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CRUCIBLE OF CONSCIENCE

DESEGREGATION'S TRIAL BY FIRE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI BY JOE FLANAGAN

On the day after President John F. Kennedy's inauguration, James Meredith wrote to the University of Mississippi requesting an application. It was a seemingly mundane transaction. But as an African American in the Deep South of 1961, Meredith knew that applying to all-white Ole Miss was anything but. Nor was his timing arbitrary. He had been following the president's election campaign and was hopeful that the nation was, as Kennedy put it, ready to face a new frontier of unfulfilled hopes and dreams. Meredith's letter—in which he did not reveal his race—made its way to the university's administration building, an imposing Neoclassical Revival structure built in 1848. The Lyceum, as it is known, is perhaps the school's most prominent edifice, modeled after an Ionic temple near Athens, at the end of a long, straight drive framed by stately southern trees. When the staff sent Meredith an application form in January 1961, the first hint of a cataclysm stirred, one that would resurrect the ghosts of slavery and the Civil War, and cast a glaring light on the meaning of the Constitution, states' rights, and federal power. It would involve violence, racism, and death, and the Lyceum would be at its center.

LEFT: *U.S. marshals at the Lyceum, University of Mississippi, September 1962. Photographer Charles Moore was there when tensions boiled over at Ole Miss, a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement. The images he captured, shown here, were later published in Powerful Days: The Civil Rights Photography of Charles Moore.*

RECENTLY THE LYCEUM—ALONG WITH SEVERAL OTHER STRUCTURES AND AN AREA CALLED the Circle—became a national historic landmark because of what happened here. In 1961, though the Supreme Court had ruled segregation unconstitutional seven years earlier in *Brown v. Board of Education*, there were no integrated public schools in Mississippi. “Up until then,” says Jennifer Baughn of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, “[the state] was still actively resisting integration by building new black schools.” It was an attempt to placate the federal government and keep the races apart at the same time. “Massive amounts of money went into this . . . well after *Brown*.” According to Ted Ownby, director of the University of Mississippi’s Center for the Study of Southern Culture, “The university seemed to represent all white education in the state of Mississippi.”

James Meredith expected trouble. Before sending in his application, he spoke with Medgar Evers, Mississippi field secretary for the NAACP, who suggested he contact Thurgood Marshall, then director

mentioned in previous correspondence. It was an old tactic that usually worked. The South’s response to school desegregation in the 1950s and early ’60s took many forms, from delaying tactics to outright defiance. Likened to a counterinsurgency, historians call it “massive resistance.” In 1957, *Brown v. Board* was tested during the crisis at Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas, where federal troops were called in to maintain order as nine African American students attended for the first time. Opposition remained strong in the South, however, and through a variety of methods students were discouraged from crossing the color line.

MEREDITH WAS ONE OF THIRTEEN CHILDREN, RAISED POOR ON A MISSISSIPPI FARM. He served nine years in the Air Force before returning home with a quiet determination to defeat the racism that seemed to be taken for granted. With the help of the NAACP, Meredith took the university to court, claiming he had been rejected based on race. In early 1962, a U.S. District Court ruled against him. That summer, county authorities filed charges against Meredith for voter registration fraud, asserting he falsified his residence.

Whether he knew it or not, Meredith was about to become the center of a storm. The events that followed would affect the country profoundly. Asked about their significance to the Civil Rights Movement, Ownby points out Meredith’s solitary resolve. “The desegregation of the University of Mississippi was not a central concern for a whole lot of civil rights activists,” he says. “[It] was not something that these organizations plotted strategies for.” Meredith’s motivation was personal, though extremely powerful. “He believed he had fought for what Americans should expect from their country,” says Ownby. “He’s a native Mississippian and he felt that he deserved the best education the state [could offer].” However, says Ownby, “He knew he was more or less on his own.”



WHEN THE STAFF SENT MEREDITH AN APPLICATION FORM IN JANUARY 1961, THE FIRST HINT OF A

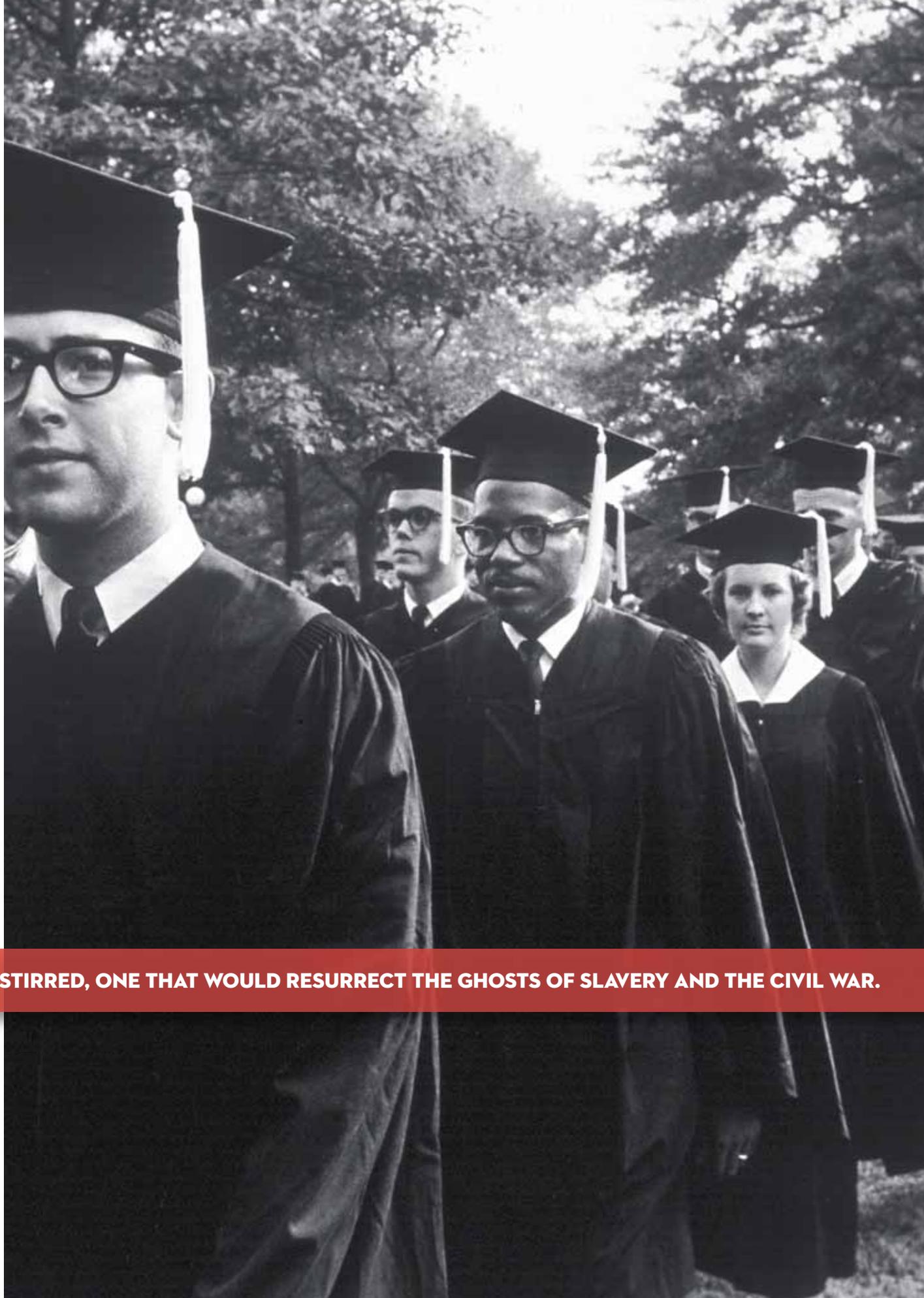
ABOVE: Ole Miss students. “Beer drinking college kids,” Moore recalls in *Powerful Days*. “I could tell by the way they were looking that . . . it was going to get bad.” **RIGHT:** James Meredith on graduation day.

of the organization’s Legal Defense and Education Fund. “I anticipate encountering some type of difficulty with the various agencies here in the state,” Meredith wrote, and asked for legal assistance if it became necessary. With his application to Ole Miss, he included a letter to the registrar, identifying himself as an “American-Mississippi-Negro citizen.” He sounded a hopeful note: “With all of the . . . changes in our old educational system taking place in this new age, I feel certain that this application does not come as a surprise to you.”

If the application was a surprise, the response was not. The university informed him that he had missed the deadline, which had never been

Meredith brought his case to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, which decided that the school had, in fact, rejected him on the basis of race. This ignited a controversy within the court itself. Judge Benjamin Franklin Cameron ordered a stay, stopping any further developments until the Supreme Court could review the case. His colleagues on the court vacated the stay only to have Cameron reinstate it, a process that was repeated three times. At this point, the U.S. Department of Justice stepped in, asking the Supreme Court to resolve the matter once and for all. In June, it ordered the university to admit Meredith.

The Old South was about to collide with the New Frontier. According to the history that informs the national historic landmark nomination, “the machinery of massive resistance was gearing up for battle.” Mississippi governor Ross Barnett, who had campaigned on segregation,



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went on television to declare his defiance of the federal government. “Even now,” he said, “as I speak to you tonight, professional agitators and the unfriendly liberal press and other trouble makers are pouring across our borders.” He invoked the sovereignty of the state, with impassioned references to principle, honor, and tradition that evoked a South besieged: “It is now upon us. This is the day, and this is the hour.” According to historian Gene Ford, who wrote the Lyceum nomination, the site—and what happened there—represent a critical time. “It’s the moment where the Kennedys are drawn in,” he says, the “flashpoint” where they had no choice but to act.

U.S. MARSHALS WERE GIVEN THE WORD TO PREPARE FOR TROUBLE AS ATTORNEY GENERAL

Robert F. Kennedy called Governor Barnett. In the meantime, Meredith was tried in absentia, convicted, and briefly jailed for the voter registration charge. The Mississippi legislature quickly adopted a law denying entry into a state school to anyone convicted of a criminal offense. The university gave Governor Barnett full powers as registrar.

Accompanied by a group of U.S. marshals, Meredith made his first attempt to register. Barnett blocked his way. The federal district court cited the school’s board of trustees with contempt, along with a handful of top officials. They agreed to allow Meredith to register. But when he showed up a second time, Barnett blocked him once again. The court cited the governor for contempt. On Meredith’s third try, Lieutenant Governor Paul B. Johnson refused him, and the court cited him, too. Emotions were running high under the glare of the national spotlight. It was evident to both sides that events could go out of control. Thus began a series of clandestine calls between Governor Barnett, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and the president. Anxious to avoid another spectacle like Little Rock, the president, says Ford, “was trying to walk a tightrope between ensuring peoples’ civil rights and not offending Southern politicians, both of which he dearly needed for reelection. His brother Robert was more outspoken.” Finally, the White House had enough of Barnett’s stonewalling and evasive tactics. The president issued an executive order demanding that the government and people of Mississippi stop their interference and comply with the court order.

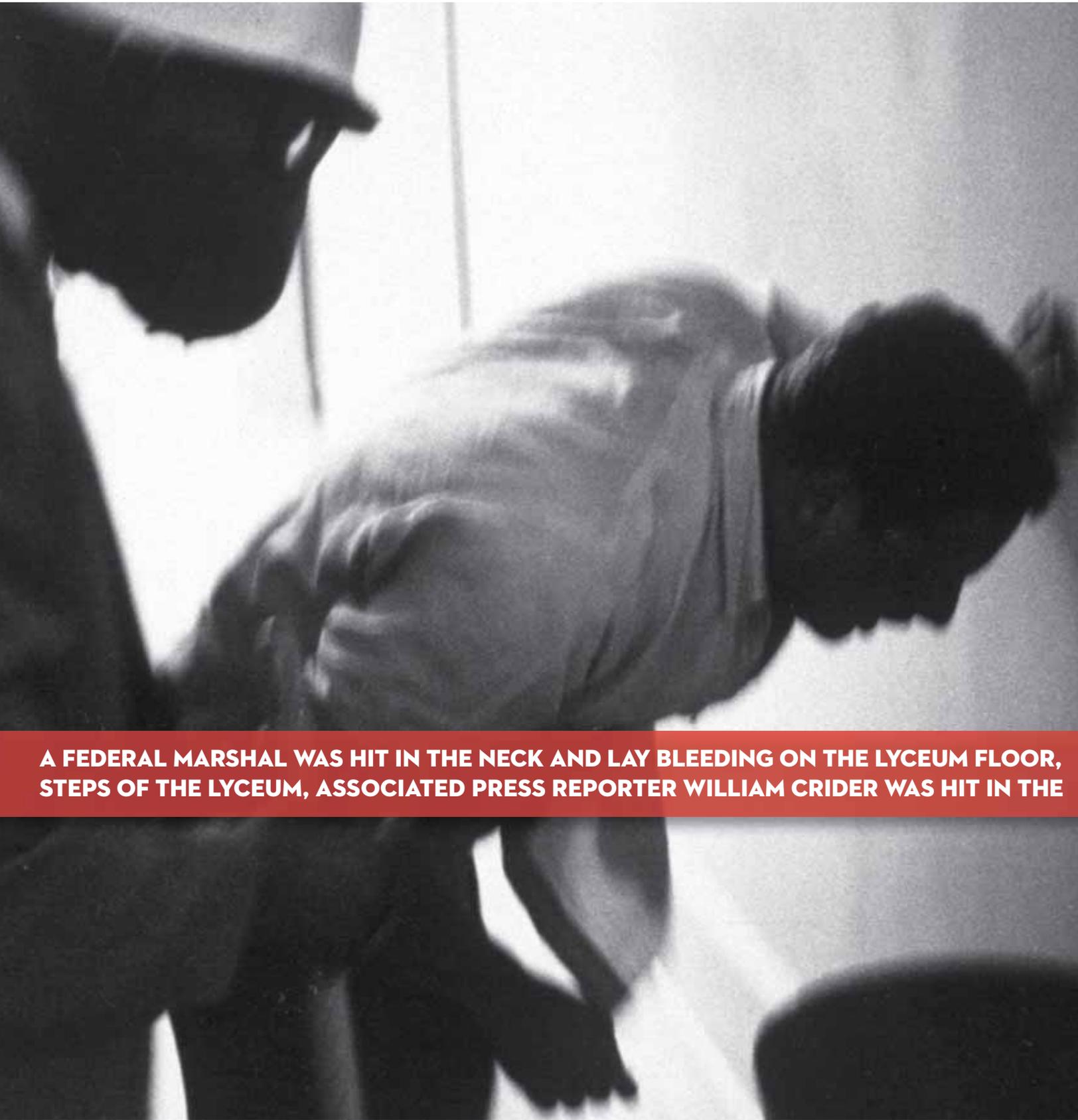
The following day, September 30, 1962, the president mobilized the National Guard, and Meredith arrived with federal marshals in a seven-truck convoy. Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach and a team from the Justice Department were also there. The marshals took up position in riot gear outside the Lyceum. As news of the federal invasion spread, crowds swarmed to the campus, along with the media. By

RIGHT: “They were talking about what they’re going to do to the U.S. marshals,” photographer Moore said of this gathering of local lawmen, “laughing and showing how they would take care of them.” On assignment for Life, Moore smuggled his cameras on campus in the trunk of a Volkswagen Beetle. He feigned illness to get inside the Lyceum, saying he had to use the bathroom. In the ensuing riot, federal marshals forgot he was there.



**PROFESSIONAL AGITATORS AND THE UNFRIENDLY LIBERAL PRESS AND OTHER TROUBLE
ACROSS OUR BORDERS. —SEGREGATIONIST GOVERNOR ROSS BARNETT ADDRESSING HIS STATE ON TV**





A FEDERAL MARSHAL WAS HIT IN THE NECK AND LAY BLEEDING ON THE LYCEUM FLOOR, STEPS OF THE LYCEUM, ASSOCIATED PRESS REPORTER WILLIAM CRIDER WAS HIT IN THE



LEFT: An arrested rioter gags from tear gas. **ABOVE:** U.S. marshals, assigned to enforce the Supreme Court's desegregation ruling, take the brunt of the rioters' abuse.

evening, the marshals faced nearly 2,000 angry demonstrators. Though the state police had ostensibly blocked access to the campus, the crowd continued to grow, bolstered by thugs and hardcore racists. The mob surged toward the white columns of the Lyceum, hurling rocks at marshals and journalists, among them *Life* photographer Charles Moore, whose images are shown here. To get access inside the building, Moore told the marshals he was sick and needed to use the bathroom. As the riot intensified, they forgot all about him.

The president went on national television. "Mr. James Meredith is now in residence on the campus of the University of Mississippi," he announced. He did not know what was happening at that moment: the crowd had set fire to the marshals' trucks and was attacking with pipes and bottles. The marshals responded with tear gas as the state police started to pull out. Robert Kennedy threatened

CLOSE TO DEATH, UNTIL THEY MANAGED TO GET HIM EVACUATED. STANDING ON THE BACK, THEN DRAGGED INSIDE, WHERE HE CONTINUED TO INTERVIEW PEOPLE.

to reveal Barnett's behind-the-scenes dealings if he didn't call them back. Meanwhile, the Circle had become a battleground. It was dark, and clouds of tear gas drifted over the campus. Burning cars lit the night. Rioters hurled acid at the marshals—which they got by breaking into the chemistry building—along with bricks and other objects from a construction site. The marshals forced them back, but they counterattacked. Inside the Lyceum, exhausted, injured men lay in the hallways and sat slumped against the walls. The ladies' bathroom was converted to a first aid station. Moore's photographs capture the scene, the mist-filled air suffused with a dull glow from the Lyceum's hall lights.

TRAPPED INSIDE, DEPUTY ATTORNEY GENERAL KATZENBACH UPDATED ROBERT KENNEDY ON THE PHONE AS THE CROWD tossed Molotov cocktails. The sound of gunfire suddenly pierced the din. French journalist Paul Guillard was shot in the back at close range and killed. A federal marshal was hit in the neck and lay bleeding on the Lyceum floor, close to death, until they managed to get him evacuated. Standing on the steps of the Lyceum, Associated Press reporter William Crider was hit in the back, then dragged inside, where he continued to interview people. Local jukebox repairman Ray Gunter was shot in the head and killed.



BY MIDNIGHT, DEPUTY ATTORNEY GENERAL KATZENBACH WAS AGAIN PLEADING FOR HELP.

ABOVE: Segregationists rally in Jackson, the state capital. **RIGHT:** The day after the riot, James Meredith is escorted to register by Chief U.S. Marshall James McShane and Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights John Doar.

Katzenbach called the president for help. Kennedy dispatched a convoy of National Guard troops, which was pelted by rocks, bricks, boards, and bottles as it crossed campus. The troops took position with the marshals but there was little tear gas left. Rioters blasted the federal forces with water from a fire truck they commandeered from the campus firehouse, and attempted to rush them with a hotwired bulldozer. Both vehicles were subdued with gunfire, but at about 9 p.m. the state police pulled out.

By midnight, Deputy Attorney General Katzenbach was again pleading for help. "We can hold out for another 15 or 20 minutes," he said. "Just get in here." Snipers were attacking from the adjacent rooftops now. A reporter for *Newsweek* likened it to the Alamo. U.S. Army troops were flown in from a base in Memphis, and in the wee hours of the morning their trucks could be heard grinding their way toward campus. With fixed bayonets, they rushed the crowd. National Guard units continued to arrive, and by 6 a.m. the fight was over.

THE EVENTS MARKED THE CRITICAL POINT WHEN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT THREW its full weight behind desegregation. "They either had to become pro-civil rights or civil rights were never going to happen," says Ford. The following year, two more African Americans, James Hood and Vivian Malone, attempted to enroll at the University of Alabama, and Governor George Wallace stood in the doorway of Foster Auditorium, now also a national historic landmark. "I don't think the Kennedy administration had any idea how resistant to this process the South was," says Ford, "but I think Ole Miss gave them their first real insight into that. Well before James Hood and Vivian Malone started advancing toward their date with history, Kennedy was working with Wallace to stave off another Oxford." The applicants ultimately gained entry, but not without struggle. Integration would be a long and slow process, but there was a growing sense that resistance was a lost cause.

James Meredith graduated and went on to study law at Columbia. Although he attended a 40th anniversary commemoration given by Ole Miss in 2002, he has distanced himself from the Civil Rights Movement and maintains he did not act on its behalf. Says Ownby, "Historians have been trying to get away from [the idea] of single heroes and leaders and instead see civil rights activism as a series of lots of local movements, unseen movements . . . Meredith stands out as an iconoclast, someone who was willing to do something that drew extraordinary attention."

contact points **web** National Historic Landmarks Program www.nps.gov/history/nhl/ NPS Discover Our Shared Heritage Civil Rights Travel Itinerary www.nps.gov/nr/travel/civilrights NPS Teaching with Historic Places Civil Rights Lesson Plan www.nps.gov/history/nr/twhp/topic.htm



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