

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Clippings

James W. Silver Collection

December 2018

Southern doors are now opening says author of Closed Society

Leslie R. Myers

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jws_clip

Recommended Citation

Myers, Leslie R., "Southern doors are now opening says author of Closed Society" (2018). *Clippings*. 307. https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jws_clip/307

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the James W. Silver Collection at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Clippings by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

Southern doors are now opening says author of 'Closed Society'

By LESLIE R. MYERS
Southern Style Writer

James Silver still has a sting in his voice for the Mississippi society that suppressed the civil rights movement of the '60s. But, he says, today's backers of the progressive movement must stop retaliating against old establishment members who are trying to adapt to new times.

"If the old (society) wants to change, you can't pick on them. You can't keep persecuting people who did things in massive resistance," Silver said in an interview before his speech at the Mississippi American Civil Liberties Union's annual meeting during the weekend.

"If they change, you have to accept them," he stressed.

At 72, Silver seems almost compelled to leave behind the memories of his years as an outspoken pro-integration figure while serving as history depart-

ment chairman at The University of Mississippi during the battles sparked by the enrollment of the first black at the university in 1962. But he does not.

Although those intense years — which were the catalyst for his highly controversial book, "Mississippi: The Closed Society" — seem to have taken enough of their toll on the lives of those involved, progress itself seems to prevent Silver from letting the memories, and himself, rest.

As he recounted that era in his Jackson speech, those times seemed to hold a new fascination for Silver because some of the once-accepted conditions he helped rally against are "unheard of today," he said.

"Like I said at the end of my book (in 1965), the change has already started," he said in the interview. "The obvious thing is the South has made much more progress since then."

Silver maintains that he doesn't have "the faintest idea what's going on" today in Mississippi, which he left in 1965 to teach at the University of Notre Dame.

Now he lives on "Honey-moon Island" in Durendin, Fla. near Tampa where he will teach the last class of his career Wednesday at the University of Southern Florida. The subject matter of his final course, "William Faulkner: An Interpreter of American History," is "rather appropriate," he said. The famed Mississippi writer was Silver's intimate friend and Faulkner's support helped add academic clout to the struggle for civil rights.

But although Silver insists he "doesn't much care" about Mississippi's current progress, occasional comments indicate he still might study those state issues of which he used to be at the forefront. And although he didn't resist chiding what he per-



James Silver

ceived as the lingering characteristics of a "closed society" — his private comments suggested that Silver holds a deep affection for the state which often riles his temper.

He said those against the confirmation of L.T. Senter Jr. as a U.S. District Judge in north Mississippi possibly should reevaluate a portion of their stand.

Officials of the United League and the National Conference of Black Lawyers are opposing the appointment of Senter because he allegedly participated in a mob action that shot and castrated a black man in 1948 when Senter was 14 years old. They also claimed that he frequently called blacks "niggers," Senter said he only

Continued on Page 2C

The times, they are a changin'

Continued from Page 1C
witnessed the mob event and does not call blacks by that name.

"Like in the Senter thing, we can't continue to blame people. Senter was at that mob when he was 14 years old," Silver said. "That ought to be forgotten because people can change."

Lyndon Johnson changed and became about the number one civil rights leader in the United States."

But he added, "If Senter ever did call civil rights leaders 'niggers,' I don't think it's all right in that case."

Although he said the Senter issue might be one of overreaction, another issue seemed to make Silver's activist blood boil.

"What some of you in Mississippi have done to grade school and high school teachers is out of this world," he said of the State Department of Education's expected recommendation to raise state requirements for awarding teacher certificates. Currently, teachers must make a score of more than 850 on the National Teach-

ers Examination to teach in Mississippi. The anticipated proposal, however, would raise that cut-off mark to 1,000 — a score only 20 percent of black Mississippi students achieved on last year's test.

Silver's speech, which primarily reviewed his years at Ole Miss, was one of both serious analysis and comic antidotes as he discussed the university's stature, his allies — and his adversaries — of the era.

As he introduced the "astounding" details of an investigation by university-related officials who alleged that Silver's outspokenness was an infringement on his duties as a professor, Silver quipped, "I hope some of these people are still alive because they deserve to suffer."

Reflecting on those specific times, he questioned officials' claims that they were preserving the prestige of Ole Miss; Silver said there was little of it to save in those days, adding "Nobody in their right mind would go to Old Miss for an education anyway."

But his lasting opinion

of the university where he taught 30 years seems to hold more compassion.

"While I was at Ole Miss, I felt I had a purpose — a mission — in life. At Notre Dame, I had less of that feeling. Now, in Florida, I'm getting paid more than ever for doing nothing."

"It's a lousy school, Ole Miss was eighteen times better," Silver said in the interview. "I expected to spend my entire life at Ole Miss."

Although he seems willing to accept many of those early foes who now have quieted their protests and have strayed from the "closed society," he said that acceptance is not offered for some of their leaders — primarily those serving in public offices — who orchestrated the anti-civil rights movement.

"For instance, I don't think you can resurrect Bill Simmons (formerly the national administrator of the Citizens Councils of America) by any means," he said. "And I still think (Sen. James O.) Eastland will go down in history as a complete defender of wrong — and he should."

Silver gave no firm answers when asked where he would retire after his last class Wednesday, but he hinted that moving

back to Mississippi probably would offer him little escape from the reminders of that early struggle.

Even during his week-end stop here, he was offered the opportunity to get away from it all — but decided the relaxation would have to be on an unacceptable terrain.

The invitation was made by a former Ole Miss student who attended his Jackson speech and who had been standing at Silver's side when the riots broke out at the university on September 30, 1962, during the administration of Gov. Ross R. Barnett — who publicly advocated separation of the races.

"Why don't you stay around and we can go fishing together?" suggested the former student, who now is a Jackson attorney.

Silver looked up to consider the offer — then his eyes sparked as he realized where the best fishing waters are in these parts. "Me?... Go fishing at the ROSS BARNETT RESERVOIR?"

Although fishing apparently was not on his agenda this stop, Silver did take time out to travel to Oxford before finally returning to Florida — at least until Mississippi lures him back for another reunion.