

the tip-off

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THE MURDER OF the three young men in Mississippi follows the same pattern of racist dehumanization we have seen before and since. A group of men, some of them in responsible positions, deliberately planned and coldly executed these murders. They even added the usual sadistic fillip of beating the Negro member of the trio.

Not all of it can be told yet. Much cannot be told, because other men, equally dehumanized by racism would kill again in reprisal, blindly, senselessly. We are counting human lives now.

Last year in Mississippi alone we had sixty-nine atrocities that we know about. Fifty-five bombings have occurred in Alabama. Now an average of two churches a month are destroyed in Mississippi, and there have been only occasional token arrests.

These killings and burnings are not isolated accidents. They are the products of generations of racism. They flourish in the climate of permissive violence.

In Negroes' homes one hears the talk. Men are shot and coroners call it death by heart failure. Men are found dead beside roads and police call them victims of hit-and-run drivers. Always Negroes are the victims of these gunpowder heart failures and hit-and-run drivers. But just telling it isn't enough. You have to be in these homes, see the faces ravaged with grief, hear the peculiar deadness of voices as when a young lady said, "We couldn't even count the bullet holes in my brother's head -- but they called it heart failure."

How many of these killings can be checked out? Who checks them out? Negroes will not talk to strangers. Reprisals come too easily. It has to be someone Negroes know and trust: a James Farmer, Dick Gregory. You have to run in and work fast because these are police states. The police soon get on your tail and then harass anyone you visit. The police are part of the racist Establishment. It is difficult to present evidence, because someone with a name gave you the evidence. He will be killed if you leave any trace that can lead back to him. Perhaps others bearing his name will be killed. A young doctor in an Alabama hospital warned a new hospital patient: "Gibbs? Are you related to the Gibbs? In this town we kill any nigger that's got that name."

But some of us try to check them out and document them. One or another of us runs into the "bad areas" whenever an atrocity occurs. At best though, we do not cover more than ten percent. We do this because local authorities and newspapers either ignore the events or distort facts beyond recognition

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WE SAT AT A side table in a San Francisco night club, "The Hungry i" when Dick Gregory was fulfilling an engagement. I had just seen him perform, sitting on a stool under the spotlight.

Now he leaned across the table in another room, a different man, his eyes softened by the anguish of our subject. I was going into Mississippi to see about the three missing students. Dick Gregory had just come from there. He knew already that the three young men were dead, that they had been killed within 24 hours after the police picked them up in Philadelphia, Mississippi. He whispered rapidly. "Take these phone numbers. If you make it to Meridian go to a pay phone and call. When they answer, tell them you want to thank them for sending the camera. That way they'll know you've been with me."

The cave-like odor of the underground room surrounded us as we discussed ways of getting in to Meridian without the usual police harassment. The message needed to be taken. There was at least one witness in hiding. We could not telephone long distance because operators simply listen in and then tell anything of importance. Mr. Gregory told me of the disguises he used to go in. I think few people in this land realize how difficult it is to circulate in a police state.

"At least try to get them the name of the tip-off man," he urged. "He's trusted. He mustn't find out anything more. He's the one who telephoned to Philadelphia and told the police the three were on their way and to pick them up."

The picture came clearer as I listened. This killing had been carefully planned. Men in America had met together and decided to take lives -- two whites and one Negro this time.

A waiter approached. Mr. Gregory waved him away.

"But how're you going to get in, baby?"

"God knows," I sighed. "The last few times I went in, the police were following me after only a few hours."

"They're checking everybody now. Why don't you go to Memphis -- get a car. Wear that black suit you got on. They might figure you for a Justice Department man."

"Yes, but if they should start quizzing me, I'd let the cat out of the bag. I never can think up plausible answers. I've got friends in New Orleans. I think I'll go there. Maybe I can get Jack S. to go in. He's got a valid reason for traveling in Mississippi. We'll figure something."

"Well, if you go from New Orleans, be sure you've got enough gas to get to Meridian. If you stop for gas on the way, the filling-station people are likely to start quizzing you. If you can't give good answers, they'll telephone your license to the Highway Patrol. If the police start following you, might as well give up and get out."

"You're sure they're dead?" I asked, hoping he might have some doubt.

"They were dead by two that first morning," he said.

"Bastards," I groaned.

"Chaney got it worse. They tore him up."

MR. GREGORY'S eyes were red-rimmed as though he had not slept. I sensed in him the same burden of disbelief and despair that I have felt so often these last years. I wondered how he could control himself sufficiently to make any attempt at humorous performances so long as he possessed his tragic knowledge.

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Every trip into Mississippi is filled with tension and fear. But this one approached terror for me. I was certain I would not succeed, filled with the premonition that I would never reach my goal. And yet human lives depended on it. The word had got out that if the police picked up Dick Gregory, he was not to live. The same probably held for anyone else in those days of explosive tension. I was known and loathed in the area, and I have recently on national television called for a federal take-over of police departments in Mississippi, so my face had been seen and I risked being recognized. As I moved through the darkness I felt the same sickness of terror that I had felt in Nazi Germany in 1939 when I worked to smuggle Jewish refugees out. The surrounding evil then and now was too great. It had corrupted too many men's hearts.

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On Wednesday, I was able to telephone that the word had been carried. The endangered lives of some were temporarily safe-guarded. The tip-off man would never again be trusted.

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