

FIRST WORD

BY ALFERDTEEN HARRISON

A Galvanizing Moment

LIKE OPPRESSED PEOPLE SINCE THE BEGINNING OF HUMAN HISTORY, African Americans have responded to hardship through a combination of resistance and adjustment. It is an important theme in the experience of American democracy, the quest for equality in the face of institutionalized racism. This is most clearly seen in the era of the “separate but equal doctrine,” when segregation was officially sanctioned by the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896. **WHILE “SEPARATE BUT EQUAL” SET THE TONE** of race relations for the next six decades, it also set into motion a slowly moving train of events that led to a night in 1962, when U.S. marshals stood besieged by rioters on the steps of a white-columned building on the campus of a southern university. Sequestered in a nearby dorm was James Meredith, an African American from Mississippi who had the temerity to apply for admission to Ole Miss. **HAVING GROWN UP IN MISSISSIPPI** and attended the segregated Piney Woods School, I understood white racial attitudes of the oppressive 1950s. Had I been aware of Meredith’s intentions, my reaction would have been great fear for his safety. I would have wondered why he was not satisfied attending Jackson State College. In those days, if African Americans wanted degrees in disciplines not offered at an historically black college, Mississippi often paid for them to attend a college outside the state, rather than allow them to enroll at a college meant for whites. Meredith’s position was that this practice denied him his rights as a citizen of Mississippi. **SINCE READING HIS 1961 LETTER** to the U. S. Justice Department, I understand his motivation in wanting to secure the best education in his home state. He wrote, “To be in an oppressed situation is not 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.” **BY THE 1930S, WHEN JAMES MEREDITH AND I WERE BORN**, many African Americans had been acculturated to take pride in the institutions of their segregated communities. Even though these institutions did not have adequate funding, they engendered in their students pride, self-confidence, hope, and the expectation of a better future. While we were taught that segregation was the law of the land, we were also taught that it was contrary to the 14th Amendment of the U. S. Constitution. Furthermore, we were advised to prepare for the change that was coming. **THE SEE-SAWING OF EVENTS DURING THAT TIME** made it seem there would be no change in Mississippi. The emergence in 1954 of a supremacist group called the White Citizens Council, and the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, told us that if we forgot our “place,” we could disappear or be murdered. But news of the Montgomery bus boycott was a sign that change could come. The formation of the Mis-

issippi Sovereignty Commission in 1956—intended to preserve the racial status quo—signaled that change would be difficult, but President Eisenhower’s decision to send in the troops at Little Rock’s Central High gave reason for hope. **IN 1957, I WAS ON MY WAY HOME ON CHRISTMAS BREAK** from college in Kansas, happy to ride wherever I chose, when I forgot that the bus had crossed into Mississippi. The driver announced that, by law, Negroes had to sit in the back of the bus, repeating it several times. I hesitated, looking at the empty seats in front of me as the driver threatened to throw off those who did not comply. When I looked back, an elderly man motioned for me to sit with him. He reminded me that oppression was still alive and well in my home state and asked not to give “those people” a reason to do harm. The incident would linger in my mind during future visits home. **MEREDITH’S DECISION TO CONFRONT THIS OPPRESSION** effectively forced the hand of the Justice Department, compelling its involvement in crucial battles to come. His defiance also encouraged an increasingly savvy NAACP to intervene,

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and continued to pursue change elsewhere. Primarily under the leadership of head counsel Thurgood Marshall, the group won legal decisions that led to integrating higher education in Missouri, Maryland, Texas, and Oklahoma. Today, a group of national historic landmarks honors these cases: Oklahoma University’s Bizzell Memorial Library, the University of Alabama’s Foster Auditorium, and the Ole Miss Lyceum-Circle Historic District. **THE LYCEUM’S LANDMARK DESIGNATION** recognizes the tragic events surrounding Meredith’s decision, but also memorializes a turning point in the fight for desegregation. That night in 1962 propelled us closer to the end of a decade of struggle. Alone, with no assurance of the outcome, Meredith forced the nation to take a stand. In the space of time between “separate but equal” and the 1964 Civil Rights Act, it was a galvanizing moment, one whose message—despite the shock and the ugliness—was hope.

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