Fear and Distrust Growing Between the Races

April 23, 2013 – Jackson, MS - Mississippi social observers fear that the repeated incidence of vehicular murder in the state suggests a dangerous rift expanding between blacks and whites in the region.

"There has always been a gap between blacks and whites, and it's not going away as fast as it should be, despite all our social progress," said Civil Rights worker Flonzie Brown-Wright, 70. "How do children gather enough hatred to kill a man with a truck at 17 years old? They're exposed to it. They're exposed to it for most of their life."

The Federal Bureau of Investigation is still studying the July 22 hit-and-run slaughter of 61-year-old Johnny Lee Butts, who is black. Panola County District Attorney John Champion presented the case to a grand jury, but white Senatobia resident Matthew Whitten Darby, now 18, has not made a plea regarding the death. Critics have demanded that police prosecute the case as a hate crime, but prosecutors have refused, saying there was no evidence to suggest a racial motive.

Columbus attorney Scott Colom, who is representing Butts' family, said he sees why the family suspects the hit-and-run of Butts in an isolated area on Mississippi Highway 310 was not accidental.

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"I can tell you that from the way Mr. Butts was walking off the highway and where Mr. Darby was driving that the car was not likely to accidentally get that far off the road," said Colom, who cited information investigators collected from two other witnesses. An 18-year-old man and a 15-year-old boy were passengers in the vehicle that dragged Butts' battered body more than 70 feet last year.

Butts, sadly, is not the first hit-and-run death in Panola County. In 2009, 41-year-old African-American Garrick Burdette was also found dead along a Panola County road, the victim of an unrelated hit-and-run.
Also in 2011, the city of Jackson reeled at the murder of Jackson auto-worker James Craig Anderson, 47, who died beneath the spinning wheels of a truck driven by yet another white teenager, this time from the white suburb of Brandon. Three white men pled guilty to federal hate crime charges in Anderson’s death. The driver of the truck, Deryl Dedmon, also pled guilty to state murder and hate-crime charges in March and was given two life sentences.

Colom said he fears black and white society remains largely separated in Mississippi, which is breeding alienation and hostility between the races.

"I don’t think that we’ve done a good job of integrating ourselves," said Colom. "We have so far to go, and I do believe that because we have failed to integrate the schools that we're still socially segregated. In public school systems across the state, whenever you get over 20-percent African-Americans in the school, then you do not find proper desegregation because whites flee to either the academies or to new school systems."

Legally, public schools may not enforce policies that segregate students, but the state's white population labors hard to avoid a tangible black presence. Last year, the Justice Department asked a judge to order the Cleveland Public School District "to devise and implement a desegregation plan that will immediately dismantle its one-race schools." Mississippi federal court determined last year that the school district continued to operate four essentially single-race schools.

Public schools in the state's capital city of Jackson are almost 100-percent black, since white students and their parents fled to the suburban areas of Rankin and Madison counties, or to privately-funded academies—most of which opened in direct response to federal desegregation laws in the 1960s and 1950s.

Segregation continues beyond the school years, in many cases. The city of Jackson and its suburb areas feature some retirement homes and communities that accept no government health program funding such as Medicaid or Medicare. Few African-Americans seniors have the finances to afford a retirement community costing $1,200 or more a month without the help of government aid, however, which leaves the white residents of these affluent institutions to amble around in near homogeneity.

"In many respects we are a harshly segregated society from cradle to grave," said Tougaloo College Political Science professor Stephen Rozman. "When you spend your whole life in a colony of people just like you with minimal cross-cultural interaction with others, you can’t be surprised when the situation increases the possibility of animosity with people who are different."
Brown-Wright described Mississippi as a 48,000 square-mile isolationist strategy, with economics facilitating much of its race-based self-quarantine. The state boasts a clear divide between the affluent and the poor, with that economic divide most obvious between the black and white races. White people in Mississippi often have a better education and more social connections to help them prosper. White Mississippians who are unemployed, for example, may know more people who are hiring. White parents are also generally wealthier than black parents and are in a position to provide their children with more inherent resources to achieve a higher income.

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that African-Americans comprised 38-percent of the Mississippi population, however blacks' median household income in the state in 2006 was $21,969—just 51-percent that of white households, whose median income was $43,139.

The economic gap facilitates whites' push to segregate themselves into communities with similar incomes, which—given the economic disparity—are frequently majority white. This social order manifests itself most clearly in the shocking demographic make-up of the city of Jackson and its surrounding suburbs. Census figures for 2010 say Jackson's neighboring business tax parasite, Rankin County, is 77.8-percent white and 19.7-percent black. The city of Madison—an affluent suburb that gulps down Jackson's property tax base as homebuyer's move north—is reportedly more than 86-percent white and only slightly more than 10-percent black.

The flight of the middle class to other areas leaves a majority of non-affluent blacks behind to comprise the main city. The trend of disposable cities is recognizable in other Mississippi metropolitan areas, including Meridian, where the population is more than 61-percent black and 35-percent white. (In 2000, the Census reported the city was 54-percent black and 44-percent white.)

Rozman said he is not entirely surprised that a state so divided and homogenized could create people harboring such fear and animosity for other cultures. He added that some whites may interpret the election of an African-American president as a sign of diminished white influence in the nation, which only compounds their fear and distrust of minorities.

"If the kids committing these murders are learning from their elders, then it's pure unadulterated hatred," Rozman said. "Consider the amount of hatred some people have for our president. They demonize the president to a terrible degree; make him appear as an alien and un-American. Remember the Texas judge saying if Obama wins this year, there'll be another civil war? We don't hear that kind of language with a white president. I didn't like Bush, but I'm not wishing he was dead. This is hatred that's race-based, and it grows out of ignorance."
The self-imposed isolation generates more than just racial hostility. Strictly homogenized micro-societies, according to one social observer, also harbor extremist political opinions.

Author and Daily Yonder blogger Bill Bishop said cultural exclusion is creating some of the most fringe politicians ever to hit Washington.

"Places are becoming increasingly politically homogenous. That’s true in states and in congressional districts," said Bishop, who wrote "The Big Sort," a study of political segregation in 2008. "It leads to primary campaigns that produce more extreme candidates. When you look at the measure of how people vote in Congress and what people think there’s this increasing division between Republicans and Democrats. That’s because of group polarization. People become more extreme as they move further into a bubble of people who are like-minded."

Consider former Republican vice-president nominee Paul Ryan, a politician from Janesville, Wisconsin. According to the 2010 Census, Ryan comes from a city with a racial makeup of 91.7-percent white and 2.6-percent African-American.

This year, Ryan re-submitted a budget alternative to sequestration that would reduce Medicare to a voucher program to pay insurance companies to provide health care for seniors, a proposal that a majority of the country does not support. His 2011 proposal also transformed Medicaid—another widely popular program—into a block grant program.

Ryan is a self-proclaimed fan of Ayn Rand, a rabid anti-government author who wrote several books last century arguing, frankly, why it's okay to be a greedy twerp. One of her particularly memorable 1974 quotes regarding the European slaughter of Native Americans was that "any white person who brought the element of civilization had the right to take over this continent." That was a quote from 1974, not 1820.

Ryan came of age in a tidy little box of comfortable white people with little to no perceived dependence upon the federal government. His society, filled with unbroken families, wealth and happy little cherubic children, put Ryan in a vacuum of political cookie-cutter "me, too's" that left him unprepared for the reality of a nation that opposes his voucher system by 57 to 37 percent and favors reducing Social Security benefits for the wealthy by 64 to 32 percent.

Ryan also co-sponsored an anti-abortion bill that declares that human life shall be deemed to begin at fertilization, (which could nullify Roe v. Wade) ignores the fact that seven out of 10 Americans now oppose overturning Roe v. Wade according to an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll conducted at the beginning of the year.

But Ryan's opinions, however unpopular among a majority of Americans, are virtually identical to the opinions of conservatives from majority-white political districts surrounding Jackson.
Like Ryan, they represent political islands of extremist thought that Bishop said can only exist in an atmosphere of debilitating homogeneity.

Brown-Wright said the rift between the races and the offshoot of the political problems it creates has no quick solution. A comfortable multicultural society in America will take many generations to grow, she said. It almost always starts with youth, who are generally more accepting of diversity, and who may carry their more progressive views into adulthood. However, the South's stubborn success rate at raising its white children in secluded islands of whiteness promises to make even that progress sluggish.

"You can't legislate cross-cultural interaction because you cannot legislate love," Brown-Wright said. "You've got to want to know about another person's culture without seeking to overshadow their values and beliefs with yours. You've got to really want to know what makes them who they are. A white businessman needs to want to know what makes his black neighbor down the road tick. You have to want to know this earnestly, not just on the surface."

"Unfortunately," she added, "that's not our nature."

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Founded in 1909, the NAACP is the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization. Its members throughout the United States and the world are the premier advocates for civil rights in their communities, conducting voter mobilization and monitoring equal opportunity in the public and private sectors.