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*When D.C. Came to the Delta: Director's Notes*

For decades, Mississippi state officials and local elites sought to make the Delta the state's best kept secret. The consequences of the region's high poverty rates were deftly kept from the public eye, a calculated effort at disguising a form of state-sponsored starvation. In April 1967, however, longtime activist and advocate Marian Wright brought New York Senators Robert F. Kennedy and Joseph Clark to some of the most impoverished communities in the South. Followed closely by a host of photographers, network cameramen, and journalists, the nation followed as Kennedy bore witness to evidence of outright manipulation of federal welfare programs, an effort to force poor African-Americans further into starvation or out of the state. The paradox of the condition of the Delta communities and the growing prosperity of the United States was not lost on Kennedy, who lifted the veil of Jim Crow-era Mississippi and saw the suffering within. It became clear to Kennedy and the nation that change was desperately needed in the Mississippi Delta, a change which local activists, such as Marian Wright, had been seeking to bring about for quite some time.

*When D.C. Came to the Delta*, in a way, walks alongside Kennedy in his visit of the Delta, analyzing the problems he witnessed and the longtime efforts of activists in the region seeking equality. From here, the film draws a parallel between the Delta of 1967 and that of 2017, tracing a legacy of segregation Mississippi wrestles with to this day. This legacy, present in nearly every aspect of the state's society, impacts from the top down, from legislation being signed by Governor Phil Bryant, to the classrooms of Delta public schools.

*The Empty Cupboards: Activists and Poverty before Kennedy*

Kennedy's visit not only revealed to Washington and the nation that poverty in the Mississippi Delta had reached a gruesome, suffocating level, but also unveiled much about the political climate in the region and the extent of white supremacy in the state's political agenda. Buttressed by decades of political manipulation, the weight of oppression fell heavily on African-Americans, with segregationist policies impacting not just political mobility, but economic as well. Marian Wright, in her testimony before Kennedy's Subcommittee on Manpower and Poverty in Jackson on April 10, 1967 not only laid out the condition of the world Kennedy was about to witness, but also provided ample detail as to why poverty persisted in an era of tremendous American economic expansion.

Poverty in the Mississippi Delta was rooted in the political and historical trend of the Deep South, inseparably tied to racial subjugation and white dominance. The Delta was, and remains today, a heavily agrarian society, at one point the cradle of the highly profitable American cotton trade.<sup>1</sup> By the 1940s, the Delta's economy remained agrarian but had shifted from slave labor to a sharecropping system that still highly resembled the system of slavery. Black laborers worked long hours under the authority of wealthy white plantation owners for extremely low wages, solidifying a socioeconomic *status quo* of white supremacy.<sup>2</sup> This system inevitably bred income inequality, and by the time the War on Poverty was declared, nearly fifty percent of nonwhites nationally lived in poverty.<sup>3</sup> Welfare programs initiated under the Roosevelt administration's New Deal generally exacerbated racial tension stemming from

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1. James C. Cobb lays out a detailed history of the Mississippi Delta, from settlement to the Civil Rights Movement, in *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
  2. Jane Adams, D. Gorton, "Confederate Lane: Class, race, and ethnicity in the Mississippi Delta," *American Ethnologist* 33, 2 (May 2006): 288-309.
  3. James E. Anderson, "Poverty, Unemployment, and Economic Development: The Pursuit of a National Antipoverty Policy," *The Journal of Politics* 29, 1 (Feb. 1967): 76.

poverty as opposed to fighting poverty, strengthening the aforementioned *status quo*.<sup>4</sup> At the height of racial tension in the political sphere, the racial dynamics of poverty in America, along with other factors such as the paradox of poverty amidst America's affluence and poverty's strong association with crime, was a primary motivator in Johnson's pursuit of a Great Society, and nowhere was this paradox seen more succinctly than in the Delta.<sup>5</sup>

In the spirit of white supremacy, Mississippi political and economic elites acutely manipulated programs initiated by the Johnson administration. The plantation system of the 1960s ensured black sharecroppers' dependence on elite whites and restricted political participation and economic mobility.<sup>6</sup> With Washington largely ignorant of the persistence of plantation politics in Mississippi, the programs met limited success, hindered by the unintentional consequences of farm subsidies, the food stamp program, and new minimum wage laws, coupled with a determination by local political and economic elites to initiate a black exodus from the state.<sup>7</sup> The persistent culture of white elitism and a desperation to maintain the *status quo* solidified and upheld the oppressive, desperate society of poverty in the Delta.

Kennedy's visit was more than an exposé of poverty in the poorest region of the United States, but also a component of civil rights activists' pursuit of economic and political equality in the Delta. A number of political elites in the state welcomed government programs such as Roosevelt's New Deal with open arms, so long as they could be manipulated to benefit white supremacy.<sup>8</sup> This naturally made the Mississippi Delta a significant battlefield in the Civil

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4. James C. Cobb, "'Somebody Done Nailed Us on the Cross': Federal Farm and Welfare Policy and the Civil Rights Movement in the Mississippi Delta," *The Journal of American History* 77, 3 (Dec. 1990): 912-936.

5. Anderson, "Poverty, Unemployment and Economic Development," 87-89.

6. Sharon D. Wright Austin, *The Transformation of Plantation Politics: Black Politics, Concentrated Poverty, and Social Capital in the Mississippi Delta* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006).

7. John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 363.

8. J. Todd Moye, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2004), 40.

Rights struggle. As the Movement picked up steam in Mississippi, SNCC activists such as Amzie Moore, Fannie Lou Hamer, Bob Moses, and Sam Block led the charge in the Delta, pushing for voter registration in an effort to challenge the political cycle keeping Deltans poor.<sup>9</sup>

Enter Marian Wright, a young Yale Law School graduate and attorney for the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund whose work as an activist centered around advancing the interests of black Deltans. Her years of working in the Delta during Freedom Summer and the years that followed meant that she fully understood the challenges of poverty and racism in the Delta, as well as its root causes. As she testified before Senators Kennedy and Clark and more in Jackson in 1967, she also understood that where Kennedy went, cameras followed.<sup>10</sup>

This was in confluence with a key strategy used by activists during the Freedom Summer movement: using the attention garnered by visiting celebrities and politicians to expose the hypocrisies and institutional racism of Mississippi's political system. As activist Prathia Hall noted, the goal was to "bring the reality of our situation to the nation." National attention and exposure consistently contributed to momentum in the Movement. With the murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, for example, attention to the struggle in Mississippi reached the White House and captured the attention of the nation. Activists contacted celebrities from professional athletes to musicians such as Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald and invited reputable scholars to study and spread information on the struggle.<sup>11</sup> Using this strategic template, Wright used the platform the Senate Subcommittee on Manpower and Poverty provided in Jackson on April 10, 1967 to extend her invitation to Senator Kennedy: "I wish that [senators] would have a chance to go and look at the empty cupboards in the Delta and the

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9. Dittmer, *Local People*, 125.

10. Nick Kotz, *Let Them Eat Promises: The Politics of Hunger in America* (Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 3-5.

11. Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season that Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2010), 68.

number of people who are going around begging just to feed their children.”<sup>12</sup>

Just a few days later, Kennedy and fellow subcommittee member Senator Joseph Clark, surrounded by a host of journalists, photographers, and television crews, followed Marian Wright into the Delta. Here, through encounters with locals caught in the struggle for dominance in the state, Kennedy witnessed the depths of desperation and starvation detailed by Wright in Jackson. Hunger and starvation persisted in the daily lives of a number of families he visited. He listened to details of restricted educational opportunities. In several interactions with white journalists and local elites, he encountered animosity and a denial of poverty directly in the shadow of the worn-down shacks of Greenville, Cleveland, and Clarksdale. Evidence of white supremacist policies and oppression abounded, and though Kennedy avoided directly pointing his finger at the local political establishment, he was certainly disturbed by the contradiction of such desperation in the midst of a prosperous nation. Upon his return to Washington, he began working with the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), looking for ways to get around the politicians of Mississippi and get money directly to the Delta poor.<sup>13</sup>

### *2017 and the Legacy of Jim Crow*

If 1967 created an ally in Washington for Deltans, 1968 took him away. Kennedy’s assassination in Los Angeles eliminated a powerful advocate for Deltans living in poverty, and though he was certainly not the only voice pushing for progress in the region, his death was nonetheless a jarring blow. Marian Wright – now Wright Edelman – continued to pursue a life of advocacy, founding the Children’s Defense Fund, a major nonprofit working to eradicate child poverty. A legacy of white supremacy in Mississippi, however, has proven to be a steady foe over the past

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12. “Anti Poverty Hearing Part 3” Transcript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 22.

13. Kotz, *Let Them Eat Promises*, 7.

fifty years. Legislation emanating from the state capitol often ignores the needs of the poor, from underfunding public education to blocking access to medical care. Inevitably, as the majority of African-Americans in Mississippi are poor and the majority of Delta residents are African-Americans, the legacy of Jim Crow lands hardest on the same communities Robert Kennedy visited in the spring of 1967.

As observed by CDF Southern Office director Oleta Fitzgerald, the individuals making decisions in Jackson are the same individuals from a generation that was taught they were superior because of the color of their skin. Governor Phil Bryant, for example, was a high school graduate of Council McClure, a segregation academy outside Jackson which was emerged along with hundreds of other such academies in the wake of desegregation of educational facilities following *Alexander vs. Holmes* in 1969. In 2017, when Governor Bryant signs legislation that undercuts public education, disproportionately affecting poor minorities, it is important to understand the historical pedigree and trend he follows, as well as the individuals he represents. Bryant overwhelmingly won the 2015 gubernatorial election in Mississippi, taking just over seventy percent of votes.<sup>14</sup> The Governor is no exception to the legacy of white supremacy that prevailed in Mississippi throughout the Jim Crow era and snuck into the twenty-first century.

In many ways, the Delta of 2017 high resembles that of 1967. Poverty prevails as a dominant socioeconomic trait in the region, especially among African-American families. In most Delta counties, around forty percent of African-American families live in poverty, reaching as high as fifty-one percent in Leflore County. Child poverty in the region hovers dangerously close to sixty percent. Many in the Delta today remain illiterate, and the population of residents with less than a high school education hovers around thirty percent. Mississippi as a whole has

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14. Mississippi Secretary of State, "Electoral Vote Assignment: 2015 Stateside General Election," Nov. 3, 2015.

the lowest rate of high school degree attainment. Most Delta counties boast around twenty primary-care physicians (PCP) serving populations of up to fifty thousand, such as in Washington County. The region also possesses the highest concentration of infants born with a low birth weight.<sup>15</sup>

The statistics alone reflect a state struggling with poverty and the day-to-day effects of unemployment and other economic woes. It is when history is factored in, however, that an inescapable connection is made between a legacy of segregation and white supremacy and the poverty persisting in the Mississippi Delta. Where the population in Mississippi is wealthier and whiter, all the above statistics improve. The median income gap between Madison County, the wealthiest in the state, and Holmes County, the poorest, is over forty thousand dollars. In Madison County, schools are better, there is greater access to healthcare, and unemployment rates are low. Madison County also has one of the lowest percentages of African-Americans in their population.<sup>16</sup>

Mississippi, then, remains a reflection of racial disparity in America, a disparity which lands heavily on Delta communities. Marian Wright Edelman, when returning to the Delta in July of 2017, spoke of today as the most dangerous time she has witnessed since she began working as a lawyer. Setting aside the Jim Crow era, setting aside the violence of Freedom Summer, Mrs. Edelman pointed to today as the most frightening moment she has experienced. And when seeing what Kennedy saw in 1967, one can understand why Mrs. Edelman feels this way. There is a frightening parallel between the Delta of 1967 and that of 2017. While people may no longer be starving in such numbers as fifty years ago, state officials and local elites still succeed in making sure African-Americans in the Delta remain poor. Whether it be through

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15. [www.sociaexplorer.com](http://www.sociaexplorer.com)

16. Ibid.

cutting public school education or making healthcare as difficult as possible to access, it is certainly clear that the Mississippi Delta still suffers from a legacy of oppression, white supremacy, and manipulated poverty.