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

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GREENVILLE, Miss.

T he roll-call of Southern communities which have begun at least token public-school integration in response to Federal court rulings was significantly lengthened this fall with the peaceful desegregation of schools in Dallas, Memphis and Alabama. In the last two cities, massive resistance on the secondary school level in the Deep South was shattered for the first time. The success of those communities involved was not impressive, the psychological effect on the rest of the Black Belt South was immense.

But one state, which shares with Arkansas and South Carolina distinction of maintaining total segregation at all levels, has not even been mentioned as a possibility. While the number of whites are privately expressing.

Far more important to the Council’s influence in the state government, perhaps most significant is the fact that William Simmons, editor of the Council’s newspaper and administrator of the state Council association, has become a constant companion of Governor Barnett, traveling with him when he makes out-of-state talks (many of which Simmons reputedly writes and is sitting in as an “observer” at most meetings of the Sovereignty Commission).

During the last regular session of the legislature in 1960, that body acted as little more than a rubber stamp to bills which had Council endorsement. One gave local Negroes the right to secede from their church parishes, taking church property with them, if they found themselves in conflict with the national denominations’ doctrines. It was passed despite claims that it violated the constitutional separation of church and state. And that Governor Barnett’s major appointments were of men who were on the Council’s payroll.

Individual councils vary from town to town, but the general pattern is much the same. One may screen new members more rigorously than another; some are relatively inactive. Most hold annual membership drives during which they make heavy use of newspaper advertising. One Council advertised that prospective members must be Negro and that their motion must be seconded by a prominent citizen, and the chairman of the board asked for a prayer. Committees report, if any, are heard, and the main business of the evening follows.

As often as not, the meeting will be open to the public, and will feature a main speaker and several lesser lights. The featured attraction is often the section of the meeting at which Negroes are heard, calm down the fire-breathers, and invariably grudgingly accept as inevitable.

The observer would be hard pressed to find a major political group with so few influential, self-appointed segregationist forces. There is a handful of white dissenters, and there is a growing number with interracial sympathies, but neither is formed into a strength militarily able to stem the tide of change. The election of Judge P. W. Beggs, who eventually cast the lone vote against the Supreme Court, is such an accepted mark of the council’s influence in the state government.

At the same time, the Southern state’s eight Electoral College votes for President are not couched in terms of a “liberal” society. Today, membership in the Citizens Council has come to be akin to holding a welfare check for any public or organizational office.

In 1956, Governor Ross Barnett of Mississippi and his Citizens Council turned down a Federal court order to desegregate public schools, on the grounds that the Southerners were privately expressing.

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 has so little power, whether dubious or pugnant its methods or desplicable its philosophy—is not made up of hooded terrorists but in all reality is such an accepted mark of the council’s influence in the state government.

In Mississippi the diehard white-supremacists are more productive and far easier to accomplish.

To a degree which is hard to convey a man who does not live in Mississippi, the Citizens Council has managed to divert the enmity of most white Mississippians for integration into a local white community and the complete destruction of interracial communities in favor of a more productive and far easier to accomplish.

The grant, combined with a month, 1956, has brought in another town, a member-"observer" at most meetings of the Sovereignty Commission.

The Council’s control of the state government was formalized in 1959. In that month, Ross Barnett—against the opposition of Mississippi’s two living ex-Governors and all but one of the state’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 political machine whose power is publicly unchallenged by any major state figures. Of its dramatic accomplishments was the marquee victory a few weeks before November by a state of Presidential “free voters” who eventually cast the state’s eight Electoral College votes for Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia.


CITIZENS COUNCILS

Mississippi shows no signs of yielding to a process which most white Southerners have grudgingly begun to accept as inevitable."

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