



“Challenging People to Shape a Better Future Now”

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## Freedom Summer – 50 Years Later

The 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer is being commemorated this week in Mississippi and it provides the perfect backdrop to reflect on the transformation of not only Mississippi, then the deadliest state in the nation, but the entire region..

As I have written in the space before, there was a popular joke about Mississippi making the rounds during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Supposedly, a Chicago seminary student who was awakened at 3 a.m. by a voice imploring him: “Go to Mississippi! Go to Mississippi!! Go to Mississippi!!!” The seminary student said, “Lord, you said that you will be with me always, even until the end of the earth. If I go to Mississippi, will you go with me?” The heavenly voice replied, “I’ll go as far as Memphis.”

Of course, if the Lord was reluctant to go to Mississippi, the chances of a Black surviving were slim and none. At the time, I had just completed my junior year at Druid High School in Tuscaloosa, Ala. In the summer of 1964. Alabama had its own violent racial history when it came to race relations, but Mississippi was the one state we knew was worse.

Of course, we all awaited the beginning of Freedom Summer, a national mobilization of mostly college students who would descend upon Mississippi in 1964 to help civil rights activists, led by Bob Moses of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, assist Blacks in voter education and voting.

More than 1,000 college stu-



**THE CURRY REPORT**

George E. Curry

dents, about 90 percent of them White, participated. With so many northern White students descending on the state, the nation would be watching. And Blacks like me, who grew up under America’s version of apartheid, knew that virulent White racists in Missis-

With so many northern White students descending on the state, the nation would be watching.

issippi would not go quietly into the dark. They would go into the dark – where they did their most vicious work – but they wouldn’t be quiet about it.

And sure enough, at the outset of Freedom Summer, three civil rights workers – James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman – were arrested in Nashoba County by Sheriff Cecil Price, a member of the Ku Klux Klan. That night, they were released. Tipped off about their impending release, Klansmen abducted the three and murdered them.

While looking for the three civil rights workers in rivers and swamps, other Black bodies were

discovered. One was Herbert Oarsby, a 14-year-old boy who was wearing a Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) T-shirt. The bodies of Henry Hezekiah Dee and Eddie Moore, who had been expelled from Alcorn A&M College for civil rights activities, were also discovered. The remains of five more Black men were found, but never identified.

It wasn’t until 1970 that anyone was imprisoned for the slayings of Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman, with six years being the longest time served.

In 1964, only 6.7 percent of Blacks were registered to vote, the lowest in the nation. Today, more

1,062 people were arrested’ 37 churches were burned or bombed and

The homes or businesses of 30 African Americans were bombed or burned.

Visiting college students weren’t the only ones responsible for the success of that summer. When Berea College withdrew as a training site for students headed South, Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, now part of Miami University, stepped forward.

Attorneys volunteered from the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, the National Lawyers Guild and the ACLU. Medical professionals, participating as individuals as well as the Medical Committee for Human Rights, also joined the caravans headed to Mississippi.

The level of national support emboldened Black Mississippians, such as Fannie Lou Hamer, to challenge the seating of the all-White Mississippi delegation to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City.

As Attorney Thomas N. Todd likes to remind us, this was done before the existence of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media.

It’s good that civil rights vets are celebrating Freedom Summer this week. But the challenge is to reignite that passion and sense of commitment today. Many of the problems of 1964 are still prevalent today. We need a Freedom Summer, Winter, Fall and Spring.

than a third of Mississippi’s voters are Black and the state has the largest number of Black elected officials in the nation.

But that progress came with a price, with people losing their jobs –and even their lives – simply because they wanted to exercise their constitutional right to vote. The casualties extended beyond the three civil rights workers.

According to the book, *Freedom Summer* by Doug McAdam, in the summer of 1964 alone:

At least four Blacks from Mississippi were murdered because of their civil rights activities; Four people were seriously wounded;

80 summer workers were beaten

## The Central Park Jogger Case Settlement

How much is a person’s innocence worth?

That’s the most fundamental question framing the news that, after years of bitter dispute, a settlement has been reached in the lawsuit stemming from the notorious Central Park Jogger case that a quarter-century ago inflamed racial tensions in New York City and across the country, sent five Black and Latino youth to prison for years – and since then has become one of the best-known examples of the injustice that’s corroded much of America’s criminal justice system.

The five men, who, though 14 to 16 years old at the time, were tried as adults for beating and raping the young White woman, will now receive about a million dollars for each year they served in prison. Four of the men—Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, and Raymond Santana, Jr. – spent about seven years in prison. One, Kharey Wise, served about 13 years.

More than a decade after their trial, DNA and other evidence uncovered by the Manhattan District Attorney’s office proved that none of the five youths had beaten and raped the jogger. The evidence tied the attack to one man, Matias Reyes, who by then was in prison for murdering a woman shortly after he had attacked the jogger, then confessed to the crime.

The convictions of the five were



**LAST CHANCE**

Lee A. Daniels

vacated in 2002, but for a decade the administration of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg refused to settle their lawsuit that charged that police and prosecutors had deliberately suppressed the DNA and other evidence. City

One of the best-known examples of the injustice that’s corroded much of America’s criminal justice system

officials, however, then maintained that the police and prosecutors had not committed any wrongdoing and therefore could not be held liable.

By contrast, the administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio, who took office in January, moved quickly to settle the case, which yet remains one of the most notorious examples of the egregious mistakes and willful misconduct by police, prosecutors and judges that have sentenced men and women of all backgrounds to long terms in prison – and some to death row.

Thanks to technological advances in the use of DNA evidence and action taken by some state legislatures and some police and prosecutors, too, the list of the exonerated has grown significantly in the decade since the Central Park Jogger Five were cleared.

According to data from The Innocence Project, a national litigation and public policy organization, there have now been 316 post-conviction DNA exonerations in the country. That includes 18 people who were sentenced to death before DNA proved their innocence. The aver-

New York City borough’s long-time prosecutor, Charles J. Hynes, to establish a special unit to investigate claims of innocence. The result: in recent months six men who had already spent as much as 23 years in prison after being convicted of murder, have been exonerated and set free.

Now, Kenneth Thompson, Brooklyn’s newly-elected district attorney (who defeated Hynes last year in a bitterly-fought contest), is, as the *New York Times* put it in a recent news article, “grappling with a metastasizing wrongful conviction scandal in which dozens of imprisoned men have asked for freedom, their convictions linked to mistakes and misconduct by police and prosecutors in the violent, drug-plagued 1980s and 1990s. It is a tidal wave that could dwarf other exoneration clusters.”

This wrongful conviction scandal, mind you, concerns just one borough of one American city. But, like the Central Park Jogger case, the terrible miscarriage of justice that is being uncovered there underscores that for many individuals accused of a crime, the criminal justice system’s operating principle has been, not innocent until proven guilty, but guilty until proven innocent.

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