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“TRUTH MARCHING ON”: DOCUMENTING THE PLAN TO BRING ROBERT F.  
KENNEDY TO THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI IN 1966

THESIS

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Documentary Expression  
in the Department of Southern Studies  
The University of Mississippi

By

Mary Paige Blessey

May 2019

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## ABSTRACT

Robert F. Kennedy visited the University of Mississippi on March 18, 1966 to give a speech followed by a question-and-answer period. My documentary project focuses on the group of students who planned this event and why they invited Kennedy. The thesis project consists of two parts: a film and a paper. This paper accompanies the documentary thesis film *Truth Marching On: Robert F. Kennedy at the University of Mississippi*. In this paper, I attempt to do the following: 1) summarize the necessary backstory of Kennedy's 1966 visit to the university that is central to my film and paper; 2) provide information and analysis of the components that make up the short film, which include interviews, archival materials, and additional film components; 3) give an overview of the structure of my short film and provide analysis about some of my filmmaking choices; 4) discuss some definitions of documentary film that inform my thinking about this project and discuss certain ways in which my film falls within the boundaries of these particular definitions.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

My M.F.A. thesis project consists of two parts: a film and a paper. This paper accompanies my documentary thesis film *Truth Marching On: Robert F. Kennedy at the University of Mississippi*.

In this paper, I attempt to do the following: 1) summarize the backstory of Kennedy's 1966 visit to the university that is central to my film and paper; 2) provide information and analysis of the components that make up the short film, which include interviews, archival materials, and additional film components; 3) give an overview of the structure of my short film and provide analysis about some of my filmmaking choices; 4) discuss some definitions of documentary film that inform my thinking about this project and discuss certain ways in which my film falls within the boundaries of these particular definitions.

I was introduced to this story by my father, Gerald Blessey, who was involved in planning Kennedy's visit to the university in 1966. He attended the university from 1960 to 1966—first as an undergraduate, then as a law student at the University of Mississippi School of Law. He originated the idea for the Law School Speakers Bureau (LSSB) along with Cleveland Donald, an undergraduate at the time who was the second African American student to graduate

from the University of Mississippi. Together, with help from a few fellow law students—notably Ed Ellington and Frank Thackston—they used the LSSB as the organization that would send the invitation to Robert Kennedy to speak on the campus.

Kennedy accepted, and on March 18, 1966 he gave a speech at the university to a crowd of over 6,000 people with more than two hundred press correspondents.<sup>1</sup> A question-and-answer period followed the main speech, in which law student Frank Thackston asked Kennedy to recount the backstory of the enrollment of James Meredith four years earlier. James Meredith had integrated the university as its first African American student in 1962. His enrollment catalyzed a series of standoffs between Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett and the federal government—represented primarily by President John F. Kennedy and attorney general Robert F. Kennedy—culminating in the infamous violence on campus the night of September 30, 1962. Answering Thackston’s question, Robert Kennedy spoke candidly about former Governor Barnett and his backroom dealings with the Kennedy administration leading up to and during Meredith’s enrollment and the resulting violence.

My goal for the documentary project is to look into the backstory and surrounding context of why the students invited Kennedy to speak at the university in 1966. This is an important story that is unknown to many people in Mississippi and nationwide. I hope *Truth Marching On* unfolds as a story of political courage with timely and nuanced reflections on free speech, the role of the press, civil rights, student activism, and the ‘better angels of our nature’ in American politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Mullen, Phil. “Robert Kennedy Cheered by 6,000 at Ole Miss—‘Only in America.’” *The Osceola Times*, 24 March 1966, p. A1.

## CHAPTER 2

### REFLECTION PAPER

#### I. THE STORY

To understand the LSSB's motivation for inviting Kennedy in 1966, one needs to understand the circumstances surrounding the enrollment of James Meredith four years earlier. In 1962, James Meredith enrolled at the University of Mississippi as its first African American student.<sup>2</sup> The governor of Mississippi at the time was Ross Barnett, a demagogic figure who had gained popularity among white voters through his bombastic, white supremacist rhetoric and his stubborn opposition to the federal government on the issue of integration. Barnett had actually run as a so-called 'moderate' candidate, by the standards of that time, in earlier state elections.<sup>3</sup> Author and journalist Curtis Wilkie explains, "[W]hen Ross Barnett first began running for public office, he ran as a moderate and then quickly realized that that wasn't going to work."<sup>4</sup> By the gubernatorial election of 1960, he had asserted himself as *the* segregationist candidate for Mississippi. He was elected and served from 1960 to 1964.

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<sup>2</sup> Eagles, Charles W. *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss*. University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Doyle, William. *An American Insurrection: James Meredith and The Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962*. Anchor Books, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Wilkie, Curtis. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 2 November 2018.



In 1962, eight years had passed since *Brown v. Board* and the state’s flagship university had yet to enroll an African American student. Meredith, a twenty-nine-year-old veteran who had previously attended Jackson State University, was accepted to the university and was set to be the first known African American student to enroll.<sup>5</sup> Barnett openly opposed Meredith’s admission and promised his base he would bravely defend the ‘Southern way of life’ by preventing Meredith’s enrollment. Historian Charles Eagles writes in his 2009 book *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss*, “Even after the federal courts ordered Meredith’s admission, Mississippi remained defiant. As a result Meredith, assisted by the U.S. Department of Justice, clashed repeatedly with inflexible state leaders when he tried to register.”<sup>6</sup> Barnett, like many of his peers, subscribed to a fabricated legal theory of “interposition,” claiming he had the right as governor to “interpose” himself between the state of Mississippi and a federal court order. Newspapers ran headlines commending Barnett for his defiance. The front page of *The Clarion Ledger* in Jackson, Mississippi on September 21, 1962 reads: “Governor Barnett Rejects Meredith, Keeps His Word To State Citizens.”<sup>7</sup> A headline the same day in the *Daily Mississippian* proclaims: “Governor keeps promise.”<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to the general public, Barnett was engaged in ongoing negotiations with the Kennedy administration, including President Kennedy and attorney general Robert Kennedy and his staff, about how to carry out and allow Meredith’s enrollment. Barnett, perhaps aware that he did not, in fact, have the authority to supersede a ruling of the Supreme Court, would ultimately have to let Meredith register for classes—despite promising the opposite

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<sup>5</sup> Eagles, Charles W. *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss*. University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Eagles, Charles W. *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss*. University of North Carolina Press, 2009, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> “Governor Barnett Rejects Meredith.” *The Clarion-Ledger*, 21 September 1962, p. A1.

<sup>8</sup> “Governor keeps promise.” *The Daily Mississippian*, 21 September 1962.

to his public. Barnett attempted to negotiate a plan with the Kennedys that would allow him to save face in Mississippi by standing in the door of the university, ostensibly barring Meredith's entry, then eventually stepping down when faced by U.S. marshals.<sup>9</sup>

The idea was to appear as though he had bravely resisted as long as he could, finally stepping down only by force of gunpoint. Barnett negotiated the details of this plan in the course of over twenty-five phone with the Kennedy administration, all taped by the white house.<sup>10</sup> The conversations between Barnett and Robert Kennedy in particular include various darkly comedic moments such as the back-and-forth dialogue about how many guns, exactly, Barnett wanted pointed at him to create the desired effect.<sup>11</sup> As William F. Winter, who later served as Mississippi's 58th governor in the 1980s, remembers in a 2017 interview, "Ross was looking for a way out."<sup>12</sup>

Despite his ongoing negotiations with the Kennedys, Barnett continued to sing the tune of segregation and states' rights to his base in Mississippi. The building tension reached a fever pitch at the Ole Miss vs. Kentucky football game on September 29, 1962.<sup>13</sup> Barnett appeared during the halftime show to make an explosive speech to a crowd of thousands of fans waving confederate battle flags. Barnett shouted, "I love Mississippi! I love her people! I love her heritage!"<sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> Wilkie describes the atmosphere in the stadium was "hysterical" in response to

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<sup>9</sup> Eagles, Charles W. *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss*. University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Doyle, William. *An American Insurrection: James Meredith and The Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962*. Anchor Books, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Doyle, William. *An American Insurrection: James Meredith and The Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962*. Anchor Books, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Winter, William F. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 10 July 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Doyle, William. *An American Insurrection: James Meredith and The Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962*. Anchor Books, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> *Rebels: James Meredith & The Integration of Ole Miss*. Film directed by Matthew Graves. The Southern Documentary Project, University of Mississippi, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Eagles, Charles W. *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss*. University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

Barnett's "looney speech."<sup>16</sup> Wilkie and Blessey, who both attended the game as students, both describe the scene, with the thousands of flags and chant responses to Barnett's speech, as reminiscent of the Nuremberg rallies in Nazi Germany. "That night reminded me of a Nazi rally, that it must have been what Nuremberg was like,"<sup>17</sup> Wilkie says. "It reminded me, frankly, of the Nazi rallies at Nuremberg with the swastika flags," Blessey remembers, continuing, "It was frightening in that sense because it was fascism in real life right in front of us, what was coming about."<sup>18</sup> By this time, much of the ire toward the federal government had begun to focus on Robert Kennedy as the attorney general, and thus the one tasked with enforcing the integration order onto the university.<sup>19</sup> Pamphlets were passed out in the stadium with the lyrics to a new cheer for the crowd, which included the lines, "Ross is standing like Gibraltar / He will never falter / Ask us what we say / It's to Hell with Bobby K!"<sup>20</sup>

That night, following the football game in Jackson, violence erupted on the University of Mississippi campus in Oxford. A large crowd that included university students as well as others from around the state and region congregated on the campus, a scene that escalated into the now notorious events of September 30, 1962.<sup>21</sup> In his 2001 book *An American Insurrection: James Meredith and The Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962*, William Doyle describes the event as "a chaotic battle between thousands of white civilians and a small corps of federal marshals," which ended only after President John F. Kennedy "ordered a lightning invasion of Mississippi by over

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<sup>16</sup> Wilkie, Curtis. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 2 November 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Wilkie, Curtis. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 2 November 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Doyle, William. *An American Insurrection: James Meredith and The Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962*. Anchor Books, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Meacham, Ellen B. *Delta Epiphany: Robert F. Kennedy in Mississippi*. University Press of Mississippi, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Eagles, Charles W. *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss*. University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

20,000 U.S. combat infantry, paratroopers, military police, and National Guard troops.”<sup>22</sup>

Academics, media outlets, and others have variously described the tragic events on the campus as everything from riots, to an insurrection, to the final battle of the Civil War. In light of the ample scholarship and documentation on this particular subject, I will refrain from providing further detail about these events, while encouraging the reader to reference the scholarship of Charles Eagles, as well as that of William Doyle and many others for further investigation into this subject.

In 1966, four years had passed since the chaos surrounding James Meredith’s enrollment. Paul B. Johnson Jr., Barnett’s former lieutenant governor, was now serving as governor of Mississippi. At that time, governors in Mississippi could not serve more than one consecutive term, but they could run again after four years. Barnett was eligible and planning to run again the following year in 1967. He was still popular among many white voters who believed he had acted bravely on their behalf in 1962. The backroom phone calls with the Kennedys were still unknown to most of the general public. A small group of students decided they wanted to damage Barnett’s political reputation, hoping that it may hurt his chances at reelection the following year.

Gerald Blessey was now a law student at the University of Mississippi in 1966, having graduated with his bachelor’s degree in political science from the same institution. He was vocal in his opposition to segregation on campus. He had been president of the Young Democrats as an undergraduate and had worked in the state with civil rights organizations including SNCC and COFO.<sup>23</sup> For example, during Freedom Summer in 1964, as a Resident Assistant in his

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<sup>22</sup> Doyle, William. *An American Insurrection: James Meredith and The Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962*. Anchor Books, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

dormitory, he arranged for incoming organizers to sneak onto campus and sleep in empty dorm rooms when they needed a place to stay, before receiving their housing assignments in the state.<sup>24</sup> Later, as a law student, he wrote a column in the *Daily Mississippian* criticizing Ross Barnett and calling for his resignation, which prompted Barnett to call the dean of the law school, Joshua Morse, to demand he be expelled. Morse managed to deflect and reassure Barnett that Blessey was not a threat, and the expulsion issue was dropped.<sup>25</sup> By 1966, as his classmate Frank Thackston recounts in a 2017 interview, Blessey had made a name for himself as “the campus liberal.”<sup>26</sup>

Cleveland Donald was the second African American student to graduate from the University of Mississippi. For clarification, there was another student, Cleve McDowell, who was the second African American to attend but he did not graduate; Cleveland Donald became the second to enroll and graduate from the university. Donald was a highly accomplished student who later went on to earn his doctorate in history from Cornell University and become a professor, and later a minister.<sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup> He passed away in 2012. Donald grew up in Jackson, Mississippi and was active in the civil rights movement from a young age, a commitment he continued throughout his life.<sup>29</sup>

Donald attended Sam Brinkley High School in Jackson, Mississippi where he was a leader in a youth civil rights demonstration that resulted in his and several other students’ arrest.<sup>30</sup> As a teenager, he served as Youth Field Secretary for the NAACP and worked with

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<sup>24</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Thackston, Frank. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 22 July 2017.

<sup>27</sup> “Celebrating the Life of Reverend Dr. Cleveland Donald, Jr.” Funeral Program from the funeral of Cleveland Donald, Jr., 4 February 2012. Provided by Donald family.

<sup>28</sup> Carey, Thomas John. “Cleveland Donald, Jr.” *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, Center for Study of Southern Culture, 13 Apr. 2018, [mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/cleveland-donald-jr/](http://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/cleveland-donald-jr/).

<sup>29</sup> Donald, James. Personal interview “A.” Interview by Mary Blessey. 14 June 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Donald, James. Personal interview “A.” Interview by Mary Blessey. 14 June 2018.

Medgar Evers and others in Jackson.<sup>31</sup> I interviewed one of Cleveland Donald's brothers, James Donald, for this project. Both James Donald and James Meredith recounted to me in their interviews that there was a meeting at one point that included Medgar Evers, Cleveland Donald, and James Meredith. At his meeting, according to these two oral history accounts, they discussed the planned enrollment of James Meredith and how Donald would be a good choice as one of the early African American students to follow closely after Meredith.<sup>32</sup> <sup>33</sup> "James was a frequent member to our house," James Donald remembers.<sup>34</sup> In my interview with Meredith, he says, "Cleveland Donald is the first student at Ole Miss. James Meredith wasn't a student—I was a soldier at war, running a war. Cleveland Donald came to Ole Miss as a student..."<sup>35</sup>

Cleveland Donald first attended Tougaloo College and transferred to the University of Mississippi in 1964.<sup>36</sup> He was the last student to enter the University of Mississippi under protection from U.S. marshals.<sup>37</sup> He continued his commitment to activism during his time in Oxford, continuing his work with the NAACP and organizing with people involved in the movement around the state.<sup>38</sup> He served as co-chairman of the statewide Mississippi Young Democrats during the 1965-1966 school year.<sup>39</sup> His brother James Donald describes him as "somewhat reserved, shy from TV cameras... He preferred to work underneath the scenes,"

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<sup>31</sup> Donald, James. Personal interview "A." Interview by Mary Blessey. 14 June 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Donald, James. Personal interview "A." Interview by Mary Blessey. 14 June 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Meredith, James. Personal interview "A." Interview by Mary Blessey. 14 June 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Donald, James. Personal interview "A." Interview by Mary Blessey. 14 June 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Meredith, James. Personal interview "A." Interview by Mary Blessey. 14 June 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Carey, Thomas John. "Cleveland Donald, Jr." *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, Center for Study of Southern Culture, 13 Apr. 2018, [mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/cleveland-donald-jr/](http://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/cleveland-donald-jr/).

<sup>37</sup> Donald, James. Personal interview "A." Interview by Mary Blessey. 14 June 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Donald, James. Personal interview "A." Interview by Mary Blessey. 14 June 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Young Democrats document, 1965-1966. Special Archives, J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi.

“diligent in his homework... and a big thinker.”<sup>40</sup> James Donald continues, “When he was all in, he was all in...Cleveland [was] so consumed about the truth, he wanted that to be told.”<sup>41</sup>

Donald was four years younger than Blessey. They cultivated a working relationship through their membership in Young Democrats and their shared commitment to civil rights progress in the state. They began attending organizing meetings and events around the state together, multiple examples of which Blessey shares in his interviews for this project. For example, Blessey recounts going with Donald in 1965 to a COFO staff meeting in Jackson where John Lewis was in attendance.<sup>42</sup> When they arrived, they learned there was a confidential briefing with only the local black leaders. Blessey, being white, stepped outside and waited during the briefing. Driving back to Oxford that evening, Blessey and Donald, alone in the car, were followed closely by an unknown car full of white men for most of the drive from Jackson to Oxford. Remembering the murders of the three Civil Rights workers in Neshoba County the year before, they stayed on main streets and highways and did not stop until they reached the university campus, where they drove straight to the Campus Police office. Shortly before arriving on campus, the following car turned off and disappeared.<sup>43</sup>

Another example Blessey recounts was in 1964, when he accompanied Donald in their plan to integrate Fulton Chapel.<sup>44</sup> Fulton Chapel is located on the Circle in the heart of the University of Mississippi campus. By this time, the school had been officially integrated for two years, but no African American student had yet attended a public event at Fulton Chapel, to their knowledge. Donald and Blessey bought tickets for an opera performance at the chapel and sat

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<sup>40</sup> Donald, James. Personal interview “A.” Interview by Mary Blessey. 14 June 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Donald, James. Personal interview “A.” Interview by Mary Blessey. 14 June 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

down in the middle of the audience. When they sat down together, several rows of white students in front and behind them got up and left. Blessey and Donald remained in their seats for the duration of the performance, and that was the extent of the conflict.<sup>45</sup>

By 1966, Blessey was in his final year of law school and Donald was still an undergraduate. Both were still politically active on campus and in the state. Blessey remembers Donald having connections in Washington D.C. through his work with Young Democrats, the NAACP, and other civil rights organizations.<sup>46</sup> Robert Kennedy was by this time the junior senator for the state of New York. Donald shared with Blessey a rumor he had heard from some friends of his in the movement: there were *recordings* of Barnett's rumored phone calls with the Kennedy white house during the Meredith enrollment in 1962. The tape recordings were said to be highly embarrassing of Barnett. They exposed him as a hypocrite who had capitulated behind the scenes at the same time as his public grandstanding, contributing to the combusive atmosphere and violence. Blessey describes that these rumors about the tapes were circulating around the Democratic party and within activist circles, but many average Mississippians they knew remained unaware.<sup>47</sup>

With Barnett running again the next year in 1967, Blessey and Donald wanted to form a plan that could hurt Barnett in the race. They thought that if this backstory about the tapes were made public, it could severely damage Barnett's reputation, even among segregationist voters who might at minimum resent being lied to by their Governor. The two students also hoped this new information would be eye-opening to Mississippi voters in general, that it may cause more people to question their support for someone like this, and a system that would allow it. They

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<sup>45</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.



figured anything that contributed to damaging Barnett's chances in the election was a good thing. They believed it could be a valuable step, however small, in the right direction.<sup>48</sup>

The students figured that, in order for the information about the tapes to actually reach a large audience in Mississippi, the story needed to break in some 'official' way. The public needed to hear the story in a way that would constitute more than rumors. They needed to make the story difficult for the more conservative press outlets in Mississippi to ignore, skew, or gloss over. Breaking this story was important not only to share the truth behind the history of 1962, but also, and more urgently, to attempt to damage Barnett's political reputation before the upcoming election. As Blessey says in 2017, "That was our strategy, to expose him."<sup>49</sup>

Blessey remembers sitting in his dorm room one day with Donald. The two were discussing Barnett and the upcoming election. They mused that it would be great if Robert Kennedy himself came to the University of Mississippi and exposed Barnett.<sup>50</sup> Kennedy was anathema to many conservative white Mississippians who still resented the him and his late brother for integrating the school and, in their minds, "causing" the Meredith violence.<sup>51</sup> This is the same school were only three years before, a group of students in the student union on campus had cheered the news of President Kennedy's assassination.<sup>52</sup> Bringing Bobby Kennedy to Oxford, Mississippi would be controversial and garner a lot of press, which would help spread the story of the tapes and the backroom dealings with Barnett. Donald and Blessey figured that even the conservative press outlets in Mississippi would not be able to ignore a story like this. They also maintained the more idealistic goal of creating an opportunity for open forum

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<sup>48</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Meacham, Ellen B. *Delta Epiphany: Robert F. Kennedy in Mississippi*. University Press of Mississippi, 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

discussion, bringing people with different views together to engage in honest debate and listen to each other, they hoped. If all went well, this event was a chance to bring a highly public figure to Mississippi—one of the last people anyone would expect to be invited to this school at this time—in a way that could potentially bring some positive attention to the school and spark a productive dialogue.<sup>53</sup>

Mississippi in 1966 was in many ways what James Silver had described as a “closed society” in his book of the same name two years earlier.<sup>54</sup> It was difficult for many people to access accurate information, particularly about the civil rights movement going on in the state and nationwide. Many of the local press outlets maintained an unabashed slant toward conservative, segregationist positions.<sup>55</sup> <sup>56</sup> For many Mississippians, the primary source of print news was two Jackson papers, the *Clarion-Ledger* and the *Jackson Daily News*—both owned by the powerful, connected, and famously segregationist Hederman family.<sup>57</sup> <sup>58</sup> <sup>59</sup> Without the internet, cable television, and other resources we take for granted today, access to alternative sources of information was limited.

There were some exceptions, of course. Certain press outlets offered more balanced information. Often cited examples include Hodding Carter’s *Delta Democrat Times*, Bill Minor’s reporting for the *Times-Picayune*, Ira Harkey’s *Chronicle-Star*, and others. Harkey, for one example, “savaged the ‘Fascist’ tactics employed by Gov. Ross Barnett in attempting to prevent Meredith from enrolling.”<sup>60</sup> This earned him a Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Writing in May of

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<sup>53</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Silver, James W. *Mississippi: The Closed Society*. University Press of Mississippi, 1964.

<sup>55</sup> Silver, James W. *Mississippi: The Closed Society*. University Press of Mississippi, 1964.

<sup>56</sup> Meacham, Ellen B. *Delta Epiphany: Robert F. Kennedy in Mississippi*. University Press of Mississippi, 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Meacham, Ellen. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 10 October 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Wilkie, Curtis. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 2 November 2018.

<sup>59</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>60</sup> Houck, Davis W. “Ira Harkey.” *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, Center for Study of Southern Culture, 14 Apr. 2018, [mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/ira-harkey/](http://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/ira-harkey/).

1963.<sup>61</sup> His defiance also earned him a cross burned in his front yard by the Ku Klux Klan, and a shotgun blast through his front window, and years of hate mail, death threats, and harassment.<sup>62</sup>

It was difficult for people to speak out or dare to offer different views.

Contributing to this closed atmosphere, the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning had imposed a “Speaker Ban” for all public universities in the state.<sup>63</sup> Members of the IHL board were appointed by the governor. The board at that time was comprised of entirely white men and known to be openly biased in favor of segregation. David Sansing writes in *The University of Mississippi: A Sesquicentennial History*, “[T]he board established a speaker ban policy. As the civil rights revolution became increasingly volatile, Ole Miss and other state colleges had to obtain the specific approval of the board of trustees before an individual could be invited to speak on campus.”<sup>64</sup> In order for a speaker from off campus to speak on a public college campus in Mississippi, one would first need the discretionary permission of the school’s president or chancellor, which was then ultimately subject to the approval of the IHL board who presided above the chancellors. The rule was instated under the pretense of protecting students from allegedly dangerous views—they wanted to prevent “outside agitators” from exposing students to more liberal ideas, particularly support for civil rights.

Donald and Blessey knew the Speaker Ban would be an obstacle in their effort to bring Robert Kennedy to speak at the campus. However, first they needed to figure out if they could

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<sup>61</sup> Houck, Davis W. “Ira Harkey.” *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, Center for Study of Southern Culture, 14 Apr. 2018, mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/ira-harkey/.

<sup>62</sup> Houck, Davis W. “Ira Harkey.” *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, Center for Study of Southern Culture, 14 Apr. 2018, mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/ira-harkey/.

<sup>63</sup> Sansing, David G. *The University of Mississippi: A Sesquicentennial History*. University Press of Mississippi, 1999, p. 274.

<sup>64</sup> Sansing, David G. *The University of Mississippi: A Sesquicentennial History*. University Press of Mississippi, 1999, p. 274.

even get Kennedy to accept their invitation. According to Blessey, Donald reached out to his organizing friends to secure an appointment at Senator Kennedy's office in Washington D.C.<sup>65</sup> Donald traveled to D.C. thinking he would meet with only Kennedy's staff to discuss the invitation. When he arrived, he was able to meet with the senator himself. Donald left the meeting assured that if the University of Mississippi invited Kennedy to make a speech, the senator would accept, but under one condition. There had to be a question-and-answer period after the speech included as part of the invitation.<sup>66</sup>

The impression given to Donald was that Kennedy did not want to look like he was traveling to Mississippi for the sole purpose of calling out the former governor.<sup>67</sup> Kennedy was mindful of the optics of the situation. Instead, he wanted to be asked—even urged, prodded—by someone else to talk about Barnett, and then he would finally relent. Kennedy insinuated to Donald that he would speak about the phone calls only if he were asked by a student in the audience. Furthermore, he would dodge and evade an answer out of politeness the first time, so the student would need to ask him more than once. His resistance to the question at first would help avoid the appearance that he had planned to come down with the intention of exposing Barnett—although that was, in fact, very much the plan. After receiving this information during Donald's visit to D.C., the two students had their plan: the university needed to invite the senator to make a speech on any topic of his choosing, followed by a question-and-answer period in which a student would persistently ask to hear about the backstory of the Meredith crisis, to which Kennedy would eventually give his answer.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

The students knew that Kennedy would accept their invitation, but the Speaker Ban still posed a problem. They assumed that if they put in a request for Robert Kennedy to speak by himself, the Kennedy name would be seen as a red flag and would immediately be rejected by the school's top administration, and ultimately the IHL. Instead, they decided to try submitting a long list of several speakers from across the political spectrum, including conservatives, liberals, moderates, and anyone they could think to invite.<sup>69</sup> They hoped that if Kennedy's name were among a long list of names from across the spectrum, perhaps the chancellor would brush off Kennedy's name as impossible and approve the entire list anyway. If Kennedy's name could at least get approved by the dean and the chancellor as part of the whole list, they could say they got him approved by following the rules. Then they could decide later whether to invite any other names on the list for different events in the future.<sup>70</sup> But the primary and most urgent goal was to get Kennedy's invitation accepted, so they could host an event with him including a question-and-answer period as planned.

The students needed an organization that could send the invitation. Blessey says they worried that if they went through Omicron Delta Kappa (ODK), or any of the other existing campus organizations that regularly invited speakers, the invitation would either be denied, or the approval and planning process would take too long.<sup>71</sup> They knew timing was important if they wanted to try to damage Barnett's reputation before the election the following year. Donald was still an undergraduate. Blessey was in law school. They decided they would have the best luck planning this through the law school and dealing with the law school Dean, Joshua Morse.

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<sup>69</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Some of the others on the list did eventually get invited, and some appeared at the university later that year and in the future, at different subsequent events. Others who were invited refused to accept on the grounds of not wanting to be associated with any organization "that would invite Robert Kennedy," as remembered by Blessey in his 2017 interview. Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>71</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

So, they decided Blessey and other law students would need to form a new organization, the Law School Speakers Bureau, which would send the invitation.<sup>72</sup>

The LSSB needed a chairman. Donald was not a law student, so he could not head up the organization. They decided Blessey would not be a good strategic choice, due to his political reputation on campus. They did not want preconceived notions about him or his politics to derail their purpose, make it harder to get the invitation approved, or cause people to write it off as some ‘liberal’ activist stunt.<sup>73</sup> In light of this, they selected Blessey’s law school classmate Ed Ellington. In describing his decision, Blessey says he thought to himself, “We need to choose somebody like Ed Ellington—who we know is for supporting constitutional law and he’s a good, moderate, even-tempered person, but very few would even know what his political leanings are at that time.”<sup>74</sup> Blessey asked Ellington to be the chairman, and he accepted. Blessey did not tell Ellington about Donald’s visit with Kennedy in Washington D.C. He remembers telling Ellington, simply, “If you invite Kennedy, he’ll come.”<sup>75</sup> Ellington went forward with the plan.

The LSSB submitted their proposed list of speakers for approval. Dean Morse, and the chancellor of the university, J.D. Williams, approved the list without objection.<sup>76</sup> The LSSB sent out the invitations, and Kennedy accepted his invitation. They also sent invitations to some of the other names on the list. Many of the others invited made a show of rejecting their invitations, insisting that they would not be seen potentially sharing a stage with Kennedy or accepting an invitation by the same body that would dare to invite Kennedy. This left them with Kennedy accepting, and others either backing down or being invited for later separate events. As planned,

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<sup>72</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>74</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017, p. 15.

<sup>75</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>76</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

Kennedy's event would constitute its own event and he would appear by himself. Technically, the students had followed the rules under the guidelines of the Speaker Ban by getting signed approval from Dean Morse and Chancellor Williams.

Eventually word got out in the press that Kennedy had accepted an invitation to appear at the university. Blessey and Donald knew it was important that Kennedy's acceptance be made public early on.<sup>77</sup> This way, it would be harder for the IHL to shut down an event that had already been widely reported in the press. The news of Kennedy's acceptance was a huge story that caused great controversy, as expected. Letters and hate mail were sent to the dean, the LSSB, and the school. Prominent alumni and businesspeople around the state wrote demanding that the invitation be rescinded and condemning the school for allowing the invitation at all. State leadership vocally opposed the event. Op-eds around the state condemned it and lamented the deterioration of the university.<sup>78 79 80 81</sup>

As the students had feared, members of the IHL board opposed the invitation and wanted to prevent Kennedy from speaking. According to Blessey, Dean Morse later recounted to him that he, Morse, and Chancellor J.D. Williams were called by the IHL to appear before the board, where the board asked them to rescind the invitation.<sup>82</sup> Blessey remembers in his interview, "The Board of Trustees of Institutions of Higher Learning, when they learned about Robert Kennedy being invited, they called Josh Morse and Chancellor Williams on the carpet down to Jackson and said, 'You've got to reverse this invitation. You've got to turn it down. He can't come. Robert Kennedy can't come.'<sup>83</sup> Morse and Williams told the board that the students had

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<sup>77</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>78</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Ellington, Edward. Personal Interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 13 June 2017.

<sup>80</sup> Thackston, Frank. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 22 July 2017.

<sup>81</sup> Meacham, Ellen. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 10 October 2017.

<sup>82</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>83</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017, p. 21.

followed all the rules, gotten permission through the proper channels, and they would not rescind the invitation.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, Morse told the board that if they tried to fire him for refusing to cancel the event, he would let them fire him and he would tell the press around the world why they did it.<sup>85</sup> He warned the board about the prospect of losing accreditation and the consequences of the public knowing that they had gone to these lengths to stifle free speech. Morse and Williams stood their ground, and the IHL voted, by a one-vote margin of 5-4, to allow the Kennedy speech on campus.<sup>86</sup>

Planning for the speech moved forward, but public backlash and controversy continued to build. The school and the LSSB continued to receive hate mail about the event.<sup>87 88 89 90</sup> Letters found in the University of Mississippi J.D. Williams Library Special Archives reveal that the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist organizations threatened to protest the event. This was only four years after the Meredith riots and two years after the violence of Freedom Summer in Mississippi, among countless other examples of tragedies and turmoil across the South. Considering this atmosphere as well as the assassination of President Kennedy only three years earlier, it was reasonable to fear that violence may erupt at Kennedy's visit. But the more the controversy stirred surrounding the event, the larger the number grew of people who wanted to attend.<sup>91 92</sup> At the start, the LSSB had planned to invite only law students. It quickly became clear that the entire law school plus undergraduates wanted to go. Then interest grew from

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<sup>84</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>85</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>86</sup> This is according to Blessey's 2017 interview for this project, in which he remembers Morse sharing with him that the board had voted by a one-vote margin of 5-4. Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>87</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>88</sup> Ellington, Edward. Personal Interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 13 June 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Thackston, Frank. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 22 July 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Meacham, Ellen. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 10 October 2017.

<sup>91</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>92</sup> Thackston, Frank. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 22 July 2017.



faculty, parents, and people all over the state. They eventually had no choice but to move the event to the newly constructed Tad Smith Coliseum, which was still not quite finished but could accommodate thousands of people.

The day of Kennedy's speech arrived: March 18, 1966. Instead of the negative reactions many people had feared, Kennedy received an overwhelmingly positive reception. He brought his wife, Ethel Kennedy, at the invitation of Chancellor William's wife, who had made a personal phone call to Mrs. Kennedy to invite her as a common Southern courtesy.<sup>93</sup> The Kennedys landed at the airport in Oxford to a crowd of reporters and young people cheering him and asking for autographs. Blessey was given the assignment to pick them up in the university's car and drive them to campus. In the car were Blessey, Robert Kennedy, Ethel Kennedy, a bodyguard, and Mary McGrory, who was reporting for the *Washington Star*. Blessey remembers both Kennedys being interested in the poverty they saw on the way from the airport into town, and Bobby Kennedy requested that they drive out of the way to see more of those neighborhoods. Kennedy would return to Mississippi the following year for his famous tour of the Mississippi Delta to examine poverty conditions in 1967, accompanied by Marion Wright.<sup>94</sup>

Once on campus, Kennedy met briefly with the Young Democrats and also with the Newman Club, the Catholic student organization on campus. They also attended a luncheon at the alumni house that included some students and members of the LSSB. Blessey, Ellington, and Frank Thackston, all law students, remember the impression it made at the luncheon when Robert and Ethel Kennedy made a point to shake hands with not only the white people in the

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<sup>93</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>94</sup> Meacham, Ellen B. *Delta Epiphany: Robert F. Kennedy in Mississippi*. University Press of Mississippi, 2018.

room, but also with all of the African American kitchen workers present.<sup>95 96 97</sup> Thackston remembers in his 2017 interview, “The Kennedys greeted them just as warmly, and they were just as glad to see them, as they were all of us, which just didn’t happen back then. That just wasn’t something that occurred. And I never will forget that.”<sup>98</sup>

After lunch, they made their way through more crowds to the coliseum. The senator and his wife walked out on stage to a standing ovation of over 6,000 people. There were over 200 press personnel from around the country and world. Ellington gave an introduction in which he referenced James Silver’s “closed society.” Kennedy made a motivational speech focusing on unity and encouraging young people to be more civically engaged. The speech, perhaps mild by today’s standards, appears tailored to act as an olive branch after the Meredith crisis and to encourage the crowd to be more open-minded, particularly on the issue of civil rights.

After the main speech, Ellington stood up to announce the beginning of the question-and-answer period. This was the moment for the LSSB’s plan to begin. Unknown to the audience and the onlooking press, the LSSB had planted Blessey’s friend and law school classmate, Frank Thackston, to be ready in the audience to ask the first question. “Ed Ellington recognized him for the first question, so we’d make sure it didn’t unravel into something else,”<sup>99</sup> Blessey explains. Ellington knew beforehand that he would call on Thackston first. Blessey and Ellington had chosen Thackston, another white student they knew to be in support of integration, in part because of his thick southern accent. “Frank, we decided, would be perfect to ask the questions

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<sup>95</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017.

<sup>96</sup> Ellington, Edward. Personal Interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 13 June 2017.

<sup>97</sup> Thackston, Frank. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 22 July 2017.

<sup>98</sup> Thackston, Frank. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 22 July 2017, p. 13.

<sup>99</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017, p. 18.

because he clearly would not be a plant from New York,” Blessey says. “He would be a southern voice.”<sup>100</sup>

The question-and-answer period began. In a recording of the question-and-answer period, Ellington can be heard telling the crowd at first, “I might be a little prejudiced in taking more questions from the law school than from the ones around it, but I think we can hear better from here.”<sup>101</sup> This comment further illustrates the staging of this plan, as Ellington already knew precisely which law student he would call on first, but his remark suggests he was picking from the law students simply because they were closer. Ellington looked around and pointed at Thackston, who stood up and asked, “Who do you believe to be primarily responsible for the Ole Miss riots, and why?”<sup>102</sup>

Kennedy laughed and responded, “Well, that was an interesting question.”<sup>103</sup> This prompted a large laugh from the audience. As planned, he deflected and had to be asked more than once. Thackston continued to repeat the question, saying, “I would appreciate any general discussion of it.” After some back-and-forth between Thackston and Kennedy, the senator said, “I’d be glad to discuss it, but what point—rather than me just to start, when do you want to start and what do you want to do? Because we can be here for an hour.” Thackston in the audience responded, “I’ve heard numerous things...” Kennedy responded, “Why don’t you say something that you’ve heard about me and I’ll tell you whether it’s true or not?” This drew a roaring laughter from the crowd that lasted several seconds. Then Kennedy said:

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<sup>100</sup> Blessey, Gerald H. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 12 August 2017, p. 18.

<sup>101</sup> Kennedy, Robert F. Question-and-answer period following speech at University of Mississippi. 18 March 1966. Audio recording. Personal archive of William Tyler, Clips 1-5, “Clip 1.” WAV file.

<sup>102</sup> Kennedy, Robert F. Question-and-answer period following speech at University of Mississippi. 18 March 1966. Audio recording. Personal archive of William Tyler, Clips 1-5, “Clip 1.” WAV file.

<sup>103</sup> Kennedy, Robert F. Question-and-answer period following speech at University of Mississippi. 18 March 1966. Audio recording. Personal archive of William Tyler, Clips 1-5, “Clip 1.” WAV file.

I asked [at] lunch today, whether anybody—my host, whether anybody thought anything good of me down here. And my host was very frank and said, "You want me to give you a frank answer?" And I said, "Yes." And he said, "I don't think there is anybody." So let's start from that.<sup>104</sup>

The crowd laughed again, and from there Kennedy launched into his answer about the events of the Meredith enrollment in 1962. He spoke for about thirty minutes on the subject alone, detailing times and dates of phone conversations with Governor Barnett, exposing various comical moments and mimicking Barnett. The following are excerpts from Kennedy's response to this first question, sourced from a transcript of the recording. These are particular excerpts of note regarding Barnett, but the full answer is much longer and is not included in its entirety here:

I suppose I spoke to, um, Governor Barnett, I... probably 25 times during that period of time from September to October. And President Kennedy spoke to him two or three times. He had a number of suggestions he felt that the situation was embarrassing to him politically, that he had said that he wouldn't permit any negro to attend the University of Mississippi and he said that, uh, it would be embarrassing if it occurred.

[...]

At one time—so at various times, we wanted to avoid using any kind of force by the federal government, and we wanted the orders of the court upheld. And that was the position that we were in. I was working with the governor of the state of Mississippi because we want, as I say, want to avoid the use of force, we wanted to avoid the use of any troops or marshals. And so I was trying to work out an arrangement with the governor of the state of Mississippi whereby the orders of the court would be upheld.

He made various suggestions during the course of the, I—I believe Mr. Meredith came here on September 29th or September 30th, but the Thursday preceding that Sunday. He,

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<sup>104</sup> Kennedy, Robert F. Question-and-answer period following speech at University of Mississippi. 18 March 1966. Audio recording. Personal archive of William Tyler, Clips 1-5, "Clip 1." WAV file.

uh, suggested that if we could come down with a few marshals and come here to Oxford that he would then step aside and permit him to come in. And I said, "Well, we'll send him down with four marshals," and he thought that that wasn't enough. So, I suggested—or he suggested if we could send 30 or 40 marshals. We compromised by saying maybe we'd send about 25 marshals. *[crowd laughter]*

We then got into a question about he wanted the marshals to draw their guns. *[crowd laughter]* You asked for the facts. He asked if the marshals could draw their guns, I said that I was concerned about the question of pulling guns and I thought that if they just arrived here, that it was—that maybe he could just step aside when he saw the 25 marshals. *[crowd laughter]* They then call up and I said, "Well then, we'll have the chief marshal pull his gun." *[crowd laughter]* And so he called back and said, "I'll talk to my advisors about that." *[crowd laughter]* And he called, and he called back and said that all of the marshals would have to pull their guns. *[crowd laughter]*

And it was also stipulated—it was also stipulated that the guns had to be pointed at the governor, and at the other public officials of the state of Mississippi, so that a picture could be taken when they stepped aside, so that the people of under Mississippi would understand that they stepped aside before superior force. I said that the, of course, the responsibility for law and order in the state of Mississippi had to be accepted by the governor of the state of Mississippi and that 25 or 30 marshals were not going to have the responsibility. He said that responsibility would be—would be accepted by him...<sup>105</sup>

Overall, the crowd responded positively to Kennedy's remarks about Barnett. As evidenced from the audio recording, Kennedy's detailing of Barnett's behavior was punctuated frequently with laughter and applause from the audience. Eventually, the question-and-answer period moved onto other topics, such as the Vietnam War and other current issues.<sup>106</sup> By the end, the crowd had

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<sup>105</sup> Kennedy, Robert F. Question-and-answer period following speech at University of Mississippi. 18 March 1966. Audio recording. Personal archive of William Tyler, Clips 1-5, "Clip 1." WAV file.

<sup>106</sup> Kennedy, Robert F. Question-and-answer period following speech at University of Mississippi. 18 March 1966. Audio recording. Personal archive of William Tyler, Clips 1-5. WAV file.

given Kennedy several standing ovations. Afterward, the Kennedys went back to the airport, where they signed more autographs before boarding the plane to leave.

The event was widely reported in the local and national press. People both within and outside Mississippi seemed surprised by the university's positive reception of the Kennedys and the multiple standing ovations. Kennedy's revelations at the event were embarrassing to Barnett. Blessey, Donald, Ellington, Thackston, and the rest of the LSSB were pleased that the event had allowed Kennedy to speak candidly about Barnett and expose him as a charlatan.

## II. COMPONENTS OF THE FILM

My documentary project consists of a short film in combination with this written essay. The film is roughly twenty minutes long and focuses on the backstory of the Law School Speakers Bureau and their plan to invite Robert Kennedy to the university. The film does not cover every detail of the story I have written about here. That is not the goal, and obvious limitations of the medium and short film length make that impossible. The goal, rather, is to select particular elements from this story and build a coherent film narrative that tells some part of the overall story and conveys the historic significance of these events.

To begin, I will explain the elements that comprise my documentary film. The film is comprised of two main sources of material: current day interviews and archival material. Other photos and graphic treatments are added to supplement the film visually. For audio, the film includes audio from the interviews, audio from the archival footage and recordings, and music. Together, all of these components—primarily the current day interviews, archival material, music, and graphics—come together to make the short film.

## A. Interviews

For the interviews, I reached out to people who were involved in the planning of the Kennedy speech in 1966 and people who were in attendance at the speech. I also wanted to interview people who were not involved in the planning and did not attend, but who could provide commentary or academic analysis. In the end, I interviewed fourteen people. For an interview-based film like this, deciding whom to interview is a crucial step in the filmmaking process. Below, I provide a list of the interviewees, in alphabetical order, with some brief descriptions and information about what each person might contribute to the film. These descriptions are not intended as biographies of these individuals and are in no way exhaustive or comprehensive about each person's contributions. Instead, these descriptions are intended as a quick guide to the people I chose to interview for this project that may give some insight into my thinking behind these choices.

### **Reuben V. Anderson**

Anderson was a law student in 1966. He attended the 1966 speech but was not involved in the planning and was not a member of the Speakers Bureau. He was one of the few early black law students at the University of Mississippi School of Law. In his interview, he speaks on the general climate of Mississippi and the university at that time. He offers the perspective of an African American student who attended the Kennedy speech on campus. In describing the event in his interview, he says, "I sit in the very back, and I did that because my experience in public places was not good. If African Americans went to movies, they would throw things at us. If you went to a restaurant, it was unpleasant. So, I did not want to be in an unpleasant

situation with that speech, so sit in the back.”<sup>107</sup> Anderson later became first African American to serve on the Mississippi Supreme Court.<sup>108</sup>

### **Gerald H. Blessey**

Blessey was in his final year of law school in 1966. He attended the University of Mississippi for his undergraduate degree and his Juris Doctorate. During his time at the university, he was involved in activism on campus and around the state. He was involved in planning the speech and he attended the speech. He was co-founder of the Law School Speakers Bureau and co-originator of the idea to invite Kennedy along with Cleveland Donald. On the day of the speech, he picked up the Kennedys from the airport, attended the luncheon, and sat on stage during the speech.

### **Donald Cole**

Cole did not attend the speech. He enrolled at the University of Mississippi two years later in 1968. He knew Cleveland Donald growing up in Jackson, Mississippi and later in life, when Donald returned to the university and became the first director of the Black Studies/African American Studies program at the University of Mississippi.<sup>109</sup> Cole was one of the early black students to enroll at the university in the 1960s. He was involved with the Black Student Union when it presented its list of demands to the administration in 1970.<sup>110</sup> He participated in a protest event at Fulton Chapel that same year, for which he and seven other

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<sup>107</sup> Anderson, Reuben V. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 13 June 2017, p. 3.

<sup>108</sup> Waldrep, Christopher. “Law.” *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, Center for Study of Southern Culture, 26 Apr. 2018, [mississippiencyclopedia.org/overviews/law/](http://mississippiencyclopedia.org/overviews/law/).

<sup>109</sup> Cole, Donald. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 16 July 2018, p. 7.

<sup>110</sup> Cole, Donald. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 16 July 2018.



students were expelled.<sup>111</sup> He returned to the university to complete his doctorate in 1985 and later became the Assistant to the Chancellor for Multicultural Affairs at the university, a position he was serving at the time of his interview for this film. He retired in 2018. In his interview, Cole speaks on the general climate of 1960s Mississippi from the perspective of an African American growing up in Jackson and who attended the university only a couple years after the Kennedy speech. He remembers the Meredith enrollment in 1962 and the Kennedy speech in 1966, both from the perspective of hearing about these events at the time, not from being in attendance.

### **James Donald**

James Donald is Cleveland Donald's younger brother. He did not attend the Kennedy speech in 1966. He enrolled at the University of Mississippi the following year, in 1967, and graduated in 1970. In his interview, Donald provides information and descriptions about his late brother and Cleveland's involvement in activism. In his interview, Donald discusses a wide range of subject matter. He speaks about the general climate in Mississippi during that era, about his memories of the Meredith enrollment in 1962, about his experience being one of the early black students on campus, and about growing up in Jackson and remembering Cleveland's connections to James Meredith, Medgar Evers, and other civil rights organizers.

### **Edward Ellington, Sr.**

Ellington was a law student in 1966. He was involved in the planning of the Kennedy speech and attended the speech. He attended the luncheon and was on stage during the speech.

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<sup>111</sup> "Don Cole Retires after Storied History at Ole Miss." *Ole Miss News*, 10 Dec. 2018, [news.olemiss.edu/don-cole-retires-storied-history-ole-miss/](https://news.olemiss.edu/don-cole-retires-storied-history-ole-miss/).

Ellington was appointed chairman of the Law School Speakers Bureau. He was called to appear before the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning and asked to rescind the invitation, which he refused to do.<sup>112</sup> He gave Kennedy's introduction at the speech where he referenced James Silver's *The Closed Society* in his remarks. He announced the beginning of the question-and-answer period after the speech and called on Frank Thackston for the first question, as planned. In his interview, Ellington remembers his involvement in the planning of the speech as well as the general climate of Mississippi during that era.

### **Ethel Kennedy**

Ethel Kennedy, widow of Robert Kennedy, accompanied him for the visit to Oxford for the speech in 1966. She attended the luncheon and was on stage during the event. In her interview, she remembers the day of the event and the reception she and her husband received on campus. For example, she remembers, "I think I was astounded by the reception. First of all, there were crowds everywhere. And secondly, they were friendly. You know, nobody was throwing things... It was an eye opener. It was heart-warming."<sup>113</sup>

### **Ellen B. Meacham**

Meacham is an author, journalist, and journalism professor at the University of Mississippi. She is the author of the 2018 book *Delta Epiphany: Robert F. Kennedy in Mississippi*.<sup>114</sup> The book focuses on Kennedy's poverty tour of the Delta in 1967, the following year after his speech at the University, which is the subject of my project. Meacham researched

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<sup>112</sup> Ellington, Edward. Personal Interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 13 June 2017.

<sup>113</sup> Kennedy, Ethel. Personal interview. Interview by Mary Blessey. 25 April 2017.

<sup>114</sup> Meacham, Ellen B. *Delta Epiphany: Robert F. Kennedy in Mississippi*. University Press of Mississippi, 2018.

the 1966 event in preparation for writing her book and examining Kennedy's evolving relationship with Mississippi in the 1960s. She offers academic and journalistic analysis for the story, speaking on a wide range of subject matter including Kennedy's career, Kennedy's relationship with Mississippi, the speech in 1966, the Meredith enrollment and the Kennedy administration's involvement in it in 1962, and the state of the press in Mississippi in the 1960s.

### **James H. Meredith**

Meredith was the first African American student to enroll at the University of Mississippi in 1962. He graduated in 1963. He was personal friends with Cleveland Donald and spoke at Donald's funeral in 2012. In his interview, he offers reflections on his enrollment at the university and the violence surrounding it, as well as descriptions and memories of Donald.

### **Charles K. Ross**

Ross is a historian, history professor at the University of Mississippi, and director of the African American Studies program at the university. He was not at the University of Mississippi in 1966 and did not attend the speech. He speaks from an academic perspective as a historian and the director of the African American Studies program who is familiar with the school's history. In his interview, he speaks on a wide range of issues, including but not limited to the enrollment of James Meredith, Ross Barnett and the phone calls with the Kennedy administration, Robert Kennedy and his evolving relationship to the civil rights movement and to the south, the significance of Kennedy's appearance at the school in 1966, and the general political and social climate of Mississippi during the 1960s.

## **Richard Scruggs**

Scruggs was an undergraduate student at the University of Mississippi in 1966 and attended the Kennedy speech as a member of the audience. He was not involved in the planning of the speech. He shares his memories of the speech and the impression it made on him as a freshman in the audience. He also discusses the general climate of Mississippi at the time, the attitudes toward Robert Kennedy on campus in his memory, the state of the press in Mississippi, and other memories from a personal perspective as a student at the time and Mississippi resident.

## **Frank Thackston**

Thackston was a law student at the University of Mississippi School of Law in 1966. He attended the Kennedy speech and asked the first question during the question-and-answer period following the speech. The LSSB chose Thackston to be the student who would raise his hand and ask Kennedy the first question about the Meredith enrollment, per the plan. Thackston attended the luncheon before the speech and sat in the audience during the speech. In his interview, he describes the day of the event and his memory of asking the question. He also discusses the climate of Mississippi and state politics at the time, attitudes toward Ross Barnett, attitudes toward Robert Kennedy, and other social and political issues relating to the film.

## **Jo Thackston**

Jo Thackston is Frank Thackston's wife. She was not a student at the University of Mississippi but she did attend the Kennedy speech in 1966 and sat next to Frank in the audience. She did not attend the luncheon. She shares her memories of the day of the event, the

speech, and the question-and-answer period, as well as general memories of Mississippi during the period from the personal perspective of a Mississippi resident.

### **Governor William F. Winter**

Winter did not attend the Kennedy speech in 1966 but was aware of the event and the controversy surrounding it. He was serving as the Mississippi state treasurer in 1966 at the time of the speech. He later served as governor of Mississippi from 1980-1984.<sup>115</sup> He remembers hearing about the Kennedy speech, and sending a letter to Dean Joshua Morse after the event on March 24, 1966, which is now housed in the University of Mississippi School of Law archives.

An excerpt from the letter reads:

This is just a note to express to you my great sense of satisfaction over the way the Kennedy visit turned out. In addition to the other purposes which it served, it confirmed beyond any question the acceptance of your wise and far-sighted policy of taking the blinders off. I feel better about things now than I have in a long time, and think it is largely due to the experiment in open discussion that was carried out last week.<sup>116</sup>

In his interview, Winter reflects on the history of Mississippi politics during his lifetime and career. He offers insight about the Meredith enrollment in 1962, Ross Barnett as a politician and his phone calls with the Kennedys, Robert Kennedy and his relationship with Mississippi, and other general observations about Mississippi then and now.

### **B. Archival Materials**

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<sup>115</sup> Sansing, David G. "William Forrest Winter." *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, Center for Study of Southern Culture, 12 June 2018, [mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/william-forrest-winter/](http://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/william-forrest-winter/).

<sup>116</sup> Personal Letter from William Winter to Joshua Morse. 24 March 1966. Special Archives, University of Mississippi School of Law Library.

I use various archival materials to make my short film. One of the primary elements I use is the newsreel footage from NBC News. This footage shows the question-and-answer period following the main speech. The raw footage stops and starts due to the camera operators turning the camera on and off, likely to save film as was common practice. So, I do not have access to video footage of the entire question-and-answer period continuously. For video, I can use only the segments that are available, including some that stop mid-sentence. The NBC Newsreel also includes footage of Bobby and Ethel Kennedy at the Oxford airport on their way to leave after the speech. The raw footage also shows them talking to the crowds, Bobby signing autographs, and answering questions from reporters. I selected certain clips to use from these portions of the newsreel.

I obtained additional footage from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson, Mississippi. Some of this footage shows the Kennedys walking through crowds of reporters and students on campus to get to the coliseum. There are also clips of Kennedy speaking on stage during his main speech. It is likely that this was also originally shot as newsreel footage, but the state archives did not list who originally shot the footage on these clips. Some of the footage obtained from MDAH is newsreel footage during the Meredith enrollment, including of the day Barnett turned Meredith away at the Woolfolk office building in Jackson, Mississippi. Other newsreel footage shows the university campus and shots around Oxford, Mississippi for a segment about Meredith, with voice over from a news anchor discussing the impending enrollment.

I also obtained additional archival footage from the University of Mississippi Southern Documentary Project. This footage shows “daily life” on the campus of the university during the general time period—no exact dates are listed but it is likely 1950s-1960s. It shows scenes

such as students walking on campus, someone typing at a typewriter, someone reading a copy of the student newspaper, *The Daily Mississippian*, and other campus activities.

In addition to video footage, I use archival still materials such as photographs and scanned letters and newspapers. These are mostly sourced from the University of Mississippi J.D. Williams Library Special Archives, the University of Mississippi Law Library, and the University of Mississippi Southern Documentary Project. There are also a few images sourced from the J.F.K. Library and Museum in Boston, Massachusetts and a few others from stock image sources and public domain sources. Some photos were provided by the interviewees from their personal archives, such as the photos of Blessey, Donald, and Thackston. All of these different archival still images are used for coverage in many places throughout the film. There are several images of newspaper headlines and cartoons used to illustrate both the 1962 backstory about Meredith and Barnett, as well as later to illustrate the controversy surrounding the Kennedy visit in 1966. Some newspaper headlines and cartoons are used to illustrate the general climate of the period, such as an anti-civil rights cartoon from the *Clarion Ledger* I included. Other still materials include angry and threatening letters sent to the law school in 1966, anti-Kennedy bumper stickers that read “Beat Lil’ Brother” and “Brotherhood by Bayonet,” campaign materials for Ross Barnett, and more.

Finally, I make use of archival audio recordings. I incorporate some of the phone recordings between Ross Barnett and John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy. I also use excerpts from an audio recording of the question-and-answer period after the speech in 1966. This particular recording, which was originally recorded by a radio station in McComb, Mississippi, includes parts that are not included in the NBC News footage from the question-and-answer period. For example, this audio recording includes the part where Ed Ellington says, “And now

for the question and answer period,” and he states that he will take questions from the law students because they are closer and “I think we can hear better from here.”<sup>117</sup> I use these audio clips to supplement the NBC footage of the question-and-answer period.

### C. Additional Film Components

There are a few remaining elements beyond interviews and archival materials, which make up the bulk of the short film. I use graphic titles in several places, such as the title of the film and the end-credits. I use graphics titles as “lower thirds” (meaning a title placed in the lower third of the frame) to identify interviewees names and other information, e.g. “Frank Thackston, University of Mississippi School of Law, ‘66” or “Charles K. Ross, Director, African American Studies, University of Mississippi.” I use subtitles to clarify audio that is difficult to understand, such as during the moment when Frank Thackston asks the question from the audience, which is difficult to hear on both recordings I have of it. I use lower thirds to identify location, such as “Oxford, Mississippi, 1966” and to clarify who certain people are in photographs, such as “James Meredith, 1962.” I use lower thirds again to identify who is speaking for the Barnett phone calls. I also use on screen text graphics during the Barnett phone calls to highlight certain quotes I feel are important. I do this against a black screen. For example, I include the on-screen text for “I’ll do everything I can to maintain order. I’m going to cooperate,” when Ross Barnett says this to Robert Kennedy in the phone recording. Finally, I use a graphic technique of highlighting certain text within some of the letters and transcripts on screen to draw the viewer’s eye toward the part I most want them to read.

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<sup>117</sup> Kennedy, Robert F. Question-and-answer period following speech at University of Mississippi. 18 March 1966. Audio recording. WAV file. Personal archive of William Tyler, Clips 1-5.



I include music as part of the sound bed of the film. I use it in three places. It starts toward the beginning of the film, leading up to and during the opening title credits. Later, during the section discussing the tension and backlash about the Kennedy invitation, I include music with a darker tone. Then at the end of the film, the same music from the beginning plays leading up to and during the final credits.

Together, all of these elements combine to create the film: interviews, archival material, graphics elements, on-screen text, and music. These are the building blocks I decided to use for this particular story.

### III. STRUCTURE AND FILM ANALYSIS

The short film opens with verite-style newsreel footage from 1966 of Robert and Ethel Kennedy at the airport in Oxford. We see them talking to crowds. A young student asks for Bobby's autograph and he signs it while answering questions from a reporter. This section establishes that the Kennedys are in Oxford, Mississippi for some reason in 1966, though the viewer may not know why yet. I include voice-over from the interview with Gerald Blessey. He gives general, broad statements about why Kennedy came to the university and why it is important. The first line we hear is, "He was speaking primarily to law students, although the rest of the student body was there." Blessey continues, "He was appealing to the needs of the day," and later, "Free speech matters... open debate matters... Kennedy was appealing to the better angels of our nature, and there are better angels in Mississippi like everywhere." This is intercut with a few brief clips of Kennedy on stage during his main speech in 1966.

Next we see shots from inside the coliseum. As the interview voice-over ends, we see the press pit full of reporters and TV cameras. We see the large crowd. We hear the diegetic

sound from the scene. We hear Ed Ellington, though he is not yet identified at this point, say, “Let’s start off... first question—Frank?” We see Robert Kennedy and Ed Ellington, who has just spoken, on the stage. It is obvious they are taking questions from the crowd. We hear the question from the audience: “Who, in your opinion, is the person primarily responsible for the Ole Miss Riots, and why?” Ellington and Kennedy both have sly smiles on their faces. Kennedy takes a sip of water while he thinks. He says, jokingly, “Well, that was an interesting question.” Music cues in the background and the title of the film appears, “Truth Marching On.”

This first section of the film accomplishes several things. I intend this as the establishing section of the film, i.e. its primarily goal is establishing information for the narrative that we will need to understand later to make sense of things. We know Robert Kennedy is in Oxford, Mississippi in the year 1966. We learn from the voice-over that Kennedy gave some sort of speech or talk and that the event primarily involved law students—“He was speaking primarily to law students, although the rest of the student body was there...” We see Blessey in his interview and he is identified by name in text on screen. This helps establish him as someone who will become a main character in the film, and the way he speaks about the event implies he must have been there. The information provided in his lower third title, which says he was in the law school class of 1966, also suggests that law students will play a role in this story. His interview comments about free speech, open debate, and truth being “the victor” hint at the plot of the film to come, that something is going to happen involving asking for information or seeking out the “real” story behind something. The inclusion of the word “truth” also hints at the title of the film, “*Truth Marching On.*”

We have established that Kennedy visited the university in Oxford, Mississippi and did end up on stage giving a speech. We see him on stage speaking to the crowd, so this gives away

the result of the tension later when it is unclear whether the event will be canceled. The viewer has already been informed that the event did occur, that Kennedy did end up on the stage giving a speech, and he did take questions from the audience afterward. We learn that someone named Frank in the audience asks the first question, and we learn what that first question is: “Who, in your opinion, is the person primarily responsible for the Ole Miss Riots, and why?” We hear the audience reaction and understand that this question is somewhat controversial and amusing to the audience, as well as to Kennedy and the other person on stage, Ellington. Kennedy’s joke, “Well, that was an interesting question,” reinforces that there is some tension surrounding this question, but also shows that he is taking it light-heartedly and is being generally agreeable. However, we do not know if he will answer yet. The joke serves to dodge the question, a light-hearted moment that could go either way. Kennedy could answer, or cast it off and move on. It is not clear whether or how Kennedy will answer the question at this point. This allows for suspense later in the film.

I chose to have the film title appear here, leaving that brief scene with Frank’s question as a teaser. At this point, we have a general sense of where we are, that it involves Kennedy in Oxford, Mississippi giving a speech with a question-and-answer period, that someone asks him about the Meredith riots, and we do not know what his answer will be. We have also heard some overarching points about broader themes of the film, about free speech, debate, and finding out the truth. I want to give the viewer enough information to understand the general setting and topic while leaving some amount of mystery, hopefully piquing their curiosity to continue watching the film.

At this point, we take a detour back in time to 1962. I illustrate this through the use of graphic titles and some old film scrap footage, which I include for stylistic purposes. It adds to

the ‘archival’ feel of the film and suggests we are going back in time, rewinding, on a film reel. This film scratch material was included in the raw footage from the NBC newreel I obtained. We hear a news anchor talking about James Meredith. He says, “Oxford is a town with a population of fifty-two hundred... 29-year-old James Meredith, married, father of a little girl, wanted to attend Ole Miss...” We see shots of the campus and the sign that says “Welcome to Ole Miss.” The newsreel cuts to the day Meredith tries to register for classes at the Woolfolk building in Jackson, Mississippi. We hear the angry crowds yelling at him to “Go home!” We see and hear Ross Barnett saying, “No school in our state will be integrated while I am your governor.” We hear James Meredith in his present day interview reflecting on these events, and we see archival footage and photos from the riots and the riot aftermath, including photos of marshals and military personnel, and shorts of burning cars and other physical damage on the university campus.

This section is intended to give a brief, concise recap of who Meredith was and establish the basics of that conflict: that he was the first African American to enroll at the University of Mississippi, that segregationist leadership attempted to stop him, and that violence occurred because of it. We learn who James Meredith is and we meet Governor Ross Barnett as a character. I choose to establish Ross Barnett as an antagonist figure from the start, which is the role he remains in throughout the film. The newsreel also mentions Robert Kennedy by name, saying “Meredith, in the words of attorney general Robert Kennedy, will be escorted by more than one, but less than five federal marshals, who will be armed with a federal court order that this all-white university admit its first Negro student.” This establishes the conflict between the federal government, represented directly by the Kennedy administration, and the segregationists and their states’ rights ideology, represented by Ross Barnett. Interviews interject between

archival footage and photos to provide more information, opinions, and analysis. For example, Frank Thackston says, “Ross Barnett was the poster-child for government-sponsored racism.” We hear from James Meredith in his interview, saying, “I pretty well knew what the opposition was going to do,” which gives voice to his reflection on these events and further reinforces the two opposing sides in this conflict. This section of the film functions to set up several dynamics: Meredith vs. segregationists and Barnett; Barnett vs. the Kennedys; state of Mississippi vs. the federal government.

My goal here is to set up these conflict dynamics rather quickly and in a way that evokes emotional investment on the part of the viewer. I want the viewer to feel invested in the cause of integrating the schools and to understand the hateful rhetoric of Ross Barnett and the Mississippi political establishment at this time. I want to show the burning cars and destruction on the campus to help the viewer understand the scale and magnitude of this conflict. This section is certainly not intended as a comprehensive history of the Meredith conflict. It services to give just enough information to the viewer about the basic characters and dynamics of 1962 needed to understand later parts of the story. Because my short film is not primarily about Meredith and what happened in 1962, it does not make sense to spend too much time in this section or delve too thoroughly into the details.

I knowingly paint this story through the bias of historical hindsight and my own current day bias as a filmmaker. For example, I do this in terms of painting Barnett negatively as the clear antagonist here. I do not attempt to draw any false equivalency between these two opposing sides, and I am fine with the viewer being able to discern whose side I am on as the filmmaker, which is the side of integration in this story. I do not delve into the possible “merits” of Barnett’s arguments or make any “fine people on both sides” arguments. I include the clip of

Barnett saying straight into camera that he will never allow integration “while I am your governor,” and in my opinion that clip speaks volumes on its own. I allow the film to work off the premise that segregation is wrong, integration was the right direction to take, these events unfolded, and we are recapping this history as quickly as possible so that we can tell the main story of this film, which are the events of 1966.

The film moves out of the 1962 sequences and back to 1966, where it started. I signal this switch with a title card that says “1966” and the same film scratch motif used before. This is a stylistic motif that again illustrates the archival nature of the subject, as if we are scrolling through old film reels and scrolling through time. It also maintains a stylistic consistency for the film. We see archival photos of Barnett and old bumper stickers and segregationist propaganda from the era. Blessey’s interview voice-over tells us, “Barnett was governor up until the end of 1963. He couldn’t run for reelection, because we had term limits at that time of one term, but he could step out for four years and come back, which is what we feared.” He continues, “We saw what was evolving here. We didn’t want to spend the rest of our lives being led by people like that.” This line suggests there is going to be some sort of plan to hurt Barnett politically.

From there, this section goes into the formation of the LSSB and the plan to bring Robert Kennedy to the law school to reveal the behind-the-scenes story about Barnett from 1962. We meet Gerald Blessey and Cleveland Donald as students, and we see old archival photographs of both of them from the era. We hear from Cleveland Donald’s brother, James Donald, who says about his brother, “He was a man about the truth. He was agitating for change. That’s the way Cleveland did things.” We learn that Donald and Blessey knew each other. We learn that Donald knew people through organizing and traveled to D.C. to shore up the plan with Senator Kennedy.

Crucially, this is the section where we learn about the backroom phone calls between Barnett and the Kennedy administration. I include excerpts from the audio clips of some of the recorded phone calls. The screen is black during this part, as I have no footage of them making the calls. Another option would have been to show photographs of Kennedy and Barnett as b-roll. I decided against that option for a couple of reasons. For one, I have a limited number of photos of them available to me that are more important for me to use in other places in the film. More importantly, I do not want to give the viewer too much information to digest at once. There is a lot of crucial information being conveyed in these phone recordings. I think it is best to have the viewer just listen, and I feel that having a black screen here contributes to the feeling that we are on the phone with them listening in.

Additionally, I decided to put large text on the screen as “pull quotes” from the phone calls for certain moments that I deem most important. Again, because there is a lot of information to listen to and digest in a short amount of time, I decided this would help the viewer focus on the most important parts of the phone recordings. For example, I show text on the screen while Barnett says, “I’ll do everything in my power to maintain order... I’m going to cooperate.” This is a key moment that shows Barnett was capitulating to the Kennedys behind the scenes and assuring them he would keep people safe, all while he was proclaiming and doing the exact opposite in public. This is crucial information needed for the viewer to understand the stakes of what it is Robert Kennedy can reveal about Ross Barnett when he visits the university in 1966. Because this is a particularly important moment in the phone calls, showing the text on screen at the same time that we hear the audio reinforces the importance and helps the viewer remember it.

We learn how and why Ed Ellington became the chairman of the LSSB. We learn how and why the LSSB chose Frank Thackston to be the law student planted in the audience to ask about the Meredith crisis. We see archival photos of Ellington and Thackston. I am limited in my ability to show archival material about the students because so little is available. I tried to acquire more photos from the Donald family, from Ellington, and from Thackston. All of the interview respondents were very gracious in their attempts to help me and to provide me with what photos they had, but the photos included in this short film were the only materials available. This is one of the many things I cannot control as a filmmaker working on a historical documentary film. I have one photo each for these three important characters, and that is all I have. I have a few more photos of my father from our family scrapbook, but I decided to use only one, to keep it the same number as the rest. Since I was limited to one photo for the other students, I did not want to appear as if I were giving an unfair amount of visual representation to my father by showing multiple photos of him while showing just one photo of the others. So, I limited the count to one photograph of each for the four main students involved in the planning, which are Blessey, Donald, Ellington, and Thackston.

After learning about the LSSB's plan to invite Kennedy, we learn about the speaker ban put in place by the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning. We see a photo of the board members, who are all white and all male. This is an example of choosing "showing" over "telling." I have interview clips of people explaining that the board was made up entirely of white men, most of which were hardline segregationists. However, I decided it is more compelling to show the photograph and let that context speak for itself visually. This also sets up another important power dynamic in the story, the dynamic of students vs. IHL and more broadly, the status quo of the political establishment.



I choose to include music again during the section where we learn about the backlash to the Kennedy invitation. The music is tense and helps create an ominous feeling while we see the angry letters from alumni and state leaders about the Kennedy invitation. The letters include lines such as “enemy of the State of Mississippi,” “low a specimen as can be found,” “traitor to his country,” “same as inviting to dinner the raper of your daughter,” and “Oswalt shot the wrong Kennedy.” Newspaper headlines read “NOT WANTED” with an unflattering cartoon of Kennedy, “Beware the Babbling Fangs of Bobby,” and “OXFORD, MISSISSIPPI COULD BECOME ANOTHER DALLAS!” My goal is for the music to supplement this foreboding feeling conveyed in the language on screen in text. Together, the music and text create a tension that may cause the viewer to wonder whether the Kennedy speech will get canceled or proceed forward. However, the viewer already knows that the speech must occur because this was already shown during the beginning sequence of the film. What the viewer does not know is how the event will turn out. Were there protests? Did an altercation occur at the event? Did something else happen we do not yet know about? I want to build tension and curiosity for the viewer during this segment, even while we know that Kennedy will eventually end up on the stage answering a question from Frank Thackston, whom we have now met by this point.

The tension continues to build and culminates in the appearance of a letter from Robert Kennedy with his signature at the bottom, which states that he will appear at the university. The music drops out at this point and there is silence while the letter remains on the screen for several seconds, allowing enough time to read. I want this to be an important emotional pause, reinforced by the music dropping out. The text we see says, “I look forward to meeting you when I visit the University. I am sure thanks to your efforts and the efforts of other people like you, I will be received with dignity and courtesy. Sincerely, Robert F. Kennedy.” At this point,

all of the tension of the previous segment is punctuated by the optimistic tone of the text of this letter. But it is still unclear how the event will turn out.

The audio of the long applause and standing ovation begins while the letter is still on the screen. The music shifts to more hopeful music in a major key. This new music has a more driving feel, as if leading toward something. I choose this music to convey that the mood has now shifted from negative to positive and we are moving toward something—hopefully the payoff of the LSSB’s plan to expose Barnett. We see the crowd giving a standing ovation, which we can reasonably assume is happening after Kennedy’s main speech. We see the crowds and the large press pit of reporters with cameras pointed at the stage. It becomes clear that we are now in the same place where we started the film. Having now seen the rest of the film, we understand that the question from the beginning sequence is the question the LSSB had been planning all along. We understand now that we are going to recap that question and see it unfold a second time.

We hear Ed Ellington’s voice announcing the beginning of the question-and-answer period. I put the audio of Ellington’s comments over different clips of the audience and the press pit in front of the stage. We hear him say, “We have some competitions as you might imagine having a question-and-answer period in here. I might be a little prejudiced in taking more questions from the law school than from the ones around it, but I think we can hear better from here.” I decided that it is important to include Ellington saying this part. Now that we understand the LSSB’s plan all along, and we understand that it was prearranged to call on Frank Thackston first, these lines further reinforce the political theater of what Kennedy and the LSSB were trying to do. Ellington’s comments suggest to the crowd that he is taking questions from the law student section first as a practical matter because they are closer. But the viewer of

the film knows this is an excuse intended to make it appear to be coincidental and casual, when, in fact, it was planned. The footage pans to the stage, and we now see Robert Kennedy and Ed Ellington on the stage. We recognize this clip from the beginning of the film, and the building music cuts out right before we hear the line, now for the second time in the film, “First question—Frank?” The music immediately cuts back in, the screen goes black, and the end credits roll.

I wanted to end the film this way as a cliff-hanger moment. This short film is not primarily concerned with how Kennedy answered Thackston’s question, how it was reported in the press the next day, or how it affected Barnett. This film intends to tell the story of the planning. It intends to answer the question, “How did it come to be that Robert Kennedy gave a speech at the University of Mississippi on March 18, 1966?” And who was involved in making that happen? And what were some of their reasons? The film explains this backstory, introduces these characters, and conveys the tension building up to the moment when Frank asks Kennedy the question. When the credits roll, we do not know how Kennedy answers the question. We do not know if the LSSB’s plan was fulfilled. Because the outcome is left a mystery, we are forced to reflect longer on the plan itself, rather than the culmination of the plan. I want the viewer to sit with this question as the credits roll. Did the plan work? Does it matter if did or not? What kind of work did the students engage in to get to that point of asking the question? Was it all worth it, even if Kennedy does not answer the question for some reason? Does the LSSB’s planning and scheming have value, unto itself, regardless of whether it “worked”? These are the type of historical and philosophical questions I hope the cliffhanger ending inspires in the viewer.

I hope the ending makes the viewer want to learn more, to possibly go out and find the answer themselves about what happened. In doing their own research, they are continuing the process of delving into this history and learning more about this story and time period. Perhaps they may draw their own conclusions from their own findings, and it may spark a level of engagement beyond the passive act of watching the film and accepting the story as the film presents it. This aligns with the overall theme of the story told in the film itself, of inquiring about the facts, finding the truth, searching for the fuller story.

Furthermore, perhaps my most important reason for leaving the ending a cliff-hanger is that I see this short film as part of a larger project. I want to expand upon this film and create a new, longer, different film in the future. I see this short film as being able to stand alone on its own merit with its own story, but, as such, it also simultaneously functions as a short work that sparks the viewer's curiosity about the longer project to come. This short film gives a concise and coherent look into one chapter of a much larger story. The viewer could choose to watch only the short version, and that would be one acceptable way to approach this project. They would learn what the short version conveys about the LSSB's plan, and they would be prompted to ponder the questions I mentioned above when the film ends. But it is my preference and my intention for the viewer to appreciate the value of the short version unto itself while building anticipation for the longer version. In other words, it is possible to watch the two versions separately, but the short version best functions as a teaser chapter for the longer version. The longer version is not part of this particular thesis project, but this short version assumes the eventual existence of the longer version.

#### IV. A DISCUSSION ABOUT DOCUMENTARY FILM DEFINITIONS

In this section, I offer some additional analysis of my short film and how it fits into broader discussions about defining documentary film. There is no singular definition for “documentary film.” The term itself has always been vague, and the meaning has evolved over the years along with the changing customs and attitudes of the field and the artform itself. In Bill Nichols’s *Introduction to Documentary*, he says, “A concise, overarching definition is possible but not fundamentally crucial. It will conceal as much as it will reveal. More important is how every film we consider a documentary contributes to an ongoing dialogue that draws on common characteristics that take on new and distinct form, like an ever-changing chameleon.”<sup>118</sup> There is no one authoritative perspective on what documentary film is, and the very question itself exists within an ongoing and evolving collective conversation among filmmakers, viewers, and anyone involved in thinking about documentary films.

Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane’s book, *A New History of Documentary Film*, discusses the issue of defining documentary film as well. They too assert that no one singular definition suffices, but they do reference early filmmaker John Grierson’s frequently quoted definition from the 1930s. Grierson called documentary film “the creative treatment of actuality.”<sup>119</sup> Nichols, in his own discussion of Grierson’s influential definition, says, “This view acknowledges that documentaries are creative endeavors. It also leaves unresolved the obvious tension between ‘creative treatment’ and ‘actuality.’”<sup>120</sup>

For the purposes of this project, I agree with this simple, general definition as a guide for discussing documentary film. The field of documentary film and its various approaches and

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<sup>118</sup> Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Indiana University Press, 2010, p. 6.

<sup>119</sup> Ellis, Jack C. and Betsy A. McLane. *A New History of Documentary Film*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005, p. 1.

<sup>120</sup> Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Indiana University Press, 2010, p. 6.

techniques is expansive and hugely diverse. But I take as my position that, at minimum, documentary films have something “creative” and something involving “actuality.” Nichols says, “Neither a fictional invention nor a factual reproduction, documentary draws on and refers to historical reality while representing it from a distinct perspective.”<sup>121</sup>

Nichols establishes what he believes are “three commonsense assumptions about documentary” that “add to our understanding of documentary filmmaking but do not exhaust it.”<sup>122</sup> He lists these assumptions as follows<sup>123</sup>:

1. Documentaries are about reality; they’re about something that actually happened.
2. Documentaries are about real people.
3. Documentaries tell stories about what happens in the real world.

Generally speaking, I accept Nichols’s three assumptions, which have informed my thinking about this project. Certainly, many documentary films include elements we may consider “not real” in that they are not sourced from the real world and real people. For example, some documentary filmmakers hire actors to perform reenactments. Others use animation to recreate scenes. Some stage events in the real world and then film that. There are many ways in which filmmakers can go heavy on the “creative” part of the “creative treatment of actuality.” But, even when these creative techniques are used, there must still be at least some part of the film that is about “actuality,” that is about *something* that happened in the real world, involving real events and real people. It cannot be entirely the creation of a fiction writer devising a new story universe. If it were, it would not constitute a documentary film.

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<sup>121</sup> Nichols, Bill. Introduction to Documentary. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Indiana University Press, 2010, p. 6.

<sup>122</sup> Nichols, Bill. Introduction to Documentary. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Indiana University Press, 2010, p. 7-14.

<sup>123</sup> Nichols, Bill. Introduction to Documentary. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Indiana University Press, 2010, p. 7-14.

These definitions and assumptions I have put forth are quite general and subject to many legitimate critiques and counter points. However, my purpose here is not to assert a perfect definition for all documentary film. Rather, my purpose in this section is to acknowledge some of these preexisting thoughts about documentary film, drawing as I have on certain writers and thinkers—in this case, I look mainly to Nichols and to Grierson’s quote—and explain how my project fits into this framework.

My project fits this general definition framework, including Nichols’s three assumptions, in a number of ways. First, my short film deals with “actuality.” Robert Kennedy is a real person who existed. Gerald Blessey, Frank Thackston, Ed Ellington, Cleveland Donald, Ross Barnett, James Meredith, and everyone else involved in the story are all real people who existed. Everyone I interview for my project is a real person who appears in the film “as themselves” under their real names, i.e. they are not paid actors. The narrative in my film is about events that happened in the real world. The story about James Meredith really happened, which has been widely reported and documented. The phone calls between Barnett and the Kennedys really happened and are proven by the recordings and transcripts. Robert Kennedy did visit the University and appear at the Tad Smith Coliseum. There is footage of that, and it was widely reported in the press.

The students explain their memories of the Law School Speakers Bureau and their plan to invite Kennedy for the speech. Memories are of course fallible and subjective, and that is true for every documentary film interview. If you are interviewing a human being, you understand that their memory is fallible and subjective. This does not disqualify the film from meeting the definition laid out here for a documentary film. Rather, it adds to our understanding that stories are personal and subjective. It is good and productive to hear as many sides to a story as

possible. The more different accounts we hear that corroborate one another, the stronger those accounts become. Blessey, Ellington, and Thackston all remember a similar story about the LSSB, how Kennedy was invited, what the reaction was to the invitation, and what happened on the day of the event. These accounts strengthen the veracity of each other. Corroborative archival evidence strengthens them even further.

For example, Blessey, Ellington, and Thackston all mention that angry letters were sent to the dean of the law school and the university. In my research, I was able to find many of these letters in the university's archives, and several appear on screen in my film. The existence of these letters in the archives strengthens the three accounts from the interviews. Another example is how the students and other people who attended the event remember the speech and the question-and-answer period. For instance, several share their memories about the standing ovation after the speech. We have footage of the standing ovation where we see people standing. We have audio recording where we can hear how long the first standing ovation was in its entirety. This footage and audio strengthens, confirms the accounts of those memories. People describe their memories of Frank asking the first question. We can hear the question on the recording, and we hear Ellington address him from the podium as "Frank." People describe the way Kennedy answered the question about Barnett, making Barnett into something of a laughing stock. We have video and audio that reveals the crowd laughing multiple times during Kennedy's answer about Barnett, very similar to the way multiple people in their interviews describe it. This particular part is not included in the short film due to the cliffhanger ending, but knowing this in my research informs the project.

So, we know that various elements of the film deal with "actuality," with things that happened in the real world. These elements mean that the film satisfies Nichols's three



assumptions. But my short film is also a “creative treatment” of these real events. There are many aspects of the film that are the result of my subjective, creative directorial choices. It is left to my sole discretion which interview clips are included in the film and which are not. Take, for instance, the opening sequence of the film. I choose to include certain clips of interview voice-over about freedom of speech and the line “Justice is served when truth is the victor.” This sets the tone of the film early on and is a deliberate attempt to get the viewer to think about those themes, which may influence the way they interpret the rest of the story. The entire film is the product of my editing choices. Everything that appears on screen is something I choose to include. There is a long list of clips I could have included but choose to omit. The way I order the different clips further influences the viewer. The choice of b-roll photographs and footage that plays during certain interviews adds yet another layer of my creative influence as the filmmaker.

Music is another example. I choose more ominous, tense music in the section about the angry letters and threats after the Kennedy invitation was announced. Then I switch to happier music when the film moves to Kennedy’s appearance on campus and we see him inside the coliseum. This is one creative technique I use as the filmmaker to communicate to the audience, without words, my negative or positive feelings about different moments in the story. This is an element that is extrinsic to the real events happening in “actuality” in the story, that I can insert to help advance the narrative and the moral message I choose to promote in this film. I am unapologetically biased in my usage of this effect, as are many documentary filmmakers who use music in similar ways. There are countless examples of the ways I choose to produce a “creative treatment” of this “actuality.” As such, my project fits within the broad framework of

Grierson's "creative treatment of actuality" and satisfies the three assumptions Nichols writes about in his book.

## V. CONCLUSION

My project is the culmination of my research into the planning behind the invitation to bring Robert Kennedy to the University of Mississippi in 1966. I referenced books, historical chronologies, articles, documentary films, and other materials for background information. I searched historical archives to find evidence and documents relating to the event. I interviewed fourteen people about their memories and thoughts on the topic. I watched hours of archival newsreel footage about Meredith, Barnett, Kennedy, and various aspects of this story. Through my work, I have arrived at a particular version of a particular chapter of this story that I feature in my short film entitled *Truth Marching On: Robert F. Kennedy at the University of Mississippi*. This film, in combination with this paper, constitute my overall documentary project.

The short film is my "creative treatment of reality." I made subjective decisions and used creative techniques to tell what I believe to be an honest, engaging version of what happened. This creative treatment is applied to these combined accounts of real events that happened in the real world, strengthened by the existence of archival evidence in the form of footage, photos, audio recordings, and written documents. The way I have compiled these elements together is necessarily subjective. My choices are influenced not only by my creative inclinations, but also by limitations of time, resources, funding, and material. Various aspects, some within my control and some not, contribute to the final outcome of the short film. This is

not the only possible version of this film. This is my version, which I see as having the potential to inform the work of a longer film project in the future.

I chose the name “*Truth Marching On*” as a reference to a lyric in “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” The “Battle Hymn” is often associated with Robert Kennedy, sometimes cited as his favorite song. It was played at his funeral and at multiple memorial services, including the memorial service held in Arlington Cemetery in 2018 commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. This Civil War-era song is generally associated with the Union army, and is often thought of in contrast to the song “Dixie,” associated with the Confederate army. The “Battle Hymn” also has a particular history and relationship with the University of Mississippi. For many years, the university marching band played “Dixie” at football games and events, including during a medley entitled “From Dixie with Love.” This medley incorporated the main melodies from “Dixie” and from “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” During a particular part of the performance, near the end, the medley would return to the “Battle Hymn” melody. The band performance was entirely instrumental; however, the lyrics that go with this particular part of the song are: “Glory, Glory, Hallelujah! His truth is marching on!” It is commonly known that over the years, certain groups of University of Mississippi students began to shout “The South Will Rise Again!” during this exact part of the band’s performance. The words fit perfectly into the same rhythm where “His truth is marching on!” falls in the original lyrics.

These students were shouting their own invented version of the lyrics over the “real” lyrics. Poetically, they were shouting their own version of reality—of Lost Cause nostalgia, of white supremacy—over the literal word “truth.” Not unlike the way Ross Barnett shouted his own version of reality to his supporters, while concealing a different reality. And not unlike current politicians who traffic in lies, race-baiting, and “alternative facts.” The tradition of

documentary film is not pure, by any means. Documentary filmmakers can work to obscure facts and promulgate their own alternate versions of reality as well. But they can also choose to do the opposite—they can work to uncover, preserve, and promote the truth. This applies equally to journalists, historians, and anyone committed to uncovering true stories. Documentary films that work to expose the truth, rather than conceal it, can function as one important line of defense against people like Barnett and others, who wish to shout over the truth.

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