

“Sic ‘Em, White Folks!”: Football, Massive Resistance, and the Integration of Ole Miss

Derek Catsam

University of Texas of the Permian Basin

Shattered Bottles at the Peabody: Introduction

It has been said that by tradition the Mississippi Delta begins in the lobby of Memphis’ venerable Peabody Hotel. Although located in Tennessee, Memphis serves as the major urban center for Northern Mississippi and much of the Delta region. The Peabody, a grand Southern establishment, has seen more than its share of Mississippians declare their intention to seek major office, celebrate alumni reunions, and use the hotel as fraternity-row-away-from-fraternity row on those weekends when the Ole Miss football team played a home game in Memphis.

There is a story associated with the hotel that captures the image Mississippi cultivated for itself during the Jim Crow era and especially after the Supreme Court announced its decision in 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Apparently a wealthy old Mississippi planter, distraught after the Ole Miss football team had lost a close game in Memphis, took out his frustrations by smashing a bottle of bourbon on one of the Peabody’s lobby pillars. The hotel manager quickly stepped in, saying, “You can’t do that, sir.” Without responding, the alumnus signaled a bellhop and waved a \$100 bill, asking the young man to fetch him a case of bourbon. When the bellhop returned with the bourbon in tow, the planter smashed all of the bottles, one at a time, on the same pillar.¹

This story could very well be apocryphal. It has never been confirmed, but it was told well into the 1960s, through Mississippi’s turbulent years of resistance to what it perceived as outside interference in internal matters. But whether the story is true or not, it speaks volumes about Mississippi in the years of the Civil Rights struggle. For in this story we have the spontaneous, visceral reaction of the Mississippi planter to a defeat, followed by an official response to his action. From this response came an escalated, planned, conscious reaction, which exponentially expanded the initial confrontation so that all that remained in the mind’s eye was the image of a case of bourbon bottles smashed, the liquor and debris soiling the magnificent interior of the Peabody lobby. This reaction made a calm and rational response, in which the dignity of both parties was maintained, virtually impossible.

Derek Catsam is with the University of Texas of the Permian Basin, Department of History, 4901 East University Blvd., Odessa, TX 79762.

This was the situation in which the federal government found itself in September 1962. For a year-and-a-half the state of Mississippi had resisted through every means possible the admission of James H. Meredith, a black native of the state, to the University of Mississippi, the state's finest and most cherished institution of higher learning.² The state had resisted through means legal, extralegal, and illegal. It had tried delay. It had tried bureaucratic legerdemain. It had used the courts. It had created post-facto rules forbidding Meredith's matriculation. The state legislature had erected laws, the state courts had allowed those laws to stand, and the Governor, Ross Barnett, interposed himself against the federal government to execute those laws. Bubbling not so far below the surface was the threat of violence, the law of tinderbox, faggot, rope, and gunpoint with which few Mississippians were entirely unfamiliar.

With each step, the state and its supporters moved ever closer to the tragedy that took place in the form of the riots of the night of September 30th and October 1st that engulfed the campus of the University of Mississippi and marked the climax of the atmosphere of resistance that had taken over the state's political culture. The events of that night were never inevitable, but they became increasingly likely with each passing display of massive resistance. The September 29th Ole Miss–Kentucky football game and undeclared race rally in Jackson served to mark the point of no return, although most of the blueprint had been etched long before Ross Barnett stepped to the microphone at halftime of that 14–0 Rebel victory over the visiting Wildcats. Football provided both a political backdrop to and a rallying point for massive resistance during the Ole Miss crisis.

Football and Massive Resistance: Ross Barnett and the Ole Miss–Kentucky Game

“I love Mississippi! I love her people—her customs! And I love and respect her heritage!”³

Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett, his fists clenched and his voice full of emotion, was barely able to get those fifteen words out before the frothing crowd of more than 40,000 swallowed them in hysteria on the night of September 30, 1962.⁴ Mississippians from across the state were gathered at Jackson's War Memorial Stadium to see their beloved Ole Miss Rebels football team take on the visiting Kentucky Wildcats. They waved their Confederate flags and wore their Confederate Grays. They whooped and hollered and shouted the school's “Hoddy Toddy” cheer and sang the “Never! No, Never!” song, and cheered to the playing of “Dixie” and let out blood curdling rebel yells and generally let their delirium carry them to that dangerous and heady level of conformity that only a mob high on championship football mixed with massive white resistance could achieve in the South in the 1960s.

But even at that late date, it was not inconceivable that Ole Miss could have avoided bloodshed. The Governor had earlier in the month taken a stand before his fellow Mississippians in an attempt to show the Kennedy brothers and the rest of the nation that Mississippi would not quietly yield to the rapacious encroachment of federal force. Even as the integration crisis fast reached its endgame, Barnett chose to continue his fight against the Kennedy interlopers. The frenzied crowd of

Mississippians was enraptured and their affection for their governor swelled with every passing bromide from his oratory. After he spoke, the fans in the stadium and the tens of thousands of others who saw the speech on television and heard it on radio were ready to fight for their leader. Using his role as Governor to its fullest potential, Barnett's speech before what Ole Miss historian James Silver called the "reasonless, incoherent, delirious" masses made confrontation with a violent climax not only inevitable, but in the twisted logic of the rabid segregationist lexicon, also patriotic.⁵ In the words of journalist Michael Dorman of New York's *Newsday*:

The crowd was in Barnett's palm. He had the opportunity here to strike a forceful blow, for either law and order or lawlessness. But he did neither. He had whipped the crowd into a frenzy. Now he let that frenzy fizzle. He uttered not one word of advice on how to cope with the crisis.⁶

But by doing neither, Barnett did not find a path between two extremes. Instead the implication of his consistent brinksmanship throughout the integration crisis was that lawlessness was an acceptable alternative.

It is no wonder that Ross Barnett acted as he did. For days before the game against Kentucky, the media, politicians, and citizens of the region had hailed him as a hero. Where a few months earlier many Mississippians considered him to be a fool or worse—in 1961 he had been booed at a football game after a minor scandal in which it was discovered that the bathroom in the governor's mansion was furnished with gold fixtures—in the halcyon days of September 1962, Barnett was Mississippi's beloved leader. No longer was Ross an out-of-touch oaf, doomed to fall in the next election to a new model of segregationist who could play the race card more skillfully than he. In September, there was no greater feeling than to be Rolling With Ross, and there was no doubt that Ross was on a roll.⁷

In the days leading up to the game, the defiant mood rang clear across the Magnolia State. On Friday, the *Jackson Daily News* had printed the "Never, No Never" song, accompanied by an editorial that urged its readers to clip out the song and learn the words. It implored its readers to "take it with you to the Ole Miss-Kentucky game on Saturday night . . . the band will play in tune and all fans will join in singing." Written by Tom Spengler, an advertising account executive, and Houston Davis, (for whom this was the second lofty height he had climbed writing homages to the Magnolia State—he had also written the newly adopted state song "Go, Mississippi")—"Never, No, Never" gave "musical and verbal expression to a public attitude." Evidently that attitude mostly took the form of variations on the words "Never, No, Never," although the lyrics also said that "Ross is rollin' like Gibraltar, he shall never, never falter;" "Ask us what we say, it's to hell with Bobby K.;" and "Never shall our emblem go from Col. Reb to Ole Black Joe."⁸

Sales of Rebel flags soared across the state, particularly in Jackson, the capital. Radio stations such as Jackson's WRBC frequently played "Go, Mississippi," "Dixie," and "Roll Ross."⁹ Bumper stickers emerged with slogans such as "Keep Mississippi Sovereign," "Beat Lil' Brother," in reference to Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and "Roll With Ross." Students at Ole Miss rallied in support of their governor. Ole Miss student Seth Williams of Jackson appeared on the front page of one section of the Sunday *Clarion-Ledger and Daily News* with the traditional shaved head of the freshman male, and the word "Roll" painted on the left side of his cleanly shaven pate and "Ross" on the right side.¹⁰

If Ross Barnett was intoxicated with the spell he had cast over Mississippi, the prevailing mood across the state explained things rather well. Ross Barnett may have deplored violence, as he had insisted on many occasions. But if he deplored violence, he nonetheless fueled it with his words throughout the month of September, and by the time the football game ended on Saturday night those flames were burning beyond his and anyone's control.

Race, Resistance, and Sport

Ole Miss was far from alone in the role that sport played in buttressing white supremacy. Charles Reagan Wilson could have had Ole Miss football in mind when he wrote about popular or civic religions in the South; however he did not and this was a theme that transcended Ole Miss, even if the Ole Miss crisis provided the most visible interconnections between sport and white supremacy during the Civil Rights Era.¹¹ Football consistently has been a nexus point for sports and societal issues. At times sports have served to lead the way on social issues – one need look no further than the examples of Jackie Robinson in baseball or Joe Louis in boxing. But sports have also provided the backdrop for supporting social institutions, such as white supremacy. Before Joe Louis, there was the heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, who inspired equal parts fear and loathing throughout white America. And baseball's color bar re-enforced white supremacy even though every Major League Baseball team played north of Mason and Dixon's Line in the decades preceding Robinson's debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers. This serves as a useful reminder that while Jim Crow prevailed in the South, racism has never been merely a Southern phenomenon.

In the South, football, especially the college game, was inextricably connected with whiteness, segregation, and masculinity for most of the twentieth century because Southern society was inextricably bound with these themes.¹² The Ole Miss crisis merely represented the most visible embodiment of the conjunction of white supremacy with sports. Most often these issues remained confined to the playing fields, or at least to the interaction between players, coaches, administrators, and the fans and have become fodder for the easy moralizing of the movies (think of the facile depictions of very real and complex, and, yes, inspiring but not anodyne situations such as the integration of high school football at Alexandria, Virginia's T.C. Williams High School in *Remember the Titans*, Texas Western's NCAA championship victory over Adolph Rupp's all-white Kentucky team as depicted in *Glory Road*, or the travails of Ernie Nevers as portrayed in *The Express*). Thus Bear Bryant could become something of an insurgent hero of race relations for forcing Alabamans to realize that by not recruiting black players their beloved crimson Tide football team was inevitably going to suffer by scheduling a game against the University of Southern California in which the Trojans' black running back Sam "Bam" Cunningham ran rampant over the Tide defense.¹³

On the field, black players who competed in those areas where integrated competition was allowed in the border South found that they faced an extra hurdle of violence above and beyond even that traditionally confronted in a contact sport such as football. Sometimes this violence could be brutal, such as the 1951 case of Drake University's Johnny Bright, a talented African American player who, in October 1951 was the leading rusher in college football. In an October 20 game

against Oklahoma A&M (later Oklahoma State University) bright received several vicious blows to the head from an A&M lineman, Wilbanks Smith, when he was far removed from the play. Smith's blows broke Bright's jaw, an event that likely would have disappeared in the transom of sporting brutality were it not for the fact that the assault was caught on film, and thus inspired some outcry.¹⁴ This was but one isolated incident of many, but serves to illustrate the ways in which sport and racial issues intersected on the field.

But Ole Miss was exceptional for the visible ways in which sports served as a backdrop to explicit political events. To be sure, Jackie Robinson's baseball integration, Joe Louis' heavyweight title, and many of these other events had an explicit political subtext. And in the aftermath of Little Rock, one of the other signal school integration moments during the Civil Rights Era, football played a role inasmuch as Little Rock Central High School fielded a football team during the 1958 school year despite Little Rock's public schools having otherwise been closed to avoid integrating.¹⁵ But at Ole Miss, the sport provided the subtext to a larger, more overt, and more immediate context. The Ole Miss–Kentucky game was turned into a part of the story in a way that was, if not unique, at least relatively rare. This is not to say that it was unprecedented.

Furthermore, the linkage of sport and social issues, especially racial issues, transcends national borders. The United States has long used sport as a way to export its image abroad. But this cultural exportation has sometimes manifested as cultural imperialism, and has most often been utilized in American dealings with those whom Americans felt the need to "civilize." This was particularly so during the Progressive era, when ideas of the "White Man's Burden" were especially strong and when the conflation of sport, masculinity, and race reached a high-water mark.¹⁶

The development of the Olympic Movement, ironically, served the purpose of providing countries, not least the United States, with an explicit platform for merging sports and politics despite the Olympic movement's putative aversion to politics. The 1968 Olympics brought the realities of the politicization of sport home to millions when track and field stars Juan Carlos and Tommie Smith made their famous protest on the podium after their performance in the 200 meter dash. Carlos and Smith were castigated, punished, and turned into pariahs for their own racially charged political stand, even as the 1968 Olympics took place against a deeply politicized backdrop in Mexico City. This included Mexico's own fraught violent political situation and the increasingly vocal anti-Apartheid Movement, which had been trying to eject sports-mad South Africa from the Olympics.¹⁷

Indeed the South African example might well provide the most apt comparison for looking at sport within the context of white supremacy. Perhaps nowhere did the power structure use sport for political, nationalistic, and racialized purposes as overtly as Apartheid South Africa, and so in turn, nowhere did resistance play out on the sporting pitches quite so clearly. The most blatant example of this "sporting nationalism" came in South Africa's rugby culture, and reached its ultimate expression with the country's mighty national squad, the Springboks. Where the Springbok mascot and the team's green and gold colors became symbols of white, and especially Afrikaner, supremacy, they equally became hated symbols of Apartheid at home and abroad and in some circles are still the focus of intense political debates even in today's post-Apartheid South Africa.¹⁸

Thus the role of football in the Ole Miss crisis did not occur within a vacuum either politically or in terms of sport. Nonetheless, football provides a useful lens through which to view the events at Ole Miss and their larger implications for race relations, the Civil Rights Movement, and, very definitely, sport.

Voices Weak and Few

On the night of September 30th, 1962 riots turned the campus of the University of Mississippi into a war zone. Federal marshals, outnumbered and under steady assault, struggled to maintain some semblance of sanity as white students and large numbers of non-students threw rocks, fired guns, launched handmade bombs, beat up those who looked suspicious, and clamored for the appearance of James Meredith, who was rumored to be somewhere on campus. The riots were the culmination of a series of public events in which the forces of white resistance in Mississippi and across the South confronted head-on a federal government committed to not only the integration of Ole Miss, but also the end of Jim Crow's strange career across the intransigent Deep South.

The complex nature of white resistance in Mississippi made it all the more powerful. Institutional segregation had the support of innumerable actors and institutions that were often disparate except in their embrace of racial inequality. Far from being monolithic, white resistance was inchoate, piecemeal, and often impromptu. Different agents had different agendas but shared many of the same goals. Business leaders and farmers, politicians and teachers, rednecks and professors, society folk and masked Ku Kluxers – across the board, members of all of these sectors of society embraced segregation as Mississippi's sacred way of life. Invoking Ole Miss history professor James Silver's classic phrase, Russell Barrett wrote in his book *Integration at Ole Miss*: "The formidable custodians of the closed society were the political leadership, the Citizens' Council activists, the dominant newspapers, and their allies in the fields of business, religion, and education."¹⁹ In the case of the integration of Ole Miss, all of these elements merged to collide with a federal force that to the last moment allowed itself to believe that the collision could be averted through reason, not violence. But the Kennedys and much of the rest of the nation was not prepared for the extent of massive resistance and its many faces in Mississippi.

Historians have often and rightfully attributed the Citizens' Council with the greatest role in Mississippi's official stance of resistance, but the most noteworthy aspect of 1950s and 1960s Mississippi is that the Councils hardly stood alone. So the question lingers: Just how all-pervasive was massive white resistance? It is certain that all Mississippians did not embrace the extremist approach. However, it is equally evident that the vast majority opposed integration, and many were willing to go to whatever means necessary to perpetuate the *status quo*. As one observer has written:

It would be extremely unrealistic to contend that, either before or after 1954 any large portion of the Southern white population had been in favor of public school desegregation. It would be equally unrealistic to assert that those who shout 'It will never happen in the South' reflect the sentiment of the great majority of all southerners, though the voices raised to contradict them seem weak and few.²⁰

Most Mississippians opposed Meredith's attempt to attend Ole Miss. The majority supported Ross Barnett and his bravado-laden stance against the Kennedys. And while the majority of Mississippians did not want violence, enough of them were willing to embrace the use of force to protect state sovereignty and the existing racial order.

Conditions on the Ground: School and University Segregation in Mississippi

In Mississippi in 1961 there were 150 public school districts that administered elementary and high school education. Every public school district in the state had both black and white students, however, in not a single school did black children attend school with white children. In all institutions, from elementary schools to doctoral-level graduate programs, students, teachers, and faculties were completely segregated—the racial separation did not begin and end with the students. There were twenty-five junior colleges, colleges and universities. Of these, nineteen were white schools, where not a single black student attended. Among these was the University of Mississippi in Oxford. Six were Black colleges. In none of these institutions could a white student be found. This included Jackson State College, the school from which James Meredith hoped to transfer in order to attend Ole Miss.²¹

By 1961, most of the states in the South (including those in the “Border” or “Upper” South) had at least begun the inevitable. More than 2,000 total black students were enrolled in colleges in Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas. Only South Carolina, Mississippi, and Alabama had managed to remain lily-white, and Autherine Lucy had attended the University of Alabama in 1956 before the state made its temporary reprieve by suspending her on dubious grounds in her first semester.²²

Mississippi state Senator George Yarbrough had helped to assure that Mississippi's schools would remain white when, in 1958, he wrote Senate Bill #2079. Receiving the nearly unanimous support of the state legislature and the approval of Governor J.P. Coleman, the bill, which expanded a 1954 state law, vested in the Governor the “authority to close any one or all schools” including “any institution in the state of Mississippi.” This power could be utilized “when . . . he decides such closure to be the best interest of a majority of educable” students in the state.²³ The 1954 law marks the beginning of the transition of power from the state legislature to the governor, a transferal that became the basis of the Interposition power Ross Barnett would claim in September, 1962.

Although there had been attempts to integrate the University of Mississippi in the past, all eventually faded gently away from view before they could become alarming to white Mississippians. In 1953, Charles Dubra had applied to the Ole Miss Law School, but his credentials did not meet Ole Miss' entrance requirements, and he found himself summarily rejected. He did not choose to challenge the decision, and most Mississippians who gave it any thought considered Dubra an anomaly.

After the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board*, Medgar Evars applied to the law school at Oxford. Despite the Court's recent decision, Ole Miss rejected

his application. Rather than mount a lawsuit, Evars took a job with the N.A.A.C.P. in Mississippi, an organization for which he would earn fame and ultimately lose his life, ironically on the night of Wallace's staged stance against federal troops in Tuscaloosa in 1963. Finally, in the summer of 1958, Clennon King attempted to enter a graduate program in history at Ole Miss. King was a teacher at all-black Alcorn A&M. College. Convinced that a non-combative approach would prove less threatening to the white power structure at Ole Miss, King applied, but instead of receiving acceptance, state authorities placed King in a mental institution, under the peculiarly self-fulfilling logic that any black person wanting to go to Ole Miss had to be insane.²⁴

The Strategy of Delay: James Meredith and Ole Miss

On January 26, 1961, the Registrar's office at Ole Miss received an innocuous-looking letter. James Howard Meredith, a 29 year old Koskiusko, Mississippi native who had spent nine years in the Air Force and who had used the G.I. Bill to earn several semesters worth of college credit, had written to request an application and any other necessary forms and instructions for him to apply to the University. On January 31 Meredith sent in his application, and stated his desire to register on February 6. But two aspects of his application were immediately problematic. Instead of six letters from University alumnae attesting to his character, Meredith had submitted letters from Mississippians not affiliated with Ole Miss. The reason for this divergence from standard procedure was explained by a quick glance at his picture: James H. Meredith of Koskiusko was, in the parlance of the times, a Negro. He was a military veteran of nine years who had attended several colleges and who, with the exception of one semester, had done admirably well, particularly given his military commitment and the fact that he had a wife, Mary June, and son, John Howard, occupying a significant portion of his time. But he was a Negro nonetheless, and thus unfit for the campus of Ole Miss in the eyes of the institution's guardians.²⁵

Little did Meredith know he had embarked on a saga that would last well more than a year-and-a-half and would cost at least two lives directly and perhaps many more indirectly through violence aimed at blacks. Meredith became entrenched in a waiting game. The university had not met with an integrationist challenge as fierce as the one Meredith would mount. With the aid of the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund, the head of which was the formidable Thurgood Marshall, Meredith challenged the university and the state in court. The advocacy of Constance Motley, Derrick A. Bell Jr., and R. Jess Brown, his able and tenacious lawyers, and the aid of Medgar Evars, Ole Miss aspirant manqué, allowed Meredith to push through a system that was set up to delay, frustrate, and wear down those who hoped for easy ascension into the rarefied and semi-aristocratic atmosphere of Ole Miss. As Walter Lord wrote about the task Meredith and his supporters faced, all of the delays

could go on forever—which was, of course, just what Mississippi wanted. For its basic strategy was one that had worked in the days of Reconstruction: be stubborn enough, and the federal government would tire of the game; hold out long enough, and Washington would go away.²⁶

Despite Mississippi's well-known and well-practiced reputation for violent proclivities, the reality of the state's Ole Miss strategy was to fight a war of attrition, not of munitions. Lord claims that despite its reputation, violence was still more the exception than the rule. The plan was less based on "a courthouse bully" than it was on "massive recalcitrance that was all the more difficult to surmount because it was so formless, so intangible, so hard to get at." For those such as Motley, Marshall, and especially Meredith, who would at some point, it was presumed, want to get on with his life, the policy of delay would wear the challengers down, tire them out, and drain their energy "until (they) finally stopped trying altogether."²⁷

The case of *Meredith v. Fair, et. al.* lingered well into 1962. Each chance Meredith thought he might get to wrap the case up so that he could begin with the upcoming semester faded in a deluge of paperwork, motions, and countermotions. First the University exhausted all of its delay techniques, which were not at all well planned. Russell Barrett has pointed out that the school's tendency to take each individual case to desegregate—those of Dubra, Evars, King, and Meredith—and wait for the aperture that would provide grounds for rejection put the school in a position where its essential policy was to have no policy. When the case went to the courts and left the university's hands, it was surely a relief, even though the University's registrar's office, the Board of Trustees, and others affiliated with the university system were named as defendants in the suit.

Second came Judge Sydney Mize of the U.S. District Court. Although the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals would later excoriate Mize's handling of the case, his groundless legal boondoggles against Meredith, and his delays in administering justice, the loyal Mississippian had used his bully pulpit to further the state's patchwork resistance to Meredith's driven effort, and thus in the concave logic of the proceedings, his peculiar brand of justice made him a hero.

Even well into 1962 when the case made it to the appellate level, the charade was not complete. After the court decided in Meredith's favor, after once having remanded it to Mize for reconsideration, the almost surreal proceedings achieved their most bizarre level. For it was after the Appeals Court upheld Meredith's right to be admitted to Ole Miss that Judge Ben F. Cameron, a judge on the Fifth Circuit who had not been on the rotation of judges involved with the Meredith case, began an unprecedented series of stays of the appellate court's decision. The Appeals Court would follow with an injunction, and Cameron would issue another stay. Four times this dance went on, with each participant seemingly stepping on the others toes, and with Cameron the mysterious interloper who had cut in with neither permission nor an invitation from anyone. This deadlock would go on until the Supreme Court finalized Meredith's status with regard to the university.

On August 31st, 1962 the Justice Department finally entered the case, filing an amicus brief on Meredith's side with Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, who handled cases pertaining to the Fifth Circuit when the Supreme Court was not in session. Finally on September 10, Justice Black, after having taken the somewhat extraordinary step of consulting the other eight Justices, vacated all of Cameron's stays and issued an injunction forbidding interference with the "enforcement of the judgment and mandate of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals."²⁸ On September 13th, Judge Mize finally stepped into line, issuing a sweeping injunction directed to all of the defendants in the case, which now included members of the Board of Trustees, the Chancellor, the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the Registrar,

and ““their servants, agents, employees, successors and assigns, and all persons acting in concert with them, as well as any and all persons having knowledge of this decree.””²⁹ Much to his chagrin, Mize, the strongest early advocate for the defense had become executioner for the plaintiff.

Mississippi would not be without its heroes in the two weeks to come, and leading the cavalry charge would be Ross Barnett, who would not only flaunt Mize’s judgment, he would raise the ante, all the while capitalizing on the political fortunes to be gained by well-placed rhetoric and well-meaning segregationism. In those two weeks the state’s political leadership would supplement the massive resistance efforts of the Citizen’s Councils and myriad other groups, large and small that advocated massive resistance, as well as the opinions of the majority of the Mississippi press and the stated beliefs of many vocal citizens. Here we get a glimpse of the nature of Mississippi’s massive white resistance and its many faces.

The groundwork for resistance that Ole Miss and state officials set in the years and months before September of 1962 is significant because it represented Mississippi’s inclination to fight change in the state’s established racial tradition. But most states in the South experienced varying degrees of similar such rhetoric and legal chicanery. What made Mississippi unique was the depth and breadth of its opposition to integration. Ole Miss did what it took throughout the 1950s to avoid integration of its storied campus. Similarly, the state’s leaders took steps that served to assert further the state’s official position.

But in the 1950s some of the most significant resistance came not from the Governor’s mansion or the halls of the state legislature. It came from the Citizen’s Councils and other such groups. It was not until Ross Barnett ascended to the governorship of Mississippi that massive white resistance became more than the standard reaction of Southern states to a change in the racial order. And even under Barnett, the violence that shook Ole Miss was not inevitable. But his actions after Mize fulfilled his sad duty, coupled with the increased volume of resistance that rose in response to Meredith’s situation, made violence increasingly likely as that month played to its grim conclusion with the football game in Jackson a key landmark in determining the grim outcome.

The Emotional Apogee of the Crisis: Football, Race, and Identity

Ole Miss had a proud history that the state’s citizens and particularly the school’s alumnae cherished. The University had been chartered in 1844 and began its first session in November 1848. The university provided masses of young men for the Civil War, and turned its mission primarily toward the education of its returning Confederate heroes. In 1882 the school admitted women for the first time, long before many other state universities. In the years from its inception, the state had embarked on an ambitious building program that made the picturesque Oxford campus a fine location to earn entree into the elite levels of state affairs. The first building to go up was the Lyceum, which was erected in 1846 and to this day still stands as the symbol of Ole Miss’ academic mission.³⁰ It was not long before the university held a sacred place in the heart of Mississippians. As a springboard to the state’s legal or commercial circles, a degree from Ole Miss went as far as did

one from one of the country's more elite private institutions. In the words of one scholar, its "law school, well-established fraternity system, and long association with a moneyed elite" made Ole Miss "'a finishing school for the state's politicians, business leaders, and lawyers.'"³¹

In the 1950s and early 1960s, however Ole Miss was known nationally for three things. Its extensive system of fraternities and sororities made it the site for the "liveliest campus politics east of Louisiana." It was known for beauty queens—within one four-year span the school had launched four Miss Mississippi, a Maid of Cotton, one Miss Dixie, and Two Miss Americas. And most of all, before the Meredith crisis, when the school became most closely connected with racial hatred, the university was known for football.³² Thus it is not surprising that the penultimate event in the crisis came at an Ole Miss football game.

Football was a central part of Ole Miss and its identity in the 1960s. In the midst of the crisis to integrate, football stood central, both in the role it played as the *mise en scene* for many of the major events of the crisis as well as in its symbolic role both as a representative of what Ole Miss was and as a redemptive force for what Ole Miss was not.³³ In 1962, Ole Miss was in the midst of the John Vaught era. John Vaught is to the University of Mississippi what Bear Bryant is to the University of Alabama. He stands as an icon and a legend, and the football stadium at Ole Miss today bears his name, which was added to Hemingway Stadium after Vaught's retirement from coaching.

In his tenure as the Rebels' head coach, Vaught led Ole Miss to eighteen bowl games, including fourteen in a row from 1957 to 1970, a record at that time. Ole Miss consistently contended for Southeastern Conference (SEC) titles during those years, when the conference was arguably the best in the nation, and the Rebels were always a national force. From 1959 to 1963, the Ole Miss regular season gridiron record was 42–2–3, they won the SEC championship three times, and the 1959 squad had been voted the Associated Press SEC team of the decade after going 9–1 with 329 points scored and only 21 given up. In 1960 the Football Writers of America Association voted Ole Miss as their National Champion, although Minnesota had beaten the Rebels out in both the Associated Press (AP) and the Universal Press International (UPI) polls. In these years "Oxford became synonymous nationally with winning football," particularly in an era when college football still reigned supreme over its professional brethren in much of the public's eye, especially in the South.³⁴ The 1962 version of the Ole Miss football team would prove to be no different in holding up the tradition of success John Vaught and a lot of talented white Mississippi boys had built up over the years.

Entering September, the main concern of many Mississippians was thus the Ole Miss Rebels' chance for another year of gridiron glory. The SEC looked to be as tough as ever entering the 1962 season. Both the AP and the UPI preseason polls had the conference's Big Three, Alabama, Louisiana State, and Ole Miss, ranked in their top five. Alabama was the favored choice to finish the season as national champion, but Ole Miss was expected to be in the hunt for the conference, and thus the national, championship. Despite the loss of fifteen lettermen, the Rebels entered the season with a solid corps of returning players, including All-America candidates Jim Dunaway on the defensive line and Glynn Griffing at the helm in the quarterback position.³⁵ The team opened the 1962 season against Memphis State, and as expected, they easily handled the host Tigers in nearby Memphis (where Ole

Miss fans may well have outnumbered supporters of the host squad) 21–7 in what local reporters termed a warm-up for the real challenges of the upcoming S.E.C. season, which would begin when the Rebels faced Kentucky’s Wildcats.

The Kentucky game had become the center of a great deal of hype, as the Meredith situation exponentially increased the tensions and excitement surrounding a conference game. Ole Miss fans felt that 1962 was the year they would get a real national championship from the Rebels, and the Kentucky game would be a chance to demonstrate the greatness of their team. In the week before the game, the pundits analyzed the confrontation from all angles. Kentucky had a new coach in Charlie Bradshaw, and they wondered if he would have any new wrinkles to baffle the Blue and Red. Since 1944 the Rebels were 12–6 against Kentucky, with six consecutive wins. For the first time the game would be played in War Memorial Stadium, the new football shrine in Jackson. In its first game, Kentucky had only managed to play unheralded Florida State to a 0–0 tie, but Vaught refused to overlook the Wildcats.

On its front page on game day the *Clarion-Ledger* ran across its front page a large cartoon showing the dapper Ole Miss mascot, Colonel Reb, as he prepared to scrub a “scaredy-cat” from Kentucky in a bathtub labeled “Memorial Stadium.” Flanking the cartoon were the rosters of both teams.³⁶ By kickoff War Memorial was at a fevered pitch and the combination of the elation of the game and the pride of state resistance made the stadium a cauldron ready to boil over at any time. By halftime, the Rebels led 7–0, and the final tally was 14–0. Though not an overwhelming score, the night was a near total victory for Rebel fans. The defense, with Jim Dunaway leading the charge, proved impenetrable, and would not yield to the attacking foe.

Mississippians believed that the game was an omen for the impending crisis to which their own fearless captain, Ross Barnett, had led them. Years later, Gerald Henry Blessey, who had been a junior at Ole Miss in the fall of 1962, and who would later go on to be a prominent businessman and Mississippi state legislator, commented about the role football played during the crisis. His comments illustrate the significance both of the Kentucky game and of the importance of football games generally at Ole Miss that year. “Football games tended to be the benchmarks for what was happening” at Ole Miss in those early days of the first semester since there were a lot of pep rallies to build school spirit for the football season to come. “At those rallies you’d have a lot of talk about Meredith, and you’d read in the paper that they were coming that day” but with all of the maneuvering, students were never completely in the know.³⁷

According to Blessey, all of the emotions “culminated, really, in the Kentucky–Ole Miss game,” where he says the unforgettable “spectacle of thousands of Rebel flags,” the school’s substitute for the more traditional pennant, struck him. While the Rebel flag normally was more a manifestation of school spirit than of politics, “That night it was both. They had been given out to the crowd as they usually were—thousands of them waving at halftime.” Blessey was disturbed by the fact that “thousands of them were waving, particularly during ‘The Star Spangled Banner,’ which disturbed me somewhat, because of its obvious disrespect.”³⁸

All of this folderol fed into Barnett’s speech. The crowd chanted “We Want Ross!” and students unrolled the world’s largest Confederate flag as Barnett sauntered onto the field to give his speech.³⁹ Ross Barnett’s rhetoric flowed to receptive

ears, and Mississippians clamored for resistance to a federal government that seemed increasingly hell-bent upon destroying a sacred way of life. When the governor finished, Blessey would later recall, “And when they sang ‘Roll Mississippi,’” the school’s official alma mater, “that allusion was not lost on the crowd. It was an intensely emotional thing—almost a fever pitch of emotion was whipped up into the crowd, particularly to the students.” The whole scene was enough to make even a moderate a convert. “I can remember—I felt caught up in the emotion of it. . . . I can remember self-doubts in my mind” that said “maybe the state should interpose itself . . . the whole State’s Rights argument . . . that maybe it was wrong for the federal government to tell us to do our duty.” But almost immediately his thoughts changed course. “I looked back at the crowd and I saw anger in the faces of people right next to me, and it sort of flashed in my mind that those Rebel flags looked like swastikas. It was almost like a hallucination.”⁴⁰

Blessey was not the only observer who likened the football game to a Nazi Party rally. According to Walter Lord, one student, “whose eyes still danced in happy recollection,” later exclaimed, “it was like a big Nazi rally. Yes, it was just the way Nuremberg must have been.”⁴¹ Ole Miss history professor Russell Barrett too acknowledged the similarity between the meetings that enthralled Germany less than thirty years earlier and the events at War Memorial Stadium on September 29, 1962.⁴² The Nazi analogy is among the most overused in contemporary political discussion, and its invocation is almost always out of place. Yet what is important about its use in the context of 1962 is not the relevance of the historical analogy, but rather the way in which so many contemporaneous observers, including some inclined to support resistance, utilized it.

Making a rather different analogy, Taylor Branch has noted that the halftime spectacle “was as close to, and yet as far from, the fervor of a Negro mass meeting as segregationists came.” He also asserts that the “football game would be the last militant race rally among respectable whites for at least a generation.”⁴³ Finally, Kevin Pierce Thornton has noted the racial nature of Ole Miss football games generally, as has John Egerton, who described “Ole Miss football games as a celebration of”:

White Supremacy, no longer regulated by law but by economics and custom and tradition: the overwhelming whiteness of the crowd, the teams, the coaches, the press, the referees, and the ancient gestures that evoke an unforgotten past—Rebel yells, the waving of the Stars and Bars.⁴⁴

The whole scene disturbed Gerald Blessey, “because I felt that a lot of good people—all these people around me were not racists, haters, they weren’t Ku Klux Klan members.” Instead “they were just ordinary school kids who were being whipped into fever-pitch of emotion by their own leaders” with the help of “the whole spectacle of reinforcement through a crowd-mass psychology—it was there just like the Nazis had done.” The next day “when we were driving back, on the radio—all coming back from the game, and I’d say probably eighty% of the student body was at that game, that’s when we heard the news that Meredith was coming in or that Meredith was already on the campus, or that nobody knew exactly what was going on.” This state of not knowing was the predominant mindset students carried with them throughout September.⁴⁵

The football game served as the culmination of state emotions before the riots the next night. It was not the beginning by any means. For much of the month the plans for resistance had gone onward in what Ole Miss Professor Russell Barrett called Mississippi's "Blueprint for Riot."⁴⁶ The blueprint had been in the making for many years, but it was on September 29th that it really began to take its form of blending political demagoguery with mass action.

“Sic ‘Em White Folks”: Conclusion

By the time of the riots at the University, massive white resistance had become a way of life in Mississippi. Governor Barnett had utilized it for maximum political gain, but so too had others used it for their own purposes. Politicians used it to get elected. Newspapers used it to sell copies. Ideologues used it to carry forth their political and philosophical agendas. White supremacists used it to foment violence and hatred. And throughout, football provided a backdrop, a communal point of gathering and celebration and affirmation. The Ole Miss–Kentucky game did not create massive resistance, and violence may well have happened without Ross Barnett's halftime speech. But Ole Miss football provided a context within which emotions could crystallize and the Kentucky game provided a staging point for those emotions. In a very real way football, so often a source of pride and honor and school spirit, fueled the massive resistance that resulted in chaos and violence and bloodshed and death on the Grove at Ole Miss, a place most famous for its tailgating scene before Ole Miss football games.

Even the students at Ole Miss' intense interstate rival, Mississippi State University, used the integration crisis to further their own agenda, which was to promote the superiority of their MSU Bulldogs football team.⁴⁷ Before the Ole Miss–Mississippi State football game in October 1962, posters supporting the MSU team showed up on the Starkville campus. The posters, distributed by Peets Advertising in Jackson, showed the MSU Bulldog nipping at the heels of Colonel Reb with one notable feature: Colonel Reb was black, caricatured to look like Sambo, or perhaps an entertainer from a minstrel show. Above the snarling Mississippi State mascot were the words “sic ‘em WHITE FOLKS,” the clear implication of which was that Mississippi State was Mississippi's white university, while newly integrated Ole Miss had become the black school.⁴⁸ Even after Ole Miss had desegregated, football and race relations continued to intertwine in the Magnolia State.

Meanwhile, a few weeks later, the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, where the angry Ole Miss alum may or may not have churlishly shattered those bottles of bourbon years before, registered its first black guest. There was little fanfare and no violence. The Peabody remains a Deep South Institution even as Ole Miss, including its football program, has continued to deal with its past.⁴⁹

Notes

1. *The Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson), November 26, 1962.
2. On the Ole Miss crisis see Russell Barrett, *Integration at Ole Miss*, (Chicago: Qwuadrangle Books, 1965); Derek Catsam, “The Jackass Brays: Massive White Resistance to the

Integration of Ole Miss,” MA Thesis, University of North Carolina–Charlotte, 1996; Nadine Cohadas, *The Band Played Dixie: Race and the Liberal Conscience at Ole Miss*, (New York: the Free Press, 1997); Michael Dorman, *We Shall Overcome: A Reporter’s Eye-Witness Account of the Year of Racial Strife and Triumph* (New York: Dell, 1964); William Doyle, *An American Insurrection: James Meredith and the Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001); Paul Hendrickson, *Sons of Mississippi*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003); Walter Lord, *The Past That Would Not Die*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); James Meredith, *Three Years in Mississippi*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966); and James Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1966).

3. Quoted in Barrett, p.121. Also in *New York Times*, Sept. 30, 1962; in James Silver, “Mississippi: The Closed Society,” Presidential address before the Southern Historical Association, Asheville, NC, November 7, 1963 later published in *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 30, No. 1, February 1964, pp. 3–34; *Jackson Clarion-Ledger and Daily News*, September 30, 1962, and in Rex Baker, “Ole Miss Football: The John Vaught Era, 1947–1970,” Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Mississippi, 1987. p.25. Each source has a slightly different variation of the exact words that Barnett uttered.

4. Estimates of the size of the crowd varied from 41,000 to stadium capacity, which was 48,000.

5. Silver, address before S.H.A., Nov. 7, 1963.

6. Michael Dorman, *We Shall Overcome* (New York: Dell, 1964) pp. 55–56.

7. “Roll With Ross,” the campaign slogan for the governor’s 1960 campaign, was accompanied with what the state’s biggest newspaper would call Barnett’s “almost forgotten campaign song.” *Jackson Clarion Ledger and Daily News*, September 30, 1962. The lyrics went:

“Roll with Ross, Roll with Ross, he’s his own boss.

For segregation one hundred%.

He’s not a modest like some of the gents.

He’ll fight integration with forceful intent.

Roll with Ross, Roll with Ross, he’s his own boss. He’s his own boss.

Sing Hallelujah, let the good times roll with Governor Ross Barnett.”

Quoted in Southern Regional Council, “Will the Circle be Unbroken,” Episode 18: The Demonstrations, 1997.

8. *Jackson Daily News*, September 28, 1962.

9. *Jackson Clarion-Ledger and Daily News*, September 30, 1962 and Lord, p.174.

10. *Jackson Clarion-Ledger and Daily News*, September 30, 1962.

11. See *Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths From Faulkner to Elvis* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

12. See Patrick D. Miller’s edited collection *The Sporting World of the Modern South* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), including Miller’s contribution “The Manly, the Moral and the Proficient: College Sport in the New South”; Andrew Doyle, “Turning the Tide: College Football and Southern Progressivism”; Charles H. Martin, “Integrating New Year’s Day: The Racial politics of College Bowl Games in the American South”; Doyle, “An Atheist in Alabama is Someone Who Does Not Believe in Bear Bryant: A Symbol For the Embattled South”; and Ted Ownby, “Manhood, Memory, and White Men’s Sports in the American South.” See also Doyle, “ ‘Causes Won, Not Lost’: College Football and the Modernization of the American South,” *International Journal of the History of Sport* 11 (August 1994), pp. 231–251.

13. See David Halberstam, "Just a Coach, Not a Leader," at ESPN.com "Page 2," <http://espn.go.com/page2/s/halberstam/021220.html>.
14. See Adam Buckley Cohen, "The Mugging of Johnny Bright," in David K. Wiggins and Patrick B. Miller, Eds., *The Uneven Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 2005) pp. 250–254.
15. See Gary Smith, "Blindsided by History," *Sports Illustrated*, April 9, 2007, pp. 66–75.
16. See Gerald R. Gems, *The Athletic Crusade: Sport and American Cultural Imperialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006). See also S.W. Pope, *Patriotic Games: Sporting Traditions in the American Imagination, 1876–1926* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007).
17. See Amy Bass, *Not the Triumph But the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
18. On South African sport see, for example, Derek Catsam, "Stopped at the Try Line?: Rugby, Race and Nationalism in South Africa," Proceedings of the South African Sports History Conference, Stellenbosch, June 2008, (forthcoming in *Impumelelo: The Interdisciplinary Electronic Journal of African Sports*); John Nauright, *Sport, Cultures and Identities in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997); Malcolm MacLean, "Making Strange the Country and Making Strange the Countryside: Spatialized Clashes in the Affective Economies of Aotearoa/New Zealand During the 1981 Springbok Rugby Tour," in John Bale and Mike Cronin, Eds., *Sport and Postcolonialism* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); and Peter Alegi, *Laduma!: Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa* (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu–Natal Press, 2003).
19. Russell Barrett, *Integration at Ole Miss*, p.246.
20. Robert Earl Williams, "Factors Associated With Attitudes of Black Students Towards Integration at the University of Mississippi" Unpublished M.A. thesis in Sociology, University of Mississippi, 1971. p.1
21. "Southern Education Reporting Service, "Statistical Summary of School Segregation–Desegregation in the Southern and Border States, November 1962, pp. 29–30.
22. *Jackson Clarion-Ledger and Daily News*, September 23, 1962.
23. Mississippi State Senate Bill No. 2079, in "School Desegregation: Mississippi," File, A.E. Cox Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
24. See Russell Barrett, *Integration at Ole Miss*, Chapter 1, which goes into detail about Mississippi's early attempts to piece together a path of resistance to integration of its institutions of higher learning.
25. Information on the period up until September, 1962 comes from a number of different sources. Besides the incomparable work of Barrett is Walter Lord's *The Past That Would Not Die*, Harper and Row publisher's, New York, 1965, and a comprehensive report from the University itself, "The Board of Trustees of Higher Learning and the Meredith Case," which presents the university's side of the case, as well as a chronology of events.
26. Lord, pp. 124–125.
27. *Ibid.* p. 122.
28. "The Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning and the Meredith Case," p. 6.
29. Quoted in *ibid.* p. 7.
30. This historical sketch comes from the 1961 *Bulletin of the University of Mississippi*, pp. 62–66.

31. Kevin Pierce Thornton, "Symbolism at Ole Miss and the Crisis of Southern Identity," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 86:3, Summer, 1987, p.254.
32. Lord, p.99.
33. Kevin Pierce Thornton explicitly draws out the importance of football to the University's history. President Kennedy mentioned the team and its successes in his televised speech to the nation on the night of the crisis. In later interviews the football game is central to the memories of many regarding the crisis.
34. Baker, p 22.
35. *Jackson Clarion-Ledger and Daily News* special football preview section, Sunday, Sept. 2, 1962.
36. *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, September 29, 1962.
37. Gerald Blessey, in an interview conducted by H.T. Holmes, Biloxi, Mississippi, July 22, 1975. Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) Oral History Project (OHP).
38. Blessey interview, MDAH–OHP.
39. Doyle, *An American Insurrection*, p. 112.
40. Blessey interview MDAH–OHP.
41. Quoted in Lord, p.191.
42. See Barrett, pp. 121–122.
43. Taylor Branch, *Parting The Waters: America In The King Years—1954–1965*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988) p.659.
44. John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America*, (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974) p.177.
45. Blessey Interview, MDAH–OHP.
46. See Barrett, Chapter 4.
47. It is worth pointing out that Mississippi State would have its own sports integration controversy, which it handled far more admirably than did the solons in charge of Ole Miss. See Russell J. Henderson, "The 1963 Mississippi State University Basketball Controversy and the Repeal of the Unwritten Law: 'Something more than the game will be lost,'" *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. LXII, Number 4, November 1997, pp. 827–854.
48. Poster found in "Segregation: Misc." Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
49. *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 26, 1962. On Ole Miss dealing with football see Cohadas, *The Band Played Dixie*, and Thornton, "Symbolism at Ole Miss and the Crisis of Southern Identity."