Federal registrars are important for two major reasons: first, they cut short many attempts at harassment and intimidation of black registrants; and second, they can register voters until 45 days before an election. Mississippi has a 120 day requirement, one of the longest in the nation, and has thereby disenfranchised a great many of its 18-year-old voters. The constitutional amendment lowering the voting age to 18 was passed only two days before Mississippi's July 2, 1971 cut-off.

Black leaders, such as Aaron Henry, Evers and the Congressional Black Caucus, have asked repeatedly that federal registrars be assigned to every Mississippi county where unapproved re-registration has taken place. Evers said that he had sent over 10 letters and telegrams to that effect to the attorney general, and has not even received acknowledgement, much less action, on his requests. It is only within the past two weeks that federal registrars have been sent to Mississippi, and now they are operating in only three counties, far short of the number of civil rights activists feel they should be in.

The registrars were sent to Humphreys, Madison and Tallahtchic County by SCS on Aug. 23, and judging by their performance, in Tallahtchic County, they are a mixed blessing. The federal registrars in Charleston, Tallahtchic County's seat, and the home of powerful Congressmen Jamie Whitten, set up shop in the campaign headquarters of recently defeated gubernatorial hopeful, Charles L. Sullivan. Sullivan is a "moderate" according to some white Mississippians, but among blacks, he is considered a staunch segregationist. It was difficult to find the sign advertising the registration place in the midst of "Sullivan for Governor" signs in the window. SCS regulations encouraging the use of radio, television and newspapers to advertise the registration place were not being followed.

Under these circumstances, it comes as no surprise that not a single citizen registered in Tallahtchic County during the first five days the registrars were on duty.

Gerald W. Jones, chief of the voting section of the civil rights division of the Justice Department, is aware of the criticisms directed against his department. In a recent interview, he seemed testy and on the defensive, refusing to go into any specifics about the division's performance this year. His defensiveness was explained by a congressional aide who said:

"Gerry's a good guy. He's just like all the other young guys in his division, shell-shocked because of the lack of enforcement. They want to do the right thing, but their superiors won't let them."

This feeling was echoed by George Taylor, who said he had a good working relationship with lower-echelon Justice Department lawyers. He too feels that the alleged lack of voting rights enforcement is due to political decisions at the top on the part of officials more concerned with the "Southern Strategy" than with enforcing the law.

But Jones did say that the Justice Department was keeping a close eye on developments in Mississippi, and that it was possible that federal registrars might be sent to other counties, "so that we make the determination that they're needed."

Such words from one of the highest ranking black officials in the Justice Department may be reassuring to some of Mississippi's citizens. But to others, who wonder with Evers and Henry and Conyers if the administration's efforts are coming too late with too little behind them, Jones' assurances have little meaning.

They see the Sept. 18 deadline for federal registrars fast approaching (that is 45 days before the Nov. 2, election), signalling the last possible opportunity for blacks to build their political strength. They see 130,000 blacks unregistered, because they had to work too hard getting those already registered back on the books. And it leaves a bitter taste in their mouths.

They feel that they have fought the good fight, and won the right to register and vote. They now see that right—bought and paid for with young lives—threatened by inaction on the part of those charged with protecting that right.

Over 250 black candidates are running for political office in Mississippi's November elections. The black candidates were made possible by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, under which black registration in the state leaped from less than 20,000 in 1964 to about 275,000 in 1970. But the black candidates are imperiled, black leaders and civil rights activists say, because the U. S. Department of Justice has been doing a less than enthusiastic job of enforcing the Voting Rights Act.

Blacks cite these three instances of Justice Department inaction: permitting counties to require voters to re-register without obtaining prior clearance, as is required by the act; failing to oppose the so-called "open primary law," which was clearly aimed at the gubernatorial campaign of the black candidate, Charles Evers; and failure to oppose re-districting plans, which discriminate against black candidates. For an examination of the charges, and the response of a Justice Department official, see Jack White's article inside this issue. * * *

Unprecedented Indian unity

On August 26, leaders from 11 of the country's largest and most influential Indian organizations—a display of unanimity unprecedented in the history of the organizations—sent a letter to President Nixon informing him that, "at this point, the confidence that Indian people have placed in your administration is shaken...".

The leaders said recent events within the Bureau of Indian Affairs have sparked fears among their people that the President has no intention of implementing the new Indian policy he enunciated on July 8, 1970—a policy strongly supported by tribal leaders and Indian activists.

"We believed you," the letter said, "when you told us about a new era of Indian SELF-DETERMINATION... But we ask how your pledge to decisively break with the past and create 'conditions for a new era in which the Indian future is determined by Indian acts and Indian decisions' squares with the following events:

The lower courts find considerable leeway in their busing decisions.... Bureaucratic complexity creates problems for minority farmers...."