

Mississippi Report, August 1964

Good evening. As regular listeners to this program will have guessed, I am not Chet Huntley. I am not even Walter Cronkite. Hence, I am not gifted with that combination of instant profundity and unlimited foreknowledge which along would enable me to intelligently discuss the significant of the Mississippi seating fight which has gone on this past week, and which, as you heard on KFPA news, had just concluded when the Convention voted to seat with two Freedom Party members as delegates at large.

The results of the floor fight over Mississippi seating, the vice presidential nomination, the comments of President Johnson and his vice presidential nominee, the intransigence of [Mississippi] Governor Johnson – out of all this should come a coherent view of the achievements of the Freedom Party in crashing the doors of the Democratic National Convention. Suffice it so say that direct political action at the local level, combined with courage unprecedented, has shown itself vital and effective – when that courage and that action are harnessed to the just demands of people. I hope to devote next week's program to that issue.

This week, we turn to the white backlash – a most unfortunate metaphorical designation of a political phenomenon which, we are told, must regulate the decisions of liberal political figures and liberal political causes. By a magical chemistry, the aspirations of Mississippi Negroes at the convention are likewise viewed against the backlash. For, we are told, President Johnson cannot afford to lose all of the South, as he may not carry the white urban work force in a few key Northern states. That bloc of votes, we are told, may swing to Goldwater as part of the white backlash – and Johnson will need the solid – or almost solid – South.

Three weeks ago, a CBS correspondent told us that President Johnson carried in his pocket a poll which showed workers on one assembly line to be 50% for Goldwater. How the reporter got into the President's pocket is not known – perhaps he snuck into the locker room when the President and the rest of the press were out skinny-dipping in the White House pool in another of those aquatic press conferences.

Let us examine the precise meaning or meanings of "white backlash" and try to determine where it may be found. The term may refer to one of two things. First: to those white voters who normally vote Democratic but who have always been hostile to civil rights and who, therefore, are becoming alienated from the national Democratic party because of its professed and meagerly supported championship of civil rights. An example of this backlash and defection is shown in the poll reported by the New York Times, when in Chicago neighborhoods composed mostly of people of Polish Catholic backgrounds there was expressed hostility to President Johnson and friendliness to Senator Goldwater because of their respective stands on civil rights. The poll sample comprised people who usually vote Democratic. Other examples of this kind of "white backlash" are cited in the large percentages of the total vote gained by Alabama governor George Wallace in the several states in which he entered the primaries, and in the feared wholesale defection from the Democratic party by normally Democratic voters in Southern states.

A second kind of white backlash is the change in attitude among persons who consider themselves liberals but who have become frightened by Negro demands or encroachments in their Northern neighborhoods or schools. An example of this is the Parents and Taxpayers group in New York City or the Parents Association for Neighborhood Schools in Berkeley. The people in these organizations had no fault to find

with the Negro struggle for equal rights so long as it took place in Birmingham, Alabama, or Greenwood, Mississippi; but when the struggle extended itself to demanding equal schooling in fact as well as in law in New York or Berkeley, they suddenly became hostile. Whether persons who have in the past looked upon themselves as liberals will go so far as to vote for Senator Goldwater because of radical upsets in their own neighborhoods is an open question. It is also an open question whether such persons were Democratic liberals or even Eisenhower Republicans in the first place.

But let us look at a Lou Harris poll taken in October, 1963. That, of course, was before the assassination of President Kennedy forced many persons to take a more sober look at the results of hate propaganda on American life. At that time, only 23% of the white people nationwide objected to their children attending school with Negroes. When one considers that this figure includes a 55% objection from white Southerners, the importance of the white backlash in northern school desegregation shrinks considerably. An interesting fact is that even in the South, while 55% objected, 45% had no objection to their children attending interracial schools.

If these figures are accurate, white backlash, as a real, as opposed to mythical, phenomenon, may not exist at all. Those who are "backlashing," whether in Group I or Group II, may be people who always have been hard-core segregationists, whether northern or southern, but because segregation has not before been a national political issue, have never based their choice of Presidential candidates on race.

And there are some signs of an opposite reaction, one of greater and greater approval of and commitment to the Civil Rights Struggle. Right here in the Bay Area there is an ever increasing number of people who come in to the East Bay office of the Friends of SNCC asking what they can do to help; donations to the South this year are double what they were last year; 40,000 people marched in San Francisco last month to protest Barry Goldwater's becoming the Republican nominee because of his stand against Civil Rights; voter registration workers and "No on Prop. 13" workers are out into the California neighborhoods. Even Mr. Goldwater has evidently come to realize that not many friends are to be made by joining forces with anti-Negro fanaticism. After his vice-presidential running mate and the chairman of the Republican National Committee both stated publicly that they would not discourage support from the Ku Klux Klan, Mr. Goldwater found it advisable to state that he did not welcome such support.

People who in the past have been indifferent to civil rights have been shocked out that indifference by the murder of four Negro children in Birmingham, Alabama; by the murder of Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi; by the murder three Mississippi Summer Project workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi, by the murder of Lemuel Penn in Athens, Georgia; and by the attempted murder of Silas McGee in Mississippi nine days ago. Decent white people are more and more coming to realize that the words of the pledge of allegiance "with liberty and justice for all," with which most public school days begin, ring hollow when the sentence for murdering Negroes is a pat on the back from the local sheriff.

In view of all this why should anyone run scared because the words "white backlash" have been thrown up as a last line of defense in the battle. Perhaps, as we mentioned a little while back, Americans are beginning to base their party affiliation on that party's position on civil rights. We would say - that is a good thing. If as the Lou Harris poll we cited earlier finds, from 82 to 93% of Americans nationwide approve of: Negroes voting in elections, unrestricted use of buses and trains, greater job opportunities,

and decent housing – and even Southern approval of these rights never falls below 75%, why should the Democratic party fear any loss of votes for supporting these things? We don't suppose anyone doubts that up to 25% of the American people in certain areas are so unreconstructed or hostile as to oppose all these things, but 24% of the vote never won any two-candidate election when there was an honest count.

What would be wrong with a new party alignment in the United States? Let Party A be the party of full human rights, and let Party B be the party of the trigger-happy racists and Lamar Hunt's oil company.

Strange it is that the liberal faith should falter when it is proposed to really put to a test all this business about people being sensible enough to choose their leaders. And is it to have a premature apocalyptic vision to say that somebody had best be about ameliorating the tragic injustice which divides us at home and mocks us abroad?

This is no less an issue in California than in Atlantic City [where the Democratic Convention was held]. Indeed, California's recent Democratic Party infighting may point a lesson. A very interesting thing happened on August 16 when the California State Democratic Central Committee met in Sacramento. The delegates approved a resolution calling for the seating of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the refusal to seat the regular Mississippi Democrats at this week's National Convention. After the approval of the resolution the delegates rose and applauded the civil rights workers who had come to Sacramento to urge its passage.

The background of the approval of this resolution forms a very instructive tale: a tale of fear of "white backlash."

On June 27, the term had not yet gained wide currency, and the executive committee of the California Democratic Party approved without wide publicity a resolution to the same effect as that adopted last week by the Central Committee. At that time it seemed that would also be a formality to have the same resolution adopted by the Central Committee. Meanwhile, there was growing uneasiness about "white backlash." Although President Johnson, in one sense, had no interest in seating the regular Mississippi delegation, because of that party's disavowal of the national Democratic platform or ticket since 1948, certain dangers were seen in the seating of the Freedom Party. White backlast dangers. Therefore, the reasoning went this way: don't seat the regular Mississippi delegation because it is disloyal; don't seat the Freedom delegation because if you show any partiality in the dispute you will lose "white backlash" votes, not to mention whole South besides; therefore let Mississippi go unrepresented at the national convention. Pressure was applied.

All Californians can take pride in their state Central Committee's resistance to this reasoning. Unfortunately, the Convention, in according only token recognition to the Freedom Democratic Party, appears to have bowed to the fear.

But that will not end the matter. Proposition 14 is still on the ballot. The *Oakland Tribune* is still a Jim Crow outfit; young men and women still pursue their commitment in Mississippi. Sooner or later, we must face the white backlash.

Liberals, one had been led to believe, participate in politics because they believe that issues, fully debated and widely understood, can be the focus of political choices by voters. In short, people are intelligent enough to govern themselves, given a choice and half a chance. Thus it is strange indeed that those who profess liberal principles stand and acknowledge, nay insist, that we must now bow to the irrationality and hatred styled the white backlash.

The Freedom Party's delegates in Atlantic City represent an intermediate goal on the road to full equality in Mississippi. Those delegates are there by virtue of 14 burned churches, countless beatings, and three dead young men. They are there to testify to the effectiveness of direct, conscientious political work among people with grievances who once saw no way to approach the power needed to alleviate them.

The lesson of that triumph over fear by Negroes, and oppression by whites, is not, I suggest, confined to Mississippi.

Thank you and good night.