

" What lies behind us and what lies before us is a small matter compared to what lies within us."

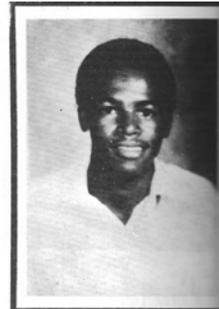
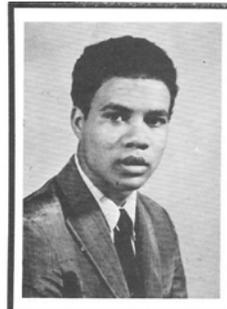
Oliver Wendell Holmes

The words of Oliver Wendell Holmes are appropriate at the conference on law and higher education because, irrespective of where we have been and where we are going, we have got to look inside ourselves and see who we are.

The murders of James Earl Green and Philip Lafayette Gibbs would have been just another episode in the long history of racial violence inflicted upon in my native state of Mississippi, had not this occurred on the heels of the murders of four white students - Alison Krause, Sandra Lee Scheuer, Jeffrey Glenn Miller, and William K. Schroeder at Kent State University in Ohio, ten days earlier.

Conscientious and compassionate individuals cannot ignore the tragic events that took place on an all black college campus in Jackson, Mississippi on May 15, 1970.

Photo: James Earl Green, Left
Philip Lafayette Gibbs, Right



Growing up in Mississippi in the early 1950's and 60's, one became accustomed to the countless acts of senseless violence experienced by black people and accepted the reality of the tyrannical system of southern white supremacy and segregation. Many of us believed that no white person would ever be held accountable for victimizing blacks in Mississippi.

During the period which preceded the modern pioneering and publicized civil rights protests in this country, the only way you could describe race relations in Mississippi was that of oppressor and the oppressed. Indelibly etched into the collective psyche of most black Mississippians are the acts of legendary proportions, in which whites viciously harassed, brutalized, and murdered blacks with no fear of retribution. I can never forget the

murder on August 28, 1955, when young Emmett Till was thrown carelessly into the muddy waters of the Tallahatchie River in the Mississippi delta. This was the great price that this young man from Chicago paid while visiting relatives for allegedly flirting with a white woman. The subsequent trial was a farce and a mockery of the judicial system in America.

No one ever served a day in jail for this shocking and sadistic act. Similarly, in April of 1959, Mack Charles Parker, a truck driver accused of raping a white woman was taken from his jail cell and lynched by an angry mob of white men in Poplarville, Mississippi and, like Emmett Till, no one ever served a day in jail for this act of terror.

Were it not for the indefatigable efforts of Medgar Wiley Evers, Mississippi's first NAACP field secretary, little or nothing would have been revealed regarding these and other heinous, horrific, and inhumane acts, which took place in Mississippi.

Medgar Evers, himself, would be victimized by a white gunman on June 12, 1963 in Jackson, Mississippi. At the age of 37, Medgar Evers was gunned down by an assassin's bullet in front of his home in Jackson, Mississippi, as he returned from a community civil rights meeting.

The courageous leadership of Medgar Evers advanced numerous causes which called for progressive change. His legion of accomplishments were unparalleled during this period of the African-American struggle in this country. It would be more than thirty years in February of 1994 that someone would be convicted for the murder of Medgar Wiley Evers.

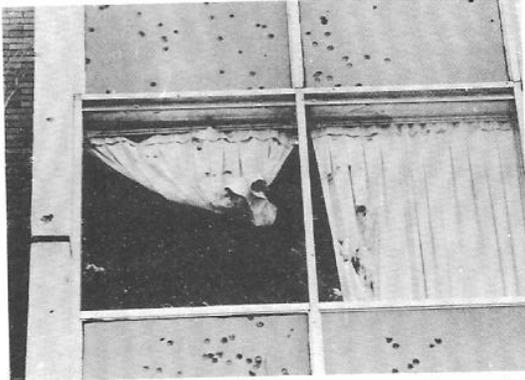
In 1964, three civil rights workers, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, who were white and James Chaney, who was black, were brutally murdered and buried beneath an earthen dam near Philadelphia in Neshoba County, Mississippi. Just a few years ago, one person was charged and convicted for the murders of these three young men.

Photo:
Left: Andrew Goodman
Middle: James Chaney
Right: Michael Schwerner



Like Kent State and Jackson State, I doubt that little attention would have been given to the death of James Earl Chaney, if he had not been with Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner. It was even reported that during the search for the missing civil rights workers, law enforcement officials found several black bodies that no one had ever reported missing. Some were pulled from the rivers and streams and wooded areas of Mississippi.

It was in this climate of national protests and campus unrest in the spring of 1970, that days following the May 4th shootings at Kent State University and the murders of black in Augusta, Georgia, black students at Jackson State in Mississippi protested against racism, the war in southeast Asia in addition to the Kent and August shootings. For years, white motorists would drive through the Lynch Street campus taunting students, making racial slurs and uttering vulgar sexual remarks. Following several nights of peaceful protests, Mississippi law enforcement officials marched onto the campus of Jackson State and positioned themselves in the street in front of F.O. Alexander Hall Women's Dormitory, where students were assembled.



This shot of the fourth floor window shows an astounding amount of bullet holes. One part of the window was shattered completely by gunfire and the curtains are in shreds. Photo - Neely

Photo: Alexander Hall
Women's Dormitory

Lynch Street is a main thoroughfare in the west Jackson community and it is named in honor of John Roy Lynch, a black man who was born in slavery in Concordia Parish, Louisiana, September 10, 1847. Following Emancipation, Lynch moved to Natchez, Mississippi and got involved in politics. Elected to the Mississippi legislature, John Roy Lynch became the youngest person ever to serve as the Speaker of the House. He would later be elected to the United States House of Representatives, serving several terms. Following his retirement, he received presidential appointments and practiced law in Chicago until his death on November 2, 1939.

Shortly after midnight on the morning of May 15th, a 32- second fuselage of more than 300 bullets was fired into the crowd of students in front of

Alexander Hall. In the bloody aftermath, two young black men had been killed - Philip L. Gibbs, a 21 year old pre-law major from Ripley, Mississippi and James Earl Green, a 17 year-old high school student who had taken a shortcut across the campus, on his way home following a evening of work at a part-time job at a neighborhood store. Like Alison, Sandy, Jeff and Bill, these two young men had become martyrs of the murderous month of May, 1970. In this case, like many times before in Mississippi, the victims were black and the perpetrators were white.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to share these reflections of a painful period in our nation's history. I was on the campus of Jackson State on that murderous Mississippi morning in May of 1970. I was also in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963 to hear one of the greatest speeches of our time and I was in Washington, again, on January 20, 2009 to witness the inauguration of Barack Hussein Obama. *"We ain't what we wanna be, we ain't what we gonna be, but thank God, we ain't what we was."*

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would always those grammatically incorrect words to remind us that, indeed, we have come a long way, but we still have a long way to go. In a column written a day after the historic presidential election, *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman wrote:

"The struggle for equal rights is far from over, but we start afresh now from a whole new baseline. Let every child and every citizen and every new immigrant know that from this day forward everything really is possible in America."

All death is painful and difficult, but it is made even more painful when race and racism is added to the equation. Each of us should continue to be inspired and informed by the words spoken by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his last Sunday morning sermon on March 31, 1968 at the National Cathedral (Episcopal) in Washington, D.C. :

We are challenged to eradicate the last vestiges of racial injustice from our nation. I must say this morning that racial injustice is still the black man's burden and the white man's shame.

It is an unhappy truth that racism is a way of life for the vast majority of white Americans, spoken and unspoken, acknowledged and denied, subtle and sometimes not so subtle—the disease of racism permeates and poisons a whole body politic. And I can see nothing more urgent than for America to work passionately and unrelentingly—to get rid of the disease of racism.

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