young Negro passing through town was shot, however, more workers moved in. Fire damaged the office they were using, and a shotgun blasted the windows of an SNCC man's house. Aroused and united, Negroes marched to the courthouse in protest; local police dispersed them, arresting some; the Department of Justice arrived on the scene, and so did dozens of reporters. National attention was suddenly focused on Greenwood.

But in the fight for Negro votes, explosions like this one are the exception rather than the rule. Terrible as it seems, the excitement will eventu-

ally pass. For the real story of the voter-registration struggle in the South, we must look behind the headlines to the grim, everyday reality. Why does Bertha Gober sing. *We've had to walk all by ourselves?*

James Forman knows. Because of what he has seen in the past two years, he is a bitter man. He and some other Negro leaders feel that voter-registration workers pay a needlessly high price, in mental and physical anguish, for the gains they make. One of the ironies of the struggle in the South is that these leaders direct much of their bitterness, not at their enemies the local segregationists, but at their friends in the Federal Government.

Forman knows that dehard whites will use all their muscle to prevent Negro voting. "They have a lot to lose," he says. But he is tortured by the thought that his people suffer even more than they have to, and he accuses the Kennedy Administration—particularly the Department of Justice—of not using all its muscle to protect SNCC voter-registration workers in the South.

Justice Department spokesmen vehemently disagree. The Department's overworked civil-rights staff has filed more than 35 voting suits under the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, at least a dozen of them in defiant, unyielding Mississippi. During the past month and a half, it has taken legal action on behalf of the Negro demonstrators in Greenwood. But, says Burke Marshall, head of the Civil Rights Division, "I'm not running a police force."

An important suit, requesting an order barring discrimination against qualified Negroes who want to register, is now under way in Sunflower County, Miss. Sunflower is the home county of U. S. Sen. James O. Eastland, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy recently said that, although we still have a long way to go, "1969

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PHOTO BY PAT WELLS

Negroes in Mississippi are "still scared" to vote, says James Forman, executive secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He is tortured by the thought that his people suffer more than they have to, and accuses the Kennedy Administration of not using all its muscle to protect SNCC voter-registration workers.



"All right, I'll go down to register, but what you going to do for me when they beat my head?"

was a year of great progress in civil rights." It was. But for the Negro on the front lines, the price was high.

One of the costs of that year of progress was a bleeding ulcer that nearly killed Forman this January. He had to send field secretaries into towns where he knew they might be killed. He saw seven SNCC fieldmen in Mississippi goaded by police harassment, lynch threats and beatings until they filed suit against Attorney General Kennedy and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in a desperate effort to get physical protection. He had to watch voter-registration workers not only in Mississippi but in Louisiana and southwestern Georgia driven to the edge of nervous breakdowns. He is constantly fighting the ugly suspicion that he and his people are alone, deserted by friends they had counted on.

"It is hard to describe the irony of the situation," Forman told me. "Voting is a constitutional right. We take time out of school, take all sorts of risks and try to register folks. When you get no help, that's pretty demoralizing. Take Mississippi. The Government has filed suits. OK. But people are still scared. They tell us, 'All right, I'll go down to register, but what you going to do for me when I lose my job and they beat my head?' And we can't do anything. The local folks are beginning to doubt that it's worth the risk."

Your name is Samuel Block. You are a Negro, 23 years old, born and raised in Mississippi. For the past year, you have been in the front lines of the voter-registration battle, as an SNCC field secretary.

Before all the help arrived in Greenwood last March, you and one or two others tried to cover all of Leflore County in the Mississippi Delta cotton country. Leflore's population is 65 percent Negro; almost all its voters are white. When you arrived last June in Greenwood, the county seat, you found a place to sleep, cheap as possible. Then you started knocking on doors, introducing yourself and your mission, trying to convince people who have never seen a ballot that it is their passport to freedom.

You found many of your own people afraid to talk to you because a police car followed you to each house, and the police parked in front, writing things down. They jalled you several times. Three white men beat you up, and you escaped being hit by a speeding pickup truck only because

you jumped behind a telephone pole. One Thursday night last August, you barely got away from a group of whites armed with bricks, chains, ropes and pistols. You assume they meant to kill you, but you don't know for sure. You never know. You demanded protection from the Justice Department. You're not sure who it was you talked to in Washington, but you remember he said he couldn't move until a Federal statute was clearly violated. A reasonable answer, but it didn't make you feel any safer as night fell in Greenwood.

In the first six months, you managed to register five new voters.

Americans have read so much about lynchings, torture and murders that many of us, I suspect, are no longer troubled by an occasional atrocity. "There goes Mississippi again," we sigh, and move on after a moment's regret. But the possibility of death is only a part of the ordeal for men like Samuel Block. His enemy is ingenious; Block never knows where the next blow will fall. Perhaps someone to whom he talked will lose a job, or go to jail, or be dropped from the welfare rolls.

In cotton country, where almost all Negroes suffer from underemployment every winter, welfare and Government surplus food are important, not just for comfort, but for survival. Last October, the Leflore County Board of Supervisors discontinued a major part of the commodities program for 1963. As a result, more than 22,000 people who lived on surplus food in the winter were cut off. The total included Negroes and whites, but Block's people suffered most. Suspecting that his activities had caused the reprisal, Block suffered too. This spring, the departments of Justice and Agriculture managed to persuade Leflore County to start the program again—but it had been a hard winter there. And if your people are too cold and hungry to worry about a concept like the vote, no matter how important you tell them it is, you can't help wandering. . . .

If you are lynched, says Samuel Block, "you're dead, that's all. Dying takes courage. Living day by day, week in and week out for a year, with no relief in sight, under endless harassment, tests not only your courage, but your sanity."

I have been in many towns in Mississippi. I was in Greenwood before the recent upheaval there, and have been back since it began. The first

time, I went to see Block because his troubles were—and are—commonplace by Mississippi standards. It was not easy to locate him. He was to all appearances, in hiding. He moved constantly; his mail went to a friend, who passed it on to him; he had no telephone. Luckily, I met three young Negroes in Greenville, not far from Greenwood, who knew where Block might be the next day. They offered to guide me to the place.

The four of us drove the 54 miles from Greenville to Greenwood the next morning, with the radio turned up loud to blanket the tension in the car. Three Negro passengers and a white man at the wheel do not feel comfortable driving through the Delta country. The stares and angry mutters of people along the road provoked nudges and nervous laughter among my companions.

Near Greenwood, a sign pointing to "Business District" directs the traveler off U. S. Highway 82. "Go past that," said one of my passengers. The highway separates Negro from white. We turned onto a dirt temporary road and found ourselves on narrow streets among wooden, two-story buildings. My passengers relaxed; they were in familiar territory. Now, I was the outsider.

We met Block on a street corner in the Negro section of Greenwood and headed off for a sandwich, but we didn't get it. The waiter in the cafe said, "Police told me I'd have big trouble if they ever caught me serving a white man." Block told him, "Well, don't bother serving me either," and we left.

BLOCK WALKS in long strides. His movements are abrupt, and even when he is sitting still long enough to talk, you can feel the tension in him. "We're working hard toward voter registration," Block said, "but it is beginning to seem impossible. We've carried 30 or 90 people up to the courthouse, but only five of them got registered. . . ."

That was not surprising. Mississippi law requires each applicant for registration to read and write and to interpret in writing any section of the state constitution and write an explanation of the duties of a citizen. The state constitution has 235 sec-

tions, some of which are, in the words of a Mississippi lawyer, "extremely difficult, long and tedious." The registrar is the sole judge of whether or not an applicant has passed the test. The name of each applicant is listed for two weeks in the local paper, "so they know who you are," says Block.

When I saw him, Block was still doggedly taking people to the courthouse. (Most would not go by themselves.) He refused to admit despair, but his talk was angry. "In the state of Mississippi," he said at one point, "every animal has a season but the Negro; you can shoot him anytime." To understand some of his bitterness, follow Block's early progress in Greenwood in these excerpts from his reports to James Forman:

June 20, 1962: "On my arrival in Greenwood, everything seemed the same as in Parchman, Miss. [site of the state prison farm]. Negroes working hard for nothing, each waiting for the other to do something. . . . In a conversation with Greenwood's big [Negro] businessmen, I was told to sponsor anything I want. Where? None other than the big [Negro] Elks Club. . . ."

June 30: "I have cut my office and room rent very much. Office now \$14 a month, living quarters \$2.50 a week. . . ."

July 11: "We lost our meeting place at the Elks Club. The members did not approve of our meeting there and singing Freedom songs. They could have turned us off in a better way than they did, waiting until we were fixing to have a meeting, then telling us to have it in our office. . . ."

July 16 [from one of Block's temporary helpers]: "Say, are we supposed to work both day and night like Sam? Man, he doesn't even take time to eat now; I don't know what has gotten into him lately."

July 26: "In all my hard days of [voter] workshop recruiting, I was only able and glad to get six to attend from Greenwood. . . . By the way, I cannot send a budget for this week because I did not have any money to spend anyway. . . ."

August 11: "With things going bad for me in Greenwood, some of the citizens have asked me to protect myself and leave now because the

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Miss. Police Cool Negro Voter Crisis

GREENWOOD, Miss. (AP)—The tense civil rights crisis cooled a bit here Friday as police kept pedestrians scattered and moving. Wooden barricades and police squad cars blocked off the street in front of Leflore County courthouse. Uniformed officers were backed by volunteers with riot clubs and wearing yellow Civil Defense helmets.

However, Police Chief Curtis Lary said Negroes trying to register as voters were free to enter the courthouse — so long as they walked in small groups instead of in a demonstration march.

In a City Court hearing, eight Negroes convicted of disorderly conduct drew the maximum penalty: \$200 fines and four-month jail terms. Appeal bonds were set at \$500 each.

One of them, Lawrence Guyot of Chicago, also was convicted of contempt of court. Punishment on that charge was one day in jail and a \$50 fine.

The eight were among 11 arrested in the first registration march Wednesday. Six were tried Thursday, Guyot and James Forman of Atlanta were tried Friday.

Mayor C. E. Sampson, at a news conference, bitterly accused the Justice Department of helping "professional agitators" foment racial trouble in an attempt to win Negro votes.

When a voter registration march formed across town, about a mile from the courthouse, Chief Lary sped to the scene with three patrol cars backing him.

"It's all right for you to go down there," he told about 40 Negroes through a portable bullhorn, "but go in small orderly groups."

One Negro was arrested during the dispersal. He was booked as Donald Harris, 22, of New York City. The charge: disturbing the peace. Officers said he ignored orders to move on.

WHITES, TOO

White people loitering on street corners near the courthouse also were dispersed and told to keep moving.

The three-day-old crisis flared a few hours after nightriders fired blasts of heavy buckshot slugs into the home of a Negro who has two sons active in civil rights work. No one was hit.

It was the third incident involving bursts of gunfire. Each one served to spur on the registration drive started by the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee eight months ago.

Negroes were urged, in church rallies Thursday night, to keep trying to register.

They came in scattered groups to walk past the barricades at the courthouse and stand in line outside the circuit clerk's office, where voter registration is handled.

At one point, about 50 were waiting.

They were admitted one by one to take the qualifying test. One requirement is that they interpret the state constitution. The verdict on the test comes in 30 days.

Mayor Sampson said investigation showed that the recent fire in SNCC headquarters here was deliberately set — but that the arsonists were Negroes.

"From our investigation, it is pretty clear no white people were involved," the mayor said.

NEGRO VOTES continued

Volunteers have received death threats

white people are planning to kill me. I replied, 'I am not leaving. . . .'

"Not more than a week ago, two Greenwood city policemen came to our office. I met them at the foot of the stairway and was told they were investigating an automobile theft. [One] voiced his opinion that I was a 'smart nigger from up North and if I didn't say Yes Sir and No Sir to him I would end up on the concrete without any teeth.' Last Friday, I took four Negroes to the county court in Greenwood. . . . I had given them instructions in how to register before we went. We arrived at about 2:30 p.m. and found a female deputy registrar, who acknowledged the presence of Negroes by asking me, 'What's for you, boy?' The four Negro applicants were frightened by the deputy registrar's attitude. . . .

"When I arrived home, I received a call from an individual who identified himself as speaking for the White Citizens Council. He told me, 'If you take anybody else up to register, you'll never leave Greenwood alive.' I get such calls with some frequency. About a week and a half ago, Miss —, from who I rented a room for some time, told me that she received a similar call.

"Today, I took two Negroes to the registrar's office. The Negroes finished filling out the application form and the literacy and citizenship

tests . . . and left the office. Two policemen were waiting just outside the courthouse. They said something to me, but I just ignored them, got into a taxi and took the applicants home. The police followed, stopping in front of the homes of the applicants and sat writing something. . . ."

Ironically, the recent incidents in Greenwood have proved more effective than all Block's persuasion. Since the beginning of March, hundreds of aroused Negroes have tried to register there; few have passed the tests, of course, but at least they tried.

But Block and others like him do not want to depend on violence for results. He pretends to see hope in the Justice Department's suit to open the voter rolls in Senator Eastland's Sunflower County, which borders Leflore County on the west. "Maybe if the Justice Department wins the suit over there, things will ease off here in Leflore," he says. But he doesn't really believe that. The Department, he knows, has had to work county by county in its tedious, expensive effort to break down 150 years of tradition in a defiant state.

As lawyers fight their battles in court, lonely young people will continue to struggle for voter registration in less public places. Block and his companions are outnumbered. SNCC and other groups like it are small, and they do not seem to attract many new recruits. That means there is little prospect of relief for the field secretaries. They have been at their posts for over a year now, and will try to stay there indefinitely, despite the inevitable battle fatigue that makes some weep—and sing—in anguish. For them, the voter-registration movement is an endless, nerve-racking series of guerrilla battles in dark corners of the Black Belt. In many ways, it is like underground warfare in an occupied country. To have to think in such terms of American citizens on their own soil is, as James Forman says, ugly. END

Document analysis: *The South's war against Negro voters*

The document is an article, written by senior editor John Poppy and published on Look magazine on May 21st, 1963.

Before we start, it is important to address the use of the term "negro" in the text. The word has been considered offensive, inoffensive, or completely neutral depending on the region and time, and while it is now mostly considered offensive, it was accepted as normal, both as exonym and endonym, until the late 1960s, after the later Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King even called himself "negro" in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech of 1963. On the other hand, some leaders such as Malcolm X associated the term with the long history of slavery and discrimination that African Americans endured. Since the late 1960s, other terms including black, Black African, Afro-American (up to 1990) and African American became more popular.

The article opens with a powerful quote, part of a song that Bertha Guber, a young member of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, wrote for the organization. The song, called We'll never turn back, embodies the strong spirit of African-Americans, their battles and struggles to achieve equality and the will to fight despite all adversities. It became a hymn to Black power and was later performed among the others by Mavis Staples.

The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee or SNCC was founded by Ella Baker in 1960 when she still was part of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference or SCLC led by Martin Luther King. Ella felt that the latter was not in touch with young black people that wanted a real and quick change in America. The new movement, as stated in the name, originated as non-violent but became more radical with time and more prone to the use of violence, quickly distancing from King and the SCLC. By the 1960s the members of the SNCC were known within the Civil Rights Movement as "shock troops of the revolution".

During the early 1960s, under the leadership of James Forman, the main job of the SNCC was to encourage African Americans who lived in the Southern states to register to vote. According to the article, voting rights activists in the South were constantly risking their lives, they were often mistreated by the police itself and became victims of harassment and death threats. The author refers in particular to a few events that took place in 1963 and collects the testimonies of a number of activists.

One example is what happened in Greenwood, Mississippi, in March 1963. A black man trying to register had been shot and the fact had set off protests that were quickly silenced by the police but were strong enough to make the national news. According to Poppy, however, Greenwood was an exception rather than the rule and everyday reality in the Southern states was very different. James Forman, executive secretary at SNCC, claimed that the difficulties that voter registration workers were facing were unbearable and urged the Kennedy administration to take steps to ensure that African Americans wouldn't be discriminated during registration.

Samuel Block's life as a registration worker is only one example of the struggles he and many others had to face. Threatened and forced to hide, Block refused to leave Greenwood or stop doing his work, but became bitter and bitter. "In the state of Mississippi" he said at one point "every animal has a season but the Negro; you can shoot him anytime". Ironically, the protests in Greenwood and the violent repression by the police had a stronger impact on the black

community than Block's work in the previous months and more and more people started to register, but the fight was still long.

Death threats and police brutality were not the only things keeping African Americans from registering. The 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870, stated that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude" formally granting voting rights to all men, including ex slaves. The Southern states however introduced poll taxes and literacy test to try to keep black people from voting.

Poll taxes were fees that voters had to pay in order to exercise their constitutionally granted right, thus excluding all the people that could not afford to pay, usually black former slaves. In the same way, literacy tests were created knowing that African American communities suffered a high rate of illiteracy due to centuries of oppression and poverty and forced black people to take difficult test that they would often fail. The article refers in particular to Mississippi law, which required "each applicant for registration to read and write and to interpret in writing any section of the state constitution and write an explanation of the duties of a citizen". The state constitution of Mississippi has 285 sections. Sadly, Mississippi was not an exception but rather an example of the rule in Southern states. White people were exempted from taking the tests most of the time, thus revealing their racist nature. Poppy also says that the name of each applicant was listed for two weeks in the local paper so that people would know who the person was and beat him up, or in the worst case, kill him.

Mississippi also enacted a "grandfather clause" that allowed the registering only of people whose grandfather was qualified to vote before the Civil War. Obviously, this benefited only white citizens. The "grandfather clause" as well as the other legal barriers to black voter registration worked. From over 90 percent of black voting-age men registered to vote during Reconstruction, Mississippi came down to less than 6 percent in 1892.

These violations of the Constitution were not addressed by the US Government until 1965. Following March 7 when peaceful participants in a Selma to Montgomery march for voting rights were met by Alabama state troopers who attacked them with nightsticks, tear gas and whips after they refused to turn back, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act. The Act was a formal admission that unconstitutional practices had taken place but also allowed African Americans to finally be able to vote. In Mississippi alone, voter turnout among blacks increased from 6 percent in 1964 to 59 percent in 1969.

Nowadays 49 out of 50 States require people to register to vote, but eligibility is decided solely on American citizenship, State residency requirements and age. Despite the huge progress, some issues have emerged in the most recent mid-term elections of November 2018. Republican Brian Kemp, running in Georgia, was accused of violating the Voting Rights Act, after an Associated Press report found around 53,000 people, nearly 70% of which were African-Americans, had their registrations 'pending' because of some kind of mismatch with drivers' license or social security information. Kemp negated all allegations and assured that those people would be able to vote in the upcoming elections of 2020. It seems appalling that nowadays there still are attempts aimed at restricting the voting rights of some categories of people, which goes to show that the fight for rights is still not over and should not be overlooked.

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