9-20-1962

Annotated article by Clark Porteous to Memphis Press-Scimitar, 20 September 1962

Clark Porteous
OXFORD, Miss. -- Gov. Ross R. Barnett won a battle in his fight to keep negro James H. Meredith from enrolling at Ole Miss, but he could still lose the war.

The Governor personally took over as University registrar and refused to register Meredith, to the acclaim of a large group of Ole Miss students.

But the federal government is expected to strike back, possibly as early as today, and Gov. Barnett could be sentenced to jail for contempt of Federal Court.

It seems likely that after more court action, Meredith, 29, a married Air Force veteran who has a 2-year-old son, may try again to break the racial barrier at Ole Miss.

After a long day of waiting, Gov. Barnett, accompanied by Lt. Gov. Paul B. Johnson and Dugas Shands, assistant state attorney general who handles civil rights, flew to Oxford from Jackson in a Highway Patrol plane, arriving on the campus at 2:50 p.m.

The officials drove to the Mississippi Center for Continuation Study on the campus and immediately went into a closed session.

Shortly after, the Highway Patrolmen who had been at the National Guard camp began to arrive. Some 25 patrol cars arrived, and there were 100 uniformed troopers, plus another 50 sheriffs and other plain clothes officers.

Many students had waited at the Lyceum (administration building) for Meredith, and much of the crowd had left. Word got out that Meredith was going to the building where Barnett was. Students began to run and walk across the lovely campus.

Newsmen who learned of the Governor's arrival and students were intermingled on the lawn of the Center. Then the patrolmen ordered everybody, students and reporters alike, off the lawn, finally across the street and behind a new knee-high black chain and posts, which had been put up specially for the event.
There was a 20 minute wait for Meredith. During the wait, Chief Burns Tatum of the campus police arrived and was cheered. The officers kept photographers and all behind the chain.

One trooper made Mike Smith, Miami, Life photographer, get off one of the new posts holding the chain. Smith pointed out other photographers were on other posts. The officer said it was his responsibility for that post and Smith might fall. Smith contended the others should be moved. The others stayed, and a student called out "Life doesn't have a very good reputation here anyhow."

The pistol-packing troopers lined up about two feet apart, backs to the crowd. Plain clothes officers on the walk and porch of the center faced the crowd.

At 4:40 p.m., four cars, led by one occupied by Col. T. B. Birdson, head of the "highway patrol", drove up in front of the building from the opposite direction of downtown.

Students saw a negro sitting between two white men in the back seat of a '62 light green and cream Plymouth, with Louisiana tags.

Students began screaming such things as "There's the Nigger, kiss him, kiss him." It was Meredith, accompanied by two deputy marshals and a Department of Justice attorney, all white except Meredith.

Meredith got out of the car, holding some papers. He was neatly dressed in a purplish suit, wore a white shirt and tie. Several students commented about the white shirt and tie, said Ole Miss students weren't registering dressed that way. Most of the male students wore sports shirts and many Bermuda shorts when they registered.

"Kiss him, Kiss him," called out several more. Then came a chorus of boes, and some epithets. Some co-eds joined in the taunts, and some of the girls were outspoken in what they said. There were cries of "You nigger you" and "get off this campus!"

Meredith walked calmly into the building with his escorts. He was inside the building 19 minutes. The students grew restive.

They started yelling in unison "two, four, six eight, we don't want to integrate." They gave some football yells and sang "Glory, Glory Segregation, The South Shall Rise Again."
By then, there were about 1500 students in the crowd. The mood seemed ugly. The crowd had been growing steadily. The officers stood unmoved.

"He's black all right," someone called out. Another said "he's got kinky hair." Someone else said "that wasn't no sun tan."

Some were wondering why it was taking so long "to refuse to register him. One person called out "He's (the Governor) putting the no jo on that nigger."

The glass front of the Center was draped. You couldn't see at all inside.

Students began chanting "we want Ross, we want Ross." Someone called "Ross said there ain't nothing wrong with niggers, everybody ought to own two or three of them."

They began chanting "rock 'em back, rock 'em back, way back," a football yell.

Then Meredith and his escorts came out. "Nigger, nigger," came in loud yells. Someone yelled loudly "kill the dirty bastard." There were more obscene calls as the Plymouth drove away, about 500 students in pursuit. The car turned away from downtown, and some students spat at it. It seemed for a few seconds students might catch the car, but they didn't.

As soon as the car left, the troopers broke rank and students and others rushed forward. Some of the crowd waited for Barnett, while others chased the car.

Henry Hitchins, of Jones County, a prosecutor, tried to get past the plain clothes guards on the porch, but was refused. "He gave one his card, sent in the message that he wanted the names of the marshals who were with Meredith. He said Jones County Chancery Court Judge L. B. Porter had issued an injunction against Meredith going to Ole Miss, and he wanted to prosecute the marshals and "everyone who violated the injunction." He didn't get the names. More
In a few minutes Gov. Barnett came out, wearing a black homburg. He was cheered and received many favorable comments as he moved thru the crowd.

Barnett as asked for a statement. "The only comment I have to make at this time is the application of James Meredith was refused." Asked on what ground, he simply repeated "it was refused."

No information was given out by the Governor or other officials as to what happened, and they immediately flew back to Jackson. However, it was learned what transpired.

Gov. Barnett sat at a table with Robert E. Ellis, Ole Miss registrar. Barnett asked if the Justice attorney if there was any business to bring up. The lawyer said Meredith wanted to register to enter the University, as provided by federal court order he had.

Ellis got up and read a statement from the state board which stated that Ellis had been relieved as registrar and Barnett named registrar in his place.

Ellis then left the table and answered no more questions directed to him.

Barnett read his proclamation of interposition, which he had released in the past. Barnett thrust out the document to Meredith, who took it. There was no other physical contact between them. The proclamation had the great seal of the state on it and was signed by Weber Ladner, Secretary of State.

The government lawyer asked Barnett if he knew in his refusal to obey a federal court order to register Meredith, he was in contempt of court.

"Are you telling me I'm in contempt of court, or is this up to the Federal judge?" Barnett asked.

"It's up to the judge," the lawyer said.

Barnett asked the lawyer if Meredith had anything to say.

Meredith got up and said "I want to register." That was all he said. It was serious. There wasn't a smile in the place. But as Meredith walked out, heard the taunts and jeers, there was a faint smile on his lips.