

"I'll Know Victory or Defeat"

By JAMES H. MEREDITH

If you asked me when it all began—what brought me to the campus in Oxford that first week in October—I guess I would say it began when I was a boy in Kosciusko, up in the hill country of Mississippi, where I was born. I used to lie in bed and dream about a city—I didn't know what city or where it was—I just knew it would be different from Kosciusko, because I didn't like the way things were there.

Kosciusko isn't altogether typical of Mississippi, I would say. It is an area of small farms, and most of the farmers, Negro and white, own their own places. I think the Negroes there might be a little more progressive than in some other parts of the state. Some Negroes there—my father, for example—have been voting for as long as I know of. I think you'll find that many progressive Negroes come from an area like this, where they own their own land. Still, I certainly can't say I liked it in Kosciusko. They tell me I was always strong on the race issue when I was young. For example, I remember a wealthy white man who used to go around town handing out nickles and dimes to Negro children. I never would take any.

In Kosciusko I grew up between things. Part of my family was much older than I was, and part was much younger. It was like being an only child. I really only got to know my brothers and sisters later. Also, I lived in the country and went to school in town. In small towns in the South you're either a "city boy" or a "country boy," but I wasn't either. I got used to taking care of things by myself.

When I was 16 I left Kosciusko to finish my last year of high school in St. Petersburg, Florida. I had a desire to go to a better school, and I had an uncle and a sister living there. I graduated from high school in June of 1951 and enlisted in the Air Force the next month. I had a brother in the Air Force, but that wasn't the reason I joined. It was common knowledge among Negroes that the Air Force was a better branch of service for them.

Influence of Air Force Duty

Certainly my Air Force days were the most influential time of my life. I served in nothing but integrated units. It seems to me the integration of the armed forces is one of the most important things that has happened to the Negro in the United States. For that reason, I thought it was particularly unfortunate that the Army apparently resegregated its units in Oxford after the night of campus rioting. If Negroes could fight side by side with whites around the world, they should be able to serve with them in Mississippi.

I never had any "bad" incidents when I was in the Air Force. There were occasional small things, reminders that a Negro was a Negro. I remember when I was in basic training at Sampson Air Force Base in New York State, all of us were invited to spend weekends with families in Syracuse. I spent a weekend with a white family there, and they were very nice, but they kept reminding me in subtle ways that they were being unusually

nice—in other words, they didn't have to do this; it was just a favor. There is always that air of difference about being a Negro that you can never quite touch.

But life was pretty good in the Air Force. As I say, I served in nothing but integrated units, and everything was OK as far as promotions went too. I remember very well one particular hearing for promotion, when I was up for staff sergeant. I was to go before a board of three colonels. Usually they question you about your qualifications and try to decide whether or not you can take on the responsibilities of the next rank. I came up before the board just two months after the Supreme Court school-desegregation decision in 1954, and they didn't ask me anything about my qualifications. All they asked about was my opinion of the decision, what my family thought about it, and all that. Well, I told them. I'll always remember that when it was over and I had made staff sergeant, they told me they were with me in the struggle but that "the outcome will depend on you." I took that "you" to mean Negroes, all Negroes, and I guess it has been sort of a badge of responsibility ever since.

"Look in a Mirror to Remember"

In 1955 I reenlisted. I always had it in mind to come back to Mississippi and study law, but I didn't think I was ready then for the responsibilities I would have to face, so I reenlisted. I was in Japan from 1957 till 1960, and there isn't any doubt that this was the settling-down point for me. I decided not only what I wanted to do, which I have known for a long time in a vague way, but how to go about doing it.

Being in Japan was an amazing experience. Negroes say, "When you're in Japan you have to look in a mirror to remember you're a Negro," and it's true. Japan is the only place where I have not felt the "air of difference."

I was surprised that the Japanese people were so aware of the racial situation in America. For instance, I met a boy—I don't suppose he was more than 12 or 13—and he knew more about Little Rock than most American kids that age. He was amazed when I told him I was from Mississippi and that I intended to go back. This kind of reaction further convinced me that I would go back to Mississippi and try to improve these conditions. I was discharged in July, 1960, and by the end of the month I was back in Kosciusko.

I entered Jackson State College, a Negro school in Jackson, and quickly met other students who felt as I did—that Negroes in Mississippi did not have the rights of full citizens, including the right to the best education the state offered. Someone had to seek admission to the University of Mississippi, and I decided to do it. But there were many of us involved. Although the lawsuit was mine, the others were with me, and I sought their advice on every move I made.

As soon as I filed application for admission, I contacted Medgar Evers, Mississippi field secre-

tary for the N.A.A.C.P., and through him I asked for N.A.A.C.P. legal aid. Mrs. Constance Motley, associate counsel of the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense Fund, came to my assistance. The N.A.A.C.P. was prompt and efficient, and that was of prime importance. There was a great morale factor here, and every time we called them, they were there.

The court fight was long, and there were times when I wondered if it would be successful. I kept winning in court, but I didn't get any nearer to the university. Finally, after the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals had said I should be registered, I felt the responsibility was the Federal Government's; it was out of my hands to do anything.

People have asked me if I wasn't terribly afraid the night we went to Oxford. No, my apprehensions came a long time before that. The hardest thing in human nature is to decide to act. I was doing all right in the Air Force. I got married in 1956, and my wife was able to work as a civil servant on the same bases where I was stationed. I had to give this up, this established way of things, this status, and try something new and unknown. That's where the big decision was—not here, last month, but there, a couple of years ago. Once I made that decision, things just had to happen the way they happened.

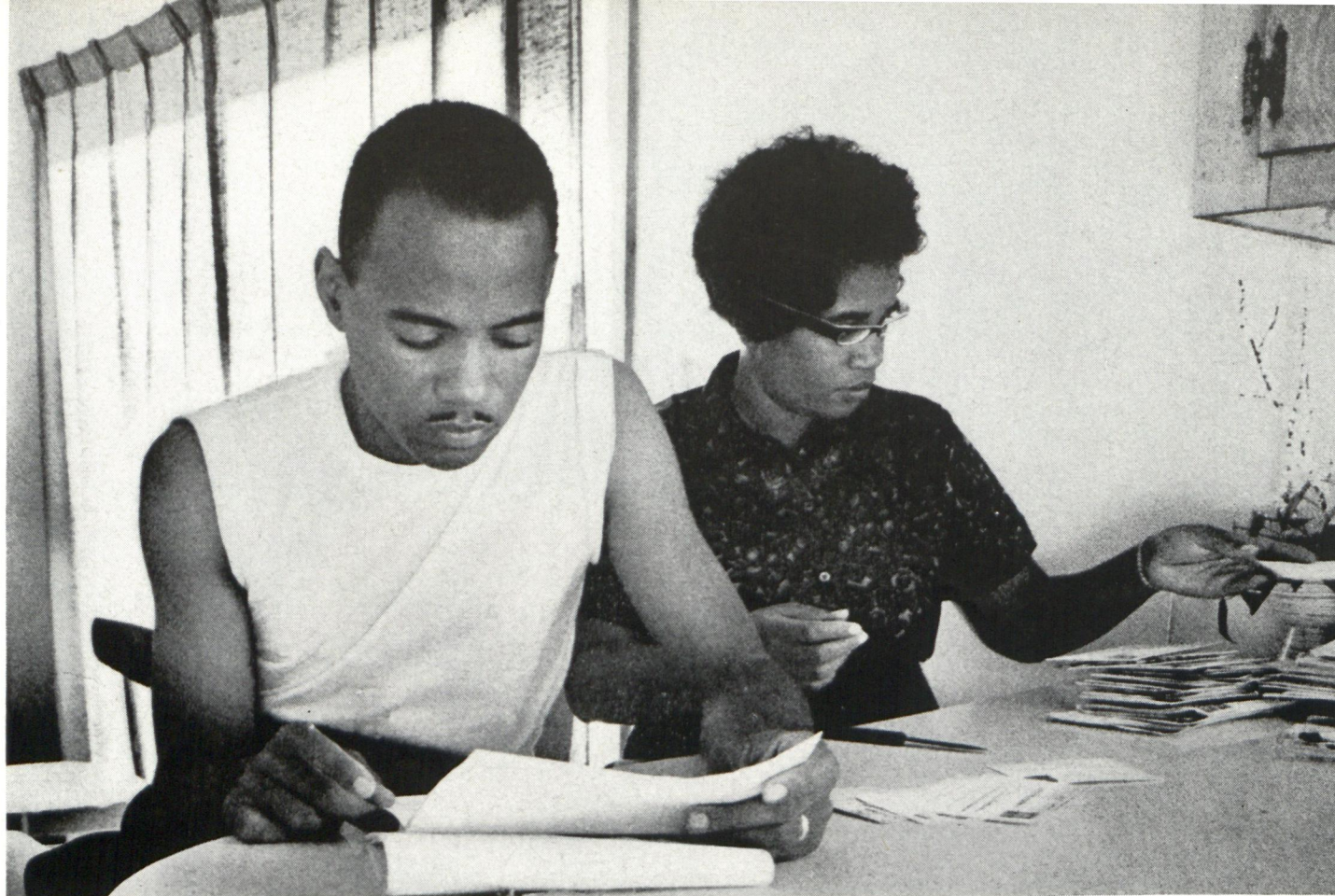
I think maybe a quote from Theodore Roosevelt that I read somewhere was more important than anything else in helping me make this decision. I think I read it around 1952, and I clipped it out, and everywhere I've gone since then—every place I've lived or everywhere I've worked—I have put that saying in front of me. I guess I must have read it two or three thousand times by now. It says, "It is not the critic who counts. . . . The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood. . . . who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place will never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat." At different times different parts of that quotation have been important to me, but when I made the decision to return to Mississippi and later to enroll at the university, the part I kept seeing was the part about "cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat." I didn't want to be one of those.

Fear Is Just Another Obstacle

As far as fear of death or personal injury goes—and I consider this most important for everybody to understand—I put death or the fear of getting hurt in the same category with legal objections to my entering the university, or moral objections, or objections on grounds of custom. They are all on the same level. They are all just ways to keep me out of the university, and no one is any more important than any other. It wouldn't matter if I stumbled and fell and couldn't go to classes or whether I cut my finger and couldn't write for a month or whether I was shot and killed—they're

Author Meredith: "They tell me I was always strong on the race issue when I was young."





With his wife, Mary June, in the kitchen of a friend's home at Jackson, Meredith pores over the letters and telegrams which have deluged him. Most support his cause; a few threaten his life.

all just things in my way. I might do quite a bit to put a stop to the act of being killed. I have done this several times already—I've taken the advice of the Federal marshals on several occasions, for instance. But this was because, if something happened to me, it would have put everything back as far as the Negroes in Mississippi are concerned. If I have lost an hour's sleep in recent weeks, it has been over some philosophical point, or through apprehension of not succeeding in entering the university, and of discouraging others from trying if I failed, but not over what might happen to me personally.

I was sure that if I were harmed or killed, somebody else would take my place one day. I would hate to think another Negro would have to go through that ordeal, but I would hate worse to think there wouldn't be another who would do it.

I had an older brother who was scary as a boy. Back home he wouldn't go certain places after dark or walk here or there. I always walked wherever I wanted. I walked four miles to Scout meetings at night, and I always went through all the hollows and the places where you were supposed to be afraid to go. I must admit my hair has stood up on my head at times, but I never ran. They used to say, "If you see a 'hant' put your hand on it." Most of the time you find it isn't there. I think it's an utter waste of time to worry about dying. It's living that matters—doing something to justify being here on God's green earth. I do what I do because I must. I've never felt I had a choice. There is some urge that I can't explain easily—I guess that's as close as I can come to defining it.

There is something else here, too, and it's hard to say right. People can misunderstand it. But it's this—generally at home I was always thought to be pretty smart. I wasn't particularly proud of it; it was just almost a fact of life. There was an expectation or a more or less acknowledged fact that I was one of the sharpest in the group. I was a champion in my group in Mississippi, but then, when I went to Florida to change high schools, I wasn't a champion at all. I had to fight to keep up.

I hadn't been prepared. Since then, one of the biggest things in my life is that I have always felt I was never able to develop my talents. I have felt many times that, given the opportunity, I could develop into practically anything. Many times I have been angry at the world for not giving me an opportunity to develop. I am sure this has been a strong motivating force with me, and I'm sure it is with many Negroes. Since then I've always tried to see myself in relation to the whole society. Too many Negroes see themselves only in relation to other Negroes. But that's not good enough. We have to see ourselves in the whole society. If America isn't for everybody, it isn't America.

Through all that has happened I have tried to remain detached and objective. I have had all sorts of reactions to things that have happened, but mostly they have been personal reactions and realistic reactions, both at the same time. When I was in the middle of the force of marshals being gathered to take me to Oxford I thought, personally, how utterly ridiculous this was, what a terrible waste of time and money and energy, to iron out some rough spots in our civilization. But realistically I knew that these changes were necessary. I knew change was a threat to people and that they would fight it and that this was the only way it could be accomplished.

I have tried to be detached and realistic. When we were turned away the first time I tried to register at the university, and especially the second time, at the State Capitol in Jackson, I saw the mobs and heard them jeering, "Go home, nigger" and that stuff, but I never recognized them as individuals at all, even those who showed the greatest contempt for me. I felt they were not personally attacking me but that they were protesting a change and this was something they felt they must do. I thought it was impersonal. Some of them were crying, and their crying indicated to me even more the pain of change and the fear of things they did not know. I feel the people were keyed up by the actions of their leaders. With Gov. Ross Barnett taking the position he did, the people were bound to act that way, and it didn't

really have anything to do with me personally. That's the way I saw it.

I might add that I thought the governor put on a pretty good performance. The first time, when he turned us away at the university, he reminded me of Charlton Heston, I believe it was, in a movie about Andrew Jackson. Very dramatic.

I don't think I have had a real low point in recent weeks. It always seemed to me it was the Government's job to carry out the court order and it would be done. The most annoying time was when there was so much talk about a possible deal between the Federal Government and Governor Barnett. But when the Federal officers told me we were going that Sunday, just a few minutes before we took off for Oxford, the annoyance disappeared.

When we landed in Oxford it was almost dark. We got in a car and I remember seeing a truckload of marshals in front of us and one behind. I went straight to the university and was taken to my rooms—an apartment, I guess you could call it. Since they knew some Government men would be staying with me, I had two bedrooms and a living room and a bathroom. The first thing I did was make my bed. When the trouble started, I couldn't see or hear very much of it. Most of it was at the other end of the campus, and besides I didn't look out the window. I think I read a newspaper and went to bed around 10 o'clock. I was awakened several times in the night by the noise and shooting outside, but it wasn't near me, and I had no way of knowing what was going on. Some of the students in my dormitory banged their doors for a while and threw some bottles in the halls, but I slept pretty well all night.

I woke up about six-thirty in the morning and looked out and saw the troops. There was a slight smell of tear gas in my room, but I still didn't know what had gone on during the night, and I didn't find out until some marshals came and told me how many people were hurt and killed. I had gotten to know these marshals pretty well in recent weeks, and I was so sorry about this. Some supposedly responsible newspapermen asked me

"If I can't live in Mississippi, I very definitely intend to leave the country."



With his father, whom the author found a "progressive" example. Moses Meredith, 71, has voted for years though many other Negroes are barred from the polls.

if I thought attending the university was worth all this death and destruction. That really annoyed me. Of course I was sorry! I didn't want that sort of thing. I believe it could have been prevented by responsible political leaders. I understand the President and the attorney general were up most of the night. They had all the intelligence at their disposal, and I believe they handled it to the best of their knowledge and ability. I think it would have been much worse if we had waited any longer. Social change is a painful thing, but it depends on the people at the top. Here they were totally opposed—the state against the Federal Government. There was bound to be trouble, and there was trouble.

Monday morning at eight o'clock I registered, and at nine I went to a class in Colonial American History. I was a few minutes late, and I took a seat at the back of the room. The professor was lecturing on the background in England, conditions there at the time of the colonization of America, and he paid no special attention when I entered. I think there were about a dozen students in the class. One said hello to me, and the others were silent. I remember a girl—the only girl there, I think—and she was crying, but it might have been from the tear gas in the room. I was crying from it myself.

I had three classes scheduled that day. I went to two, and the third didn't meet because there was too much gas in the room. No marshals were in the classrooms with me, nor were they all week.

I have received hundreds of telegrams and more than 1,000 letters, most of them expressions of support. One guy sent me a piece of singed rope, and another sent a poem, I guess you'd have to call it:

*Roses are red, violets are blue;
I've killed one nigger and might as well make
it two.*

But most of the letters and telegrams have supported me, and some of them have been really touching—letters from 10- and 11-year-olds who

think I'm right and offer me their help and that sort of thing.

As far as my relations with the students go, I make it a practice to be courteous. I don't force myself on them, but that's not my nature anyway. Many of them—most, I'd say—have been courteous, and the faculty members certainly have been. When I hear the jeers and the catcalls—"We'll get you, nigger" and all that—I don't consider it personal. I get the idea people are just having a little fun. I think it's tragic that they have to have this kind of fun about me, but many of them are children of the men who lead Mississippi today, and I wouldn't expect them to act any other way. They have to act the way they do. I think I understand human nature enough to understand that.

It hasn't been all bad. Many students have spoken to me very pleasantly. They have stopped banging doors and throwing bottles into my dormitory now.

One day a fellow from my home town sat down at my table in the cafeteria. "If you're here to get an education, I'm for you," he said. "If you're here to cause trouble, I'm against you." That seemed fair enough to me.

Marshals Are a Distraction

I am taking five courses—Colonial American History; a political science course called American Political Parties, Theories and Pressure Groups; French literature; English literature; and algebra. I expect to be able to get my B.A. in history, with a minor in political science, in two semesters and one summer, if everything goes right.

I'm not sure what I will do in the future. A lot depends on how things go at the university. We are just at the beginning of a process of change in Mississippi. I would like to help that process along, and that probably would mean some kind of job in public life. Whether this will be possible in Mississippi or not we'll just have to wait to see. I do know this: If I can't live in Mississippi, I very definitely will leave the country.

If the decision is made to keep the marshals and troops on the campus until I complete my course, it is all right with me, but certainly I hope that won't be necessary. I think the marshals have been superb. They have had an image of America—that the law must be obeyed, no matter what they may think of it or what anybody else may think of it—but they are certainly a distraction on the campus. The thing that grieves me most about all this is that the students are not getting the best college results because they're spending too much time looking on at these various events involving me. I didn't get much studying done that first week, and I don't think anybody else did.

Personally the year will be a hardship for me. My wife will be in college in Jackson. Our son John Howard, who will be three in January, is living with my parents in Kosciusko. I expect to see them both very often, but I don't think families should live apart. On the other hand, this is nothing new to my wife. We spent most of our courtship discussing my plan to come back to Mississippi some day, and I guess you could say her understanding that I would try to do this sometime was almost part of the marriage contract. She has been truly marvelous through all of it. I called her three nights after the trouble, and she picked up the phone and was so calm you'd have thought we just finished a game of 500 rummy and she won. She's a remarkable woman.

I don't think this has had any effect on my family in Kosciusko. I have talked to my father. He asks me how I am, and I ask him how he is. He knows what I mean by the question, and I know what he means by the answer. That's the way it is in our family.

I don't pretend that all the problems are over. But, whatever the problems are, I don't expect them to be too much for me. Nobody really knows where his breaking point is, and I can't say I know where mine is. But I know one thing—in the past the Negro has not been allowed to receive the education he needs. If this is the way it must be accomplished, and I believe it is, then it is not too high a price to pay.

THE END



Rebel flags fluttered, but students were social rather than seething when they entrained for Jackson to see Ole Miss play a football game a few days after Meredith's enrollment. Back at the campus, the tough MP's had things well in hand.

