James Meredith at Ole Miss: “Victory over Discrimination”

Candace D. Fisk and Beth Hurst

On October 1, 1962, James Meredith attended his first classes at the University of Mississippi. This apparently ordinary event was, in fact, an extraordinary landmark in the civil rights struggle of the 1960s. Meredith was the first African American admitted to an all-white university, and his admission came after 18 months of legal action, political posturing, and campus riots. The story of Meredith’s bid for admission to “Ole Miss” is a case study of school integration, but also a story of jurisdictional battles between state and federal governments in the civil rights struggle, as well as the story of one man’s personal courage and perseverance.

James Howard Meredith was born on June 25, 1933 in Kosciusko, Mississippi, the grandson of slaves. His family lived in poverty on a “dirt farm,” at times lacking even basic amenities such as running water. Meredith attended elementary school in Kosciusko, but because there was no black high school there, his father sent him to St. Petersburg, Florida, to live with an uncle for his high school years. Meredith was a strong student and looked for opportunities to excel. He also showed a determination to fight injustice. During his senior year he decided to enter an essay contest sponsored by the American Legion on the topic “Why I am proud to be an American.” His essay stated that he was proud of what America could become, rather than what it was. However, his teachers did not approve of the essay and refused to submit it. Defiantly, Meredith submitted the essay himself and won the essay contest.

Upon graduation, Meredith joined the U.S. Air Force. During his nine years of service, he married, started a family, and took several correspondence courses for college credit. After leaving the military, he enrolled full time in Mississippi’s Jackson State University, an all-black school. During his first semester at Jackson State, Meredith decided to apply for admission to the University of Mississippi, an all-white institution, and take a stand against school segregation. Meredith was determined to work for racial equality in his
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To: The Justice Department

It is with much regret that I present this information to you concerning myself. Whenever I attempt to reason logically about this matter, it grieves me deeply to realize that an individual, especially an American, the citizen of a free democratic nation, has to clamor with such procedures in order to try to gain just a small amount of his civil and human rights, and even after suffering the embarrassments and personal humiliation of this procedure, there still seems little hope of success. To be in an oppressed situation is not in itself very difficult, but to be in it and realize its unfairness, and then to have one's conscience compel him to try to correct the situation is indeed antagonizing and often miserable.

Before I go too far, I want to state my immediate situation. I have applied for admission to the University of Mississippi. I have not been accepted and I have not been rejected. Delaying tactics are presently being used by the state. This is the important fact and the reason I am writing (one major reason) to you. Other Negro citizens have attempted to exercise their rights of citizenship in the past, but during the period of delay, that is, between the time the action is initiated and the would be time of attainment of goal, the agencies of the state eliminate the protestant. I do not have any desire to be eliminated.

Why do I feel that you will or should be concerned about me? I have no great desire to protect my pride, but I do hope to see the day when the million Negroes that live in the state of Mississippi will have cause not to fear as they fear today. High ranking officials of this state, including the Lieutenant Governor during the absence of the Governor while on his south American trip, have made public statements saying that the law enforcement agencies of this state will not be use to enforce laws as proclaimed by the federal courts. I have no reason to believe that they will protect citizens that seek to bring about such decisions, in fact, I believe that if they are used at all it will be to intimidate such citizens.

America is a great nation. It has led the world in freedom for a long time. I feel that we can and we must continue to lead in this respect. However, I feel that a greater use should be made of the Negro potential. In my state, this is generally impossible under the present set-up. A Negro born in Mississippi can write himself off of the potential list of all of the professions, except teaching and preaching, such as it is, nearly all of the technical fields or trades and off of the Commissioned Officers roll.
Instead of the restrictions being lifted, they are being more tightly controlled. I feel that this is not in the best interest of our country and certainly not in the best interest of the negro people. Presently, much is being said by the radio and press about "a negro" wanting to go to the University of Mississippi. Much is being made of prior attempts by negroes to go to "all white" Mississippi schools. They elaborate on the fate of these individuals, for instance, the latest one to try is now serving a seven (7) year prison term on alleged crooked-up charges subsequent to his attempt to go to school. If this is to be the normal fate of an individual who seeks to exercise his rights of citizenship, then I certainly feel that this is an undesirable situation.

My background! I was born on a small farm in Attala County, Mississippi, the seventh of thirteen children. I walked to school, over four miles each way, everyday for eleven years. Through-out those years, the white school bus passed us each and every morning. Of course, there was no negro school bus. I never had a teacher during grade and high school with a college degree. Sounds bad doesn’t it? Well, it is not. I was indeed fortunate, because each day I passed by one of the largest farms in the county, and there I saw boys my own age and younger that fed cows all day and to this day most of them can’t even read read signs. I have never known that I could help solve this situation, but I have always felt that I must do my best.

During my last year of high school, which was spent in Florida, I entered an essay contest, sponsored by the American Legion, of which I was winner along with two white girls. The title of the essay was "Why I am Proud to be an American." My theme was that I was not proud because I was born with as many or more of the desirable things of life as the next man, but because in my country an individual has the opportunity to grow and develop according to his ability and integrity, and is not restricted from progress solely on the basis of race. Basically, I still believe in this possibility.

I spent nine (9) years in the United States Air Force. All of this time was in the so called "integrated" service and I feel that I can safely say that there is no logical reasons to justify denying a law abiding citizen the rights of full citizenship solely on the basis of race.

What do I want from you? I feel that the power and influence of the federal government should be used where necessary to insure compliance with the laws as interpreted by the proper authority. I feel that the federal government can do more in this area if they choose and I feel that they should choose.

In view of the above (incomplete) information I simply ask that the federal agencies use the power and prestige of their positions to insure the full rights of citizenship for our people.

Sincerely,

J. H. Meredith
home state, and was convinced that “only a power struggle between the state and the federal governments could make it possible” for African Americans to gain admission to the University of Mississippi.

Inspired by President John F. Kennedy’s inauguration speech, and believing that the new president would be responsive to civil rights issues, on January 21, 1961, the day after Kennedy took office, Meredith wrote to Ole Miss requesting an application for admission. When he submitted his application on January 29, he included a letter in which he introduced himself saying, “I am an American—Mississippi—Negro citizen. . . . I certainly hope that this matter will be handled in a manner that will be complimentary to the university and the state of Mississippi!” The university sent a telegram just five days later stating that his application would not be considered because it had been received late, even though no application deadline had been mentioned in previous correspondence.

Interpreting the telegram as a stalling tactic, Meredith realized that he would have to undertake a legal battle to gain admission to the school. He wrote to the United States Department of Justice stating that the “power and influence of the federal government should be used where necessary to insure compliance with the laws.” Throughout the spring of 1961, Meredith continued to submit all necessary forms and recommendations for fall semester admission, but was told repeatedly by university officials that his application was not in order. On April 12, he wrote to Dr. Arthur Lewis, dean of the College of Liberal Arts, stating his conclusion that the university registrar had not processed his application solely because of his race and color.

To prepare for an expected legal fight, Meredith wrote to Thurgood Marshall of the Legal Defense Fund asking for assistance and stating, “My long preserved ambition has been to break the monopoly on rights and privileges held by the Whites of the State of Mississippi.” Attorney Constance Motley was assigned to represent Meredith, and in May 1961, she filed suit against the University of Mississippi in the United States District Court alleging that Meredith’s admission had been denied on the basis of race. When word of Meredith’s school application became public, his family began to receive threatening mail and phone calls; their home was vandalized, and they were refused service in local businesses.

In the first case, the court ruled against Meredith. According to the ruling, Meredith had not provided substantial evidence that race was the grounds for his denial of admission. He appealed the ruling to the United States Court of Appeals, and in September 1962, the higher court overturned the decision, issuing an injunction ordering the university to admit Meredith. At this point, the struggle for jurisdiction in this matter between the state of Mississippi and the federal government was about to begin.

The battle to integrate Ole Miss raged on, becoming a jurisdictional contest between the governor of Mississippi and the president of the United States. On the same day as the Court of Appeals ruling, Mississippi governor Ross Barnett issued a proclamation claiming constitutional authority to ignore the court’s injunction. He claimed that the Tenth Amendment statement that “powers not specifically delegated to the Federal Government are reserved to the several states” applied to the operation of public schools, and, therefore, a federal court had no authority to issue the injunction. In a televised speech that evening, he proclaimed, “no school will be integrated while I am your governor.”

The Battle Lines Are Drawn
At this point, President Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, became personally involved. Over the course of a week, the question of jurisdiction was discussed in numerous phone conversations and telegrams between Governor Barnett and President Kennedy. Kennedy asserted that it was his duty to enforce the Court of Appeals ruling. Barnett responded that he was obligated to uphold the Constitution of the State of Mississippi, and further to protect local citizens from the violence that would follow if Meredith were admitted to Ole Miss. Barnett ordered the state police to the university campus to bar Meredith’s admission. Kennedy responded by ordering National Guard troops and U.S. Marshals to escort Meredith to classes.

On Sunday, September 30, 1962, the day before Meredith was scheduled to begin classes, tensions began to mount on the university campus. Word of Meredith’s impending admission had received widespread press coverage, not only in the city of Oxford, but also throughout Mississippi. People began pouring into the city from around the state. One Ole Miss faculty member reported that the crowds were mostly made up of people unrelated to the school, with students only comprising about one-third of the crowd. The crowd, which would grow in size to 2,000 by the end of the day, was a mix of militant citizens, curious onlookers, and dozens of members of the press. The local highway patrol had been ordered to seal off the campus, but their manpower was not sufficient to accomplish this.

Campus events turned violent just prior to sunset when a group of students lowered the American flag in front of the administration building and subsequently raised the Mississippi state flag. A skirmish around the flagpole ensued, and the fighting quickly escalated, spreading around the campus. Throughout the night, roaming mobs threw bricks, bottles, and rocks at law enforcement officers and other targets. They occupied buildings, tossed Molotov cocktails into crowds, burned cars, fired guns, and looted businesses near the campus. However, the rioters were no match for federal troops who were armed with tear gas. By dawn the rioting was subdued, but not before 212 rioters were injured and over 175 arrested. Tragically, two men were killed in the melee. The body of Paul Guinard, a French journalist, was found near the Fine Arts Center with a close-range bullet wound in his back. And a local bystander, Ray Gunter, was felled by a stray bullet as he watched from outside a building on the perimeter of the campus. Unfortunately, no arrests were ever made for either shooting. Meredith, who was housed off-campus, had gone to bed early in preparation for his first day of classes, and did not become aware of the rioting until the next day.

When word of the rioting reached
Kennedy, the president promptly issued Executive Order 11053, which instructed the secretary of defense to "take all appropriate steps to enforce the orders of the United States Court of Appeals... [And] call into the active military service of the United States any or all of the units of the Army National Guard." The Court of Appeals order to grant Meredith admission to the University of Mississippi would be upheld at gunpoint. It was in this atmosphere that Meredith was escorted to class on Monday morning, October 1, 1962. Later he would recount how his eyes kept tearing during his American history class due to tear gas residue from the previous day's riots.

For weeks federal escorts trailed Meredith as he attended classes, ate in the cafeteria, and as he returned to his dorm room. (He had chosen to stay in a university dorm on weekdays to protect his family from harassment.) Meredith endured racial epithets, noisemakers outside of his room in the middle of the night, and even returned to the dorm one afternoon to find a life-sized effigy hanging from his window with a noose around its neck. Despite the months of racial unrest on the campus, Meredith went on to graduate from the University of Mississippi.

After graduation, he continued his civil rights activism. In June 1966, in order to promote voter registration among African Americans, Meredith planned a one-man "March Against Fear" from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi. He hoped to show that if he could walk alone and unharmed through the state of Mississippi, his fellow African Americans could vote without fearing retribution. Just 20 miles into his walk, he was shot in the leg by a sniper. Meredith's cause, however, was not lost as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and dozens of other supporters completed the march in his place. It was during this march that a young Stokely Carmichael first used the term "black power" as a rallying cry in a roadside speech.

James Meredith's personal story of courage and perseverance is perhaps best captured in his own words. In a letter he wrote to Robert Kennedy after graduating from Ole Miss, Meredith said: "I believe that I echo the feeling of most Americans when I say that 'no price is too high to pay for freedom of person, equality of opportunity, and human dignity.'"

**Teaching Activities**

1. Ask students to what extent they believe that racial discrimination still exists in this country. Have students identify the basis for any acts of discrimination (e.g., gender, age, religion, or modes of dress.).

2. Distribute copies to students of Meredith's letter to the Justice Department. Ask students to read the letter in order to gain an understanding of Meredith's background and the man himself. Direct student attention to the reference in the letter about an essay that Meredith wrote in high school titled, "Why I am Proud to Be an American." Ask students to write a three to five paragraph essay on this topic as they imagine Meredith may have written it, based on Meredith's experiences as described in his letter, and based on their knowledge of the African American experience of the early 1960s in general.

3. In the next to last paragraph of Meredith's letter to the Justice Department, he states, "the power and influence of the federal government should be used where necessary to insure compliance with the laws." Ask students to brainstorm what types of laws Meredith is referring to in this quote. Then assign students to work in groups to research specific laws and produce charts that identify the following information about each law: a) name of law, b) date law was passed, c) historical context of law, and d) content of law as it relates to Meredith's situation.

4. As a means of understanding attitudes that were prevalent among Southerners in 1961, have students compose one of the following letters: a) assume the identity of Dean Arthur Lewis and write a letter of response to Meredith's admission application explaining why it would be in...
Meredith’s best interest not to pursue his application to the University of Mississippi; or b) assume the identity of a private citizen and write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper in support of Meredith’s admission to the university providing specific rationale for his admittance.

5. Offer students the opportunity to conduct further research into the life of James Meredith, including more recent activities or activism. From today’s vantage point, ask students to predict how Meredith would respond to the question, What are the biggest civil rights issues still facing African Americans today?

6. Ask students to compare James Meredith’s admission to Ole Miss with two other landmarks in United States school integration: Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954) and the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas (1957). What are similarities and differences with the people involved? Public reaction? Levels of government involvement? Long-term effects?

7. During his career, James Meredith worked with two other civil rights leaders, Thurgood Marshall and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Have students work in pairs to research the contributions of these two men, then compose a fictional dialogue between them concerning the relative successes and failures of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s.

8. Encourage students to visit the National Archival Information Locator website at www.nara.gov (key words: James Meredith) where they can explore other primary sources relating to Meredith’s admission to Ole Miss (e.g., correspondence between Meredith and university personnel, transcripts of telephone conversations between Governor Barnett and President Kennedy, or eye witness accounts of the campus riots).

Source of Document
James Meredith’s letter to the U.S. Justice Department was obtained from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum website at www.jfklibrary.org.

Notes
1. James Meredith, Three Years in Mississippi (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1966), 51.
2. Ibid., 57.
4. Meredith, 71.
6. Constitution of the United States of America, 10th Amendment.
8. Ibid., 199.
9. Ibid., 156.
11. Motley, 186.

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