

“RETURN TO MISSISSIPPI”

Several weeks ago I was invited by former NAACP National Chairperson Myrlie Evers Williams to deliver the inaugural lecture in honor of her late martyred husband, Medgar Evers, in Jackson, Mississippi. The event marked two occasions—the fortieth anniversary of Medgar Evers’s assassination, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, and Myrlie Evers Williams’s 70th birthday. The well attended lecture was held at Millsaps College in Jackson, and hosted by former Mississippi Governor William Winter. The warm and enthusiastic response my talk received said much about how far Mississippi has tried to transcend its terrible history of racism.

Yet for a younger generation of African Americans born after 1970, Medgar Evers was for many just a name in the pages of a history book, one purpose of my lecture was to highlight the courageous personalities and great moral sacrifices that were essential in transforming the Jim Crow South. African Americans who were never told to go to the back of the bus, those who were refused service at restaurants and hotels, need to appreciate how monumental Medgar Evers was to the history of Black Freedom in this country, and to the opportunities they now enjoy today.

Born near Decatur, Mississippi in 1925, Medgar Evers served in the army during World War II and subsequently attended and graduated from Alcorn A&M College (now Alcorn State University). Even as a college student, he established high standards of academic and personal excellence. He was a member of the debate team, the college choir, was on the football and track teams, and he also held student offices and served as editor of the campus newspaper for two years.

It was here at Alcorn that Medgar Evers met Myrlie Beasley of Vicksburg, Mississippi, and the young couple married on December 24, 1951. Thus began a loving partnership that would help to change the racial climate of this state and nation.

After graduating from college, Evers was employed traveling around the state selling insurance. It soon became clear to him that decisive action had to be taken in order to address the deplorable conditions faced by poor black families and communities. Medgar and Myrlie joined the NAACP, and in 1954 Medgar became the first field secretary of the NAACP in Mississippi. Myrlie became his secretary, and together they initiated a series of challenging and difficult campaigns to bring democracy and equality to all of the people of this state.

After the 1954 Brown decision that outlawed school segregation, Evers applied to be admitted, but was denied entry into the University of Mississippi Law School, in an attempt to integrate the state's oldest public university. Moving to Jackson, Medgar and Myrlie set up the NAACP office, and he began to investigate violent crimes committed against African Americans and sought ways to prevent them. Evers achieved national attention when he advocated and organized boycotts against the white merchants who discriminated against African Americans. Evers's efforts to have James Meredith admitted to the University of Mississippi in 1962 brought about long overdue federal assistance to desegregationist initiatives.

The desegregation of Ole Miss, and the organizing efforts of civil rights workers across the region, led to increased levels of violence aimed against the forces of peaceful reform and racial justice. In 1962, the Evers's home in Jackson was firebombed in reaction to Medgar's organized boycott of local white merchants.

In 1963, the pro-segregationist terrorism escalated, culminating with the assassination of Evers by a sniper in front of his own home. On the night of June 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy, in a nationally televised address, announced his decision to submit a comprehensive Civil Rights Act to Congress, which would outlaw racial segregation in all public accommodations—restaurants, hotels, bus terminals and airports—throughout the United States. Kennedy's actions outraged white supremacists. Only hours after President Kennedy's historic speech, on June 12, 1963, at 12:30 pm, Medgar Evers drove his car and parked in his driveway after a long day of work. Stepping out of his car, he was shot in the back. It would take 31 long years to bring his assassin to justice.

As Myrlie Evers has written: "Just days before Medgar's death, he had remarked to a reporter: 'If I die, it will be in a good cause. I've been fighting for America just as much as soldiers in Vietnam.' I wonder about the images that my husband must have carried with him on his quest for equality. How emotionally draining it must have been on his spirit to bear in mind the unrecognizable portrait of the battered Emmett Till as Medgar pursued justice to bring the young boy's murderers to trial. Nothing could have shielded Medgar's eyes from the deplorable conditions of the Mississippi sharecroppers or from the 'strange fruit' hung on trees by brutal barbarians. When the struggle for freedom began in the late 1950s, the individuals participating

in the civil rights movement could not possibly have foreseen that protesting in support of basic human dignity would culminate in one of the most heartrending civil wars in American history.”

Four decades have transpired since these events. An entire generation of African Americans who did not personally experience the utter humiliation of being segregated, of being forced to go to the back of the bus, of being denied the right to register to vote solely due to your race, now exists. The “white” and “colored” signs have long been removed from restaurants and restrooms across the South. Yet the deeply entrenched patterns of black inequality remain just as fresh and real as when Medgar Evers was still with us.

We must remember Medgar Evers, not simply for his many sacrifices, but for the powerful example of grace and political courage that he provides for us today. The struggle against American racism still continues, and we must face the challenges of today, confident with the knowledge and appreciation of our past.

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