“Sic ‘Em, White Folks!’: Football, Massive Resistance, and the Integration of Ole Miss

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Shattered Bottles at the Peabody: Introduction

It has been said that by tradition the Mississippi Delta begins in the lobby of Memphis’ venerable Peabody Hotel. Although located in Tennessee, Memphis serves as the major urban center for Northern Mississippi and much of the Delta region. The Peabody, a grand Southern establishment, has seen more than its share of Mississippians declare their intention to seek major office, celebrate alumni reunions, and use the hotel as fraternity-row-away-from-fraternity row on those weekends when the Ole Miss football team played a home game in Memphis.

There is a story associated with the hotel that captures the image Mississippi cultivated for itself during the Jim Crow era and especially after the Supreme Court announced its decision in 1954 in Brown v. Board of Education. Apparently a wealthy old Mississippi planter, distraught after the Ole Miss football team had lost a close game in Memphis, took out his frustrations by smashing a bottle of bourbon on one of the Peabody’s lobby pillars. The hotel manager quickly stepped in, saying, “You can’t do that, sir.” Without responding, the alumnus signaled a bellhop and waved a $100 bill, asking the young man to fetch him a case of bourbon. When the bellhop returned with the bourbon in tow, the planter smashed all of the bottles, one at a time, on the same pillar.¹

This story could very well be apocryphal. It has never been confirmed, but it was told well into the 1960s, through Mississippi’s turbulent years of resistance to what it perceived as outside interference in internal matters. But whether the story is true or not, it speaks volumes about Mississippi in the years of the Civil Rights struggle. For in this story we have the spontaneous, visceral reaction of the Mississippi planter to a defeat, followed by an official response to his action. From this response came an escalated, planned, conscious reaction, which exponentially expanded the initial confrontation so that all that remained in the mind’s eye was the image of a case of bourbon bottles smashed, the liquor and debris soiling the magnificent interior of the Peabody lobby. This reaction made a calm and rational response, in which the dignity of both parties was maintained, virtually impossible.

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This was the situation in which the federal government found itself in September 1962. For a year-and-a-half the state of Mississippi had resisted through every means possible the admission of James H. Meredith, a black native of the state, to the University of Mississippi, the state’s finest and most cherished institution of higher learning. The state had resisted through means legal, extralegal, and illegal. It had tried delay. It had tried bureaucratic legerdemain. It had used the courts. It had created post-facto rules forbidding Meredith’s matriculation. The state legislature had erected laws, the state courts had allowed those laws to stand, and the Governor, Ross Barnett, interposed himself against the federal government to execute those laws. Bubbling not so far below the surface was the threat of violence, the law of tinderbox, faggot, rope, and gunpoint with which few Mississippians were entirely unfamiliar.

With each step, the state and its supporters moved ever closer to the tragedy that took place in the form of the riots of the night of September 30th and October 1st that engulfed the campus of the University of Mississippi and marked the climax of the atmosphere of resistance that had taken over the state’s political culture. The events of that night were never inevitable, but they became increasingly likely with each passing display of massive resistance. The September 29th Ole Miss–Kentucky football game and undeclared race rally in Jackson served to mark the point of no return, although most of the blueprint had been etched long before Ross Barnett stepped to the microphone at halftime of that 14–0 Rebel victory over the visiting Wildcats. Football provided both a political backdrop to and a rallying point for massive resistance during the Ole Miss crisis.

Football and Massive Resistance: Ross Barnett and the Ole Miss–Kentucky Game

“I love Mississippi! I love her people—her customs! And I love and respect her heritage!”

Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett, his fists clenched and his voice full of emotion, was barely able to get those fifteen words out before the frothing crowd of more than 40,000 swallowed them in hysteria on the night of September 30, 1962. Mississippians from across the state were gathered at Jackson’s War Memorial Stadium to see their beloved Ole Miss Rebels football team take on the visiting Kentucky Wildcats. They waved their Confederate flags and wore their Confederate Grays. They whooped and hollered and shouted the school’s “Hoddy Toddy” cheer and sang the “Never! No, Never!” song, and cheered to the playing of “Dixie” and let out blood curdling rebel yells and generally let their delirium carry them to that dangerous and heady level of conformity that only a mob high on championship football mixed with massive white resistance could achieve in the South in the 1960s.

But even at that late date, it was not inconceivable that Ole Miss could have avoided bloodshed. The Governor had earlier in the month taken a stand before his fellow Mississippians in an attempt to show the Kennedy brothers and the rest of the nation that Mississippi would not quietly yield to the rapacious encroachment of federal force. Even as the integration crisis fast reached its endgame, Barnett chose to continue his fight against the Kennedy interlopers. The frenzied crowd of