One Council

While other Southern states move toward at least token desegregation, in Mississippi the diehard white-supremacists are firmly in control.

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THE roll-call of Southern communities which have begun at least token public-school integration in response to Federal court pressure has been significantly lengthened this fall with the peaceful desegregation of schools in Dallas, Memphis, and Atlanta. In the last two cities, massive resistance on the secondary school level was expressed in the Deep South was sheltered for the first time. Yet the manner in which the resistance was handled was not impressive, the psychological effect on the rest of Alabama and South Carolina the disintegration at all levels of state is Mississippi. After seven years of mounting pressure it is virtually impossible to find any public manifestations of the faltering many whites are privately expressing.

As the pressure has intensified, in fact, Mississippi resistance has tended to stiffen rather than crumble. It is the one Southern state which showed that the complete unified front in defying the recent Interstate Commerce Commission ruling on the desegregation of interstate facilities. State laws were ignored in every city and town and in the local waiting rooms and terminal restaurants. The Justice Department promptly asked Federal courts for a restraining order, but there was little doubt that one will be maintained until the last legal maneuver is exhausted.

The observer would be hard pressed to find a major change among the segregationist forces. There is a handful of white dissenters, and there is a growing number of whites who are sympathetic, but neither is formed into a strength that can influence greatly. Support for the continuation of segregation in Mississippi is pervasive, sometimes subtle and immensely strong.

It is difficult to explain an outsider just how powerful a force this white-supremacy group has become. Perhaps the hardest point to grasp is that the Citizens Council in Mississippi was successful not because it had a clever or pugnacious methods or defied its philosophy—it is not made up of hooded figures meeting furtively in dark alleys. Its leadership is drawn not from the pool hall but from the country club. Its membership generally reflects the attitudes of the middle and upper classes rather than of the poor white. And its aims are stated in violent language but in the careful embroidery of states rights and constitutionalism.

In fact, when the first Council was formed seven years ago by a clique of community leaders in the Delta town of Grenada, one central purpose was to retain control of resistance to desegregation in the hands of the "better people." Then, it was a small, society. Today, membership in the Citizens Council has come to be a matter of pride. It is a membership in the Rotary or Lions Club. It is such an accepted mark of distinction, in fact, that many candidates for public or organizational office explicitly add their participation in the Council to their listings of civic enterprises in which they have engaged.

The Council's control of the state was formalized in August, 1959. In that month, Ross Barnett—a former position of Mississippi's two living ex-Governors and all but one of Mississippi's daily newspapers, but with the all-out support of the Council—won a landslide victory in the Democratic primary runoff for Governor.

Since then, the Council has all but completed the construction of a political machine whose power is publicly unchallenged by any major state-wide group. One of its dramatic accomplishments was the narrow victory which Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia.

As a result of presidential control, the natural Southern whites who must be influenced by political pressure. The next several years will be critical in determining whether or not the state will be able to make a full transition to desegregation without violent clashes or bloodshed.

The Citizens Council, of course, is a symbol of the persistence of segregationist attitudes. It is a symbol of the political strength of those who would make the basic laws of state and nation worthless for Negroes. But it is also a symbol of the failure of the white South to come to grips with the problems of the modern world. It is a symbol of the hopelessness of the South's past. It is a symbol of the future's promise.

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