

The Legacy of the Child Development Group of Mississippi: White Opposition to  
Head Start in Mississippi, 1965-1972<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the most pressing debates among historians of the African American Freedom Struggle have revolved around the concept of a long Civil Rights Movement. The details of those historiographical arguments may be new, but they reflect a well-established pattern, for they concentrate on one side of what was a two-sided struggle: as the activities of civil rights' proponents become ever more contextualised, white opposition to African American advancement has remained relatively overlooked.<sup>2</sup> The main debates have left Massive Resistance narrowly defined as a decade-long political backlash triggered by the Supreme Court's *Brown* ruling and ending with the passage of Civil Rights legislation in the mid-1960s, despite some historians' exploration of the depth and complexity of a segregationist movement that was too diverse and multifaceted simply to be initiated by the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling or halted by the Civil and Voting Rights Acts.<sup>3</sup> Studies of pre-*Brown* and post-1964 expressions of white opposition have expanded our understanding of Massive Resistance to an evolving expression and often violent implementation of white supremacy encompassing political, social and economic facets. This understanding incorporates white southern opposition to the New Deal, the Southern Manifesto and interposition, White Citizens Councils, State Sovereignty Commissions and the Coordinating Committee for Fundamental American Freedoms to anti-busing campaigns, finding national

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<sup>1</sup> The research on which this article is based was made possible by the support of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, the Royal Historical Society and the British Association for American Studies.

<sup>2</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the political uses of the past,' *Journal of American History*, 91:4, (March 2005) 1233-63. While Emilye Crosby (among others, notably Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, 'The "Long Movement" as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies', *The Journal of African American History*, 92:2 (Spring 2007) 265-288) critique recent Long Civil Rights scholarship, Crosby emphasizes the importance of local studies in shaping a new understanding of the movement, including the nature and persistence of white resistance. Emilye Crosby, 'The Politics of Writing and Teaching Movement History' in Crosby ed., *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press 2011) 1-42.

<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Klarman, 'How *Brown* Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis,' *Journal of American History*, 81:1 (June 1994) 81-118. George Lewis, *Massive Resistance: the White Response to the Civil Rights Movement*, (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006) 24

political expression through the Dixiecrat Revolt, Goldwater, Wallace, Reagan and (to a certain extent) Nixon.<sup>4</sup> One of the most significant aspects of post-1964 Massive Resistance is its links to emerging national conservatism. Focusing on a single southern state, historian Joseph Crespino has shown how outright opposition gave way to ‘strategic accommodations’ and the segregationist rhetoric of Mississippi Governors such as Theodore Bilbo and Ross Barnett softened into ostensibly race neutral language which entrenched white supremacy without the vitriolic racism and violence of ‘short’ Massive Resistance.<sup>5</sup> While post-1964 Massive Resistance saw a marked change in the extent of accommodation, white opponents of African American advancement drew on the mechanisms and methods of Massive Resistance dating back to the 1930s.<sup>6</sup>

The available historical evidence points unequivocally to the need to contextualise white opposition to civil rights activists as richly as their opponents, for there are clear connections between these distinct manifestations of Massive Resistance, through expressions of social, political and economic conservatism and continuities in the rhetoric and mechanisms of opposition. A focus on segregationist opposition to federal social welfare programs, for example, illuminates clear connections from white southern opposition to the New Deal to opponents of Johnson’s Great Society and white southern support for Reagan in his attacks on welfare queens and war on welfare. White opposition to the War on Poverty provides an insight into this link at a significant moment as whites who struggled to find a coherent response to Civil Rights legislation, the changing nature of the Southern Democratic

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<sup>4</sup> Glenn Feldman, (ed.) *Before Brown: Civil Rights and White Backlash in the Modern South*, (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2004)

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*, (Woodstock: 2007). Language which was inherited from the rhetoric of earlier Mississippi politicians rather than an invention of the suburban Sunbelt, although the importance of this language to the conservatism of the Sunbelt Suburbs is clearly illustrated by Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the making of modern conservatism*, (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005) and Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*, (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> At least 1930; Crespino notes that conservative colour blindness and racial code words were being used by Mississippi segregationists as far back as 1890. Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 8-9

Party and the growing conservatism of the national Republican Party, found controversial antipoverty programs a useful target for uniting opposition. Drawing on some of the methods and mechanisms of the earlier expressions of Massive Resistance, white opponents of the War on Poverty began the evolution of an ostensibly colour blind language of opposition to social welfare that would become a central tenet of national conservative opposition to welfare.<sup>7</sup>

Sociologists and historians have begun to explore the often controversial connections between Civil Rights activists and War on Poverty programs in the South. Studies by Kenneth T. Andrews, Susan Youngblood Ashmore, Kent Germany and Amy Jordan have deepened our understanding of the era traditionally seen as the demise of the Civil Rights Movement through their examinations of the connections and conflicts between antipoverty programs and Civil Rights activists.<sup>8</sup> However, white opposition to antipoverty programs, though widely publicised at the time, especially in Mississippi, has received little scholarly attention.<sup>9</sup> Head Start in Mississippi, at first in the form of the highly controversial Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM), gave meaning to newly-won political rights of African Americans. Developing from Freedom Summer's Freedom Schools, CDGM was established by the outsiders so reviled by Mississippi's white establishment. However, at the

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<sup>7</sup> While OEO programs were separate from welfare programs, with emphasis being place on a hand up not a hand out, in Mississippi the distinction was subsumed under overwhelming racial opposition. In many cases antipoverty programs took the place of welfare as target, as even by the late 1960s many of Mississippi's African Americans were still excluded from welfare rolls by the racism of local Public Welfare Departments while antipoverty programs, especially Head Start, were all black.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth T. Andrews, 'Social Movements and Policy Implementation: The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty, 1965 to 1971, *American Sociological Review*, 66:1, (February 2001) 71–95. Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry It On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964-1972* (London: University of Georgia Press, 2008), Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty Citizenship and the Search for the Great Society*, (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2007), Amy Jordan, 'Fighting for the CDGM: Poor people, local politics and the complicated legacy of Head Start' in Annelise Orleck, and Hazirjian, L. G. (eds) *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History 1964-1980* (London: University of Georgia Press, 2011) and William Clayson, *Freedom is not Enough: the War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Texas*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> The exceptions are Clayson, *Freedom is not Enough* and David C. Carter, *The Music has Gone Out of the Movement: Civil Rights and the Johnson Administration, 1965-1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009)

local level Head Start centres were staff by local poor African Americans and it was here at the grassroots that the program had its most significant impact. Employment in Head Start programs meant poor African Americans could register to vote without losing their jobs. More than this it provided African Americans, for the first time with a meaningful measure of power and control over their lives, providing an opportunity to exercise the right and responsibility to think, act and choose for themselves and their children.<sup>10</sup> Historians of the Civil Rights Movement have focused too much on the impact of outsiders to the exclusion of the equally important African American activists left behind in their wake. CDGM, established and operated at the state level by white northern liberals and CDGM-remnants, the grass roots African American Head Start centres left without funding after the white campaign against CDGM, thus provide an example of what was left after the outsiders (and the national attention they brought with them) departed.<sup>11</sup> These CDGM-remnants, like Civil Rights activists after Freedom Summer, were left to face white Mississippi's backlash. In the white establishment's attempts to seize control of federal funds coupled with their reluctant acceptance of a limited amount of African American involvement the evolution of Massive Resistance becomes apparent.

Mississippi serves as an ideal location for such a case study. Not only was the state at the heart of the majority of the manifestations of Massive Resistance, Mississippi was central to the emerging national conservatism and home to one of the earliest and most controversial Head Start programs in the county, a program whose turbulent history and legacy showcases the effects of the presence and departure of outsiders. Mississippi's Massive Resistance, like

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<sup>10</sup> 'Fast for Freedom: Some Opinions of these Pre-School Centers' United States National Student Association Pamphlet, May 1967. Box 149 Folder 3, Johnson Family Papers, Archives and Special Collections, University of Southern Mississippi.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Levin left in 1965, Polly Greenberg in June 1966, followed by John Mudd and Marvin Hoffman in 1967. Polly Greenberg, *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes: A Biased Biography of the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) A Story of Maximum Feasible Poor Parent Participation*, (London: [1969] Youth Policy Institute, 1990 repr.) 285, 658.

its contribution to emerging national conservatism was unique and important but not exceptional. Indeed, the growth of the modern Republican Party in a state lacking the Sunbelt Suburbs that scholars have shown to be the natural breeding ground of Republicanism makes Mississippi not exceptional but central. Republicanism here drew on less on a shared environment than on a basic conservative cultural, racial and religious foundation.<sup>12</sup> Mississippi, as the poorest state also provides a unique vantage point on the War on Poverty. Its antipoverty programs were diverse and controversial though markedly different from the large, urban and intensely politicised Community Action Programs (CAPs) that are the usual focus of scholarly attention. Opposition to Mississippi's War on Poverty programs thus illustrates the development of the race neutral language that would become central to emerging national conservatism, while drawing on the mechanisms of post-*Brown* Massive Resistance, the political discontent of the Dixiecrat Revolt and white Southern conservative opposition to the New Deal.

In opposing CDGM, white Mississippi – from the political elite to the grassroots – utilised the methods, mechanisms and rhetoric of earlier phases of Massive Resistance. Mississippi's politicians drew on the anti-communism of the post-*Brown* Massive Resistance as well as more successfully utilising the State Sovereignty Commission to infiltrate, undermine and report on the CDGM. Local reporters played on the white community's fears of anticommunism and the new threat of Black Power, combining them with New Deal era and Dixiecrat rhetoric opposing social welfare programs and federal intervention. Senator Stennis, responding to the demands of his constituents wielded his influence to bring pressure on the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and the White House to defund CDGM.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Crespino, *In Search of Another County*, 5. Chris Danielson, *After Freedom Summer: How Race Realigned Mississippi Politics, 1965-1986* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011) 5

<sup>13</sup> According to one reporter, 'Citizens of Mississippi and the rest of the US will be eternally in the debt of Senator John Stennis of Mississippi for his courageous persistent and successful exposure of the CDGM with the end result that this spurious organisation which has been filching public monies for personal aggrandizement

Local newspapers printed new accusations almost daily of wrongdoing against CDGM and the State Sovereignty Commission expanded its spy network to infiltrate the Groups' Head Start centres. Used by Senator Stennis in his press briefings and Senate statements, the Sovereignty Commission reports provided a wealth of material for the local media to construct an image of Head Start as corrupt, a waste of tax dollars and as a source of funding of Civil Rights activism. Local reporters called for responsible Mississippians to run local programs, frequently referring to the lack of judgment of administration bureaucrats and of the generous distribution of tax money, carefully constructed language which not only avoids overt references to race, but which draws on powerful Southern tenets opposing federal interference and concerns over the redistribution of wealth.<sup>14</sup> The mechanisms of earlier Massive Resistance were successfully combined with a new language which echoed the conservative rhetoric of Senator Barry Goldwater, drawing on his extensive base of support in the state.<sup>15</sup> The Sovereignty Commission and local press employed the Massive Resistance rhetoric of "outside agitators" and charges of communism, linking their opposition to CDGM to wider national concerns. Charges of communistic activity failed to have any weight with OEO, as accusations were even more unlikely than earlier charges of communism against Civil Rights activists.<sup>16</sup> With HUAC in terminal decline and the Vietnam War becoming increasingly unpopular, appealing to anticommunism was less successful. However, such accusations found favour with the local press, who reported frequently on the red influence on OEO programs. In the wake of the Watts riot local reporters utilised the new national fears

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and promotion of civil rights has been completely liquidated.' 'Thanks, John Stennis' *Winston County Journal* October 27, 1966

<sup>14</sup> 'More Bad Apple Money,' *Unknown Newspaper*, March 5, 1966 Papers of Bernard L. Boutin, Box 20 Folder: RS Southeast Region, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library (hereafter LBJL)

<sup>15</sup> In the 1964 Presidential election, the first following the passage of the Civil Rights Act, Goldwater received 87.14 percent of Mississippi's popular vote.

<sup>16</sup> 'Memo to File', May 29, 1967. SCR ID # 6-45-5-25-2-1-1, Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records 1994-2006, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/result.php?image=/data/sov\\_commission/images/png/cd06/047421.png&otherstuff=6|45|5|25|1|1|1|46731|](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/result.php?image=/data/sov_commission/images/png/cd06/047421.png&otherstuff=6|45|5|25|1|1|1|46731|)

of Black Power, depicting CDGM as ‘an instrument of the black separatist movement’.<sup>17</sup> One of the most potent aspects of all phases of Massive Resistance had been politicians’ and reporters success in linking the overt racism of the Deep South with wider concerns. Both the Dixiecrat revolt and opponents of school integration drew on national concerns of the expanding power of the federal government; anti-Communism provided a rich vein of hysteria to exploit. Now the menace of Black Power replaced the threat of Communism as local whites seized on fears of Black Nationalism to articulate grassroots white fears about an outside alien force in a way that had national resonance.

The evolution of the language of Massive Resistance was one of the most significant and potent legacies of white opposition to CDGM. However, not all of the elements of Massive Resistance proved as successful; ultimately Stennis’ campaign failed to rid Mississippi of Head Start or the Child Development Group. While the White House was susceptible to pressure from Senator Stennis, OEO Director Sargent Shriver’s commitment to support grassroots organisations, though weak, was bolstered by his desire to avoid further adverse publicity.<sup>18</sup> Though irreversibly damaged and robbed of its ability to be an instrument for social change the strength, perseverance and dedication of CDGM staff ensured the Group’s survival albeit with significantly reduced funding.<sup>19</sup> Across the state, CDGM had engaged poor African American communities in Head Start and those communities were now left without funding and facing the wrath of local whites newly awakened to the potential threat of the War on Poverty. Senators John C. Stennis and James O. Eastland presented a united public front of opposition to the Great Society but having discredited CDGM, they

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<sup>17</sup> Rowland Evans, and Novak, R., ‘Radicals fighting to keep state poverty war control’, *Clarion Ledger* (January 30, 1967) and Victor Riesel, ‘Red Influence seen in unrest,’ *Commercial Appeal*, (July 30, 1967)

<sup>18</sup> Scott Stossel, *Sarge: the life and times of Sargent Shriver*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2004) 462-467

<sup>19</sup> Tom Levin quoted in Polly Greenberg, “Three Core Concepts of the War on Poverty: Their Origins and Significance in Head Start” in Edward Zigler and Styfco, S. (eds) *The Head Start Debates* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 2004) 80-81. Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: the Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (London: University of California Press, 1995) 347.

used their influence in Washington to increase Mississippi's share of antipoverty funds. In Mississippi, they mobilised networks of power and influence to wrest control of this money from grassroots African American programs. Eastland drew on his long history of subverting federal funds intended to aid the poor into his own, and other rich planters' coffers, while Stennis responded to white constituents concerns by encouraging local responsible people to take control of federal funds in their communities.<sup>20</sup> State Sovereignty Commission investigators, unable to secure any further sanctions against the group turned their vicious attention to any Head Start program linked to CDGM, however tenuous the connection. Over the next several years, Commission Investigators wrote hundreds of reports on these alleged CDGM-influenced programs, undermining CDGM offshoot Friends of the Children of Mississippi and CDGM's state-wide biracial, establishment-approved replacement Mississippi Action for Progress. The Commission provided evidence to successive governors on alleged malfeasance in various African American, former CDGM programs. As white politicians, local officials and businessmen across the state created their own Community Action Agencies, they clashed with these CDGM-remnants for control of federal funds. While these battles played out differently in communities across the state, poor African Americans tenaciously clung onto their programs, sometimes successfully but more often not. Despite the eventual and perhaps inevitable near universal loss of control of their programs by poor blacks, battles with the local white establishment had a profound effect on the future of Head Start in the state.

The rural, Delta Bolivar and Sunflower Counties offer the opportunity to explore often overlooked rural Community Action Programs and to examine the complexity and diversity of the white response to Head Start despite the similar political, economic,

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<sup>20</sup> J. Todd Moye, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945–1986* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) 168. Senator Stennis to Clyde Smith October 19, 1967. John C. Stennis Papers Series 25 Box 7 Folder 51. Congressional and Political Research Center, Mississippi State University (hereafter MSU).

geographic and racial characteristics of the two counties. Extremist white segregationists dominated every aspect of social, economic and political life, violently enforcing segregation in the small isolated communities of Bolivar and Sunflower Counties. Historians of the Klan have pointed to a diminishing impact of violent extremism in the late-1960s. Drabble suggests that the FBI's Counterintelligence White Hate Program had successfully infiltrated the organisation and despite their lack of success in securing prosecutions the HUAC's Klan investigations did have some effect in diminishing Klan activity.<sup>21</sup> However, as Newton has noted Southwest Mississippi became a hotbed of extremist violence from 1964, violence which persisted throughout the remainder of the decade spreading into the Delta and much of the rest of the state. Delta counties had been dominated by White Citizens Councils in the decade following *Brown*; unlike the hill counties of Southwest Mississippi, the repressive racial structure of the plantation economy rendered the Klan's violent enforcement unnecessary.<sup>22</sup> However, with the decline of Citizens Council influence and the increasing activism of African Americans in the Delta, violent white supremacist organisations began to make headway in these counties. By 1966, FBI reports on Klan activity indicate the presence of the Klan in Bolivar, Coahoma, Leflore, Washington and Yazoo Counties.<sup>23</sup> Internal conflicts and inter-Klan rivalries created a volatile situation. Between the Mississippi White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, the Alabama-based United Klans of America (who had made Adams County a base from which to invade Mississippi) and the Americans for the Preservation of the White Race, white extremists' influence remained widespread and entrenched amongst local officials, businessmen and even churches in many areas of

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<sup>21</sup> John Drabble, 'The FBI, COINTELPRO-WHITE HATE, and the Decline of the KKK Organisations in Mississippi, 1964 – 1971,' *Journal of Mississippi History* LXVI: 4 (Winter 2004) 353-402.

<sup>22</sup> Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: the Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (London: University of California Press, 1995) 111-12

<sup>23</sup> 'Member List: White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi' Box 142 Folder 1, Johnson Family Papers, Archives and Special Collections, University of Southern Mississippi. In Sunflower County, the White Citizens Councils were so reminiscent of the Klan; a Klavern would have been obsolete.

Mississippi in the late 1960s.<sup>24</sup> Individual acts of terror against Civil Rights Activists, such as the bombing of the car of local NAACP leader George Metcalfe in 1965 and a second attempt on his life the following year, expanded to include violent attacks on Head Start staff and centres across the state. Beginning in 1965 with shootings and arson attacks against CDGM centres, violent opposition to Head Start expanded to include the harassment, intimidation and economic oppression of Head Start personnel both black and white, CDGM and non-CDGM affiliated. CDGM's state-wide biracial successor Mississippi Action for Progress faced a wave of violence against its white employees in 1967.<sup>25</sup> Although attacks waned by the end of the decade, Head Start centres remained targets of violent white opposition; in 1970 a County Attorney in Liberty threw a brick through the window of Amite County's Head Start office.<sup>26</sup>

## **Bolivar County**

Bolivar County's poor white community remained committed to segregation and largely unaffected by the passage of the Civil Rights legislation by 1965. Despite the extent and depth of poverty in the county poor whites uniformly refused to send their children to CDGM's Head Start centres. High unemployment due to agricultural mechanisation and lack of industry and poor housing, health and sanitation resulting from widespread tenant farming and sharecropping meant 43.1 percent of the county's population lived in poverty. There were numerically far more poor African Americans in the county; around 10 percent of the

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi: A History*, (Jefferson, McFarland & Co., 2010) 163. M. Bryant, 'Fact Sheet: Problems and Victories of Lincoln County MAP Head Start Program' November 29, 1967. Hodding Carter III Papers Box 1 Folder: Executive Session. Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, MSU.

<sup>25</sup> Roland Evans and R. Novak, 'Mississippi Klan Shifts Gears; Aims Wrath at Head Start Project', *Janesville Daily Gazette* March 7, 1967, 7.

<sup>26</sup> 'Local Attorney Pleads Guilty to Malicious Mischief', *The Southern Herald* May 7, 1970

white population lived in poverty while over 90 percent of the African American population of the county were poor.<sup>27</sup> The poor African American community, numerically larger than the poor white community and more accustomed to community activism through Civil Rights and church activities, saw more quickly than poor whites the potential of Head Start to help the entire poor community and not just children.<sup>28</sup> However, the middle class whites involved in creating Bolivar County Community Action Program (BCCAP) were both more pragmatic about the unavoidability of the Civil Rights legislation and the need for federal funds and perhaps most importantly, would be less immediately affected by the required integration. White Board members included businessmen, local officials and civic leaders whose children would not have to attend the potentially integrated Head Start classes. Recognising that access to and thus control over federal funds would necessitate accepting certain compromises, Bolivar County's political leadership appointed six white and six African American men to serve on the Board of Directors. As acquiescence to OEO's requirement that the Board reflect the racial composition of the community was the only way to secure funding – and thus begin to erode support and funding for CDGM in Bolivar County – the County's Community Action Committee voluntarily accepted an integrated Board. As one of the first integrated CAP Boards in the South created by the local political leadership, BCCAP was lauded in the local (liberal) press.<sup>29</sup> However this veneer of interracial cooperation masked an implacable resistance to ceding control to or even sharing power with African Americans. Bolivar County's white political leadership selected six middle class, conservative African Americans as Board members, men with economic ties to the white community, a vested interest in yielding to the demands of the white Board members and

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<sup>27</sup> Evaluation Report of Bolivar County CAP, April 19, 1969. RG 381 Box 3 Folder: Mississippi Bolivar County Community Action Program Inc., Cleveland Mississippi. National Archives and Records Administration South East (hereafter NARA SE). OEO Information Center Community Profile: Bolivar County, Office Files of Fred Panzer Box 49, LBJL

<sup>28</sup> Oral History Interview with Rev. Sammie Rash by Mike Garvey, March 30, 1977. University of Southern Mississippi Digital Collections <http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/coh/id/8450>

<sup>29</sup> C. Ellis, 'Bolivar County CAP Unites Races for Common Purpose' *Delta Democrat Times* October 5, 1966

very little knowledge of or interest in the needs of poor blacks. Acquiescing to this limited and controllable integration, white men like Board Chairman Sam Long and Program Director Earl Davis ensured their control of the BCCAP would go unchallenged. BCCAP was by no means alone in excluding poor participation. OEO Region III, including Deep South states committed to preserving white control, had the lowest percentage of poor representation on CAP Boards in the country, Mississippi, the lowest in the region.<sup>30</sup> However, Bolivar County's political establishment was more successful than most. They manufactured a program that destroyed the opportunity for genuine poor community participation which was lauded for its progressive, interracial success at the state and national level.<sup>31</sup>

Denied the chance for a voice within the establishment program, the county's former CDGM workers continued to operate their Head Start centres voluntarily hoping that CDGM's grant would be renewed. However, in January 1966 it became clear the former CDGM centres in the county would not be refunded. CDGM's \$5.3 million grant did not include Bolivar County. OEO instead supported the creation of a county-wide Head Start program operated under BCCAP, which rejected CDGM's application to operate as its delegate agency in the county.<sup>32</sup> Bolivar County did not have a diverse or particularly strong network of Civil Rights activists. Pockets of activism were isolated and restricted to areas with extremely high African American populations such as Shaw and the all-black Mound Bayou. However, the proposed operation of Head Start by BCCAP crystallised the

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<sup>30</sup> Sargent Shriver to Leon Gilgoff December 4, 1965. Papers of Bernard L. Boutin Box 9 Folder: FG 269-1 CAP October-December 1965, LBJL. OEO Region III was comprised of Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama and South Carolina.

<sup>31</sup> John C. Stennis to Sargent Shriver, January 26, 1967. John C. Stennis Papers Series 25 Box 7 Folder 51. Congressional and Political Research Center, MSU.

<sup>32</sup> William Bozman to Theodore Berry March 24, 1966 Papers of Bernard L. Boutin Box 8 Folder: FG 269-1 Community Action Program January 1966, LBJL.

mobilisation of the African American community.<sup>33</sup> Led by local NAACP leader Amzie Moore, former CDGM staff, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and the Delta Ministry worked together to build and support the Head Start program voluntarily while lobbying OEO for funding. Despite the persistence of white claims that CDGM was the lynchpin in a Black Nationalist conspiracy and a front for the MFDP, the Group (and Head Start more generally) had been more a source of division than unity for local activists. While MFDP was affiliated with state CDGM leadership, at the local level the relationship between the two groups could be strained. Many SNCC activists opposed involvement with Head Start, fearing the conditions which would be attached to federal funding. The NAACP had a particularly stormy relationship with CDGM. State NAACP leaders resented NAACP staff's exclusion from the program; in over eighty centres across the state only one NAACP staff member was employed by CDGM. When the NAACP state President Aaron Henry and Field Representative Charles Evers gave their support to CDGM's state-wide replacement Mississippi Action for Progress, their relationship deteriorated even further.<sup>34</sup> Though the State Conference voted to support CDGM's application to OEO for further funding in the midst of the controversy, Henry's acceptance of a position on MAP's Board infuriated CDGM Director John Mudd. Mudd evoked the language of betrayal, drawing comparisons with post-Reconstruction era plantations, complete with a white leader and "head nigger", anger echoed in local fliers which called on African American to demonstrate in opposition to the 'third era of slavery'.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Andrews, 'Social Movements and Policy Implementation' 87

<sup>34</sup> Lillian Louie to Gloster B. Current October 6, 1966. Boehm, R. H., Bracey, Jr., J. H., Meier, A., (eds.) *Papers of the NAACP. Part 28: Special subject files, 1966-1970. Series A, Africa – Poor People's Campaign* (Bethesda: 1996) Microfilm Reel 10 fr.0705. 'Jackson Negroes Charge Betrayal' *New York Times* October 9, 1966

<sup>35</sup> M. Hoffman, and Mudd, J., 'The New Plantation', *The Nation* 24 October 1966, 411 – 415. Flyer 3 October 1966, Hodding Carter III Papers Box 2 Loose Materials. Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, MSU.

Mississippi's white leaders, uninterested or unaware of the divisions Head Start had created amongst activists found the notion of alleging communist inspired Delta Ministry-CDGM-MFDP coalition appealing. Drawing on the language of earlier Massive Resisters, influential Mississippi Democrat lawyer and friend of the President, Douglas Wynn attempted to circumvent OEO by appealing directly to the President's Special Counsel Harry McPherson. Combining the threat of Black Power with thinly veiled warnings about the potential political consequences of a failure to support BCCAP, Wynn claimed the 'DM-CDGM-MFDP coalition' had been trying in every possible way to defeat the attempts of the moderate right thinking people in Mississippi.<sup>36</sup> McPherson had relied on Wynn's knowledge of Mississippi politics to shape a state-wide replacement for CDGM that was acceptable to the white establishment, now Wynn urged him to intervene with OEO in favour of BCCAP. OEO, caught between political pressure and their belief that the survival of the former CDGM group in Bolivar County was of paramount importance, made the unusual decision to fund two parallel Head Start Programs. BCCAP was authorized to create a Head Start program for 1500 children, while the former CDGM group became Associated Communities of Bolivar County (ACBC), serving 1300 children as a delegate agency of BCCAP. Together these two Head Start programs employed over 700 people and received \$1.75 million federal funds annually.<sup>37</sup>

Despite having secured funding for their own Head Start program, BCCAP's Board and Executive Director Earl Davis remained concerned that ACBC would fuel Civil Rights activities and teach children Black Power. ACBC neither funded Civil Rights activities nor

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<sup>36</sup> Douglas Wynn to Harry McPherson April 2, 1966. Office Files of Harry McPherson Box 14 Folder: Poverty (1966) [2 of 2] LBJL.

<sup>37</sup> Evaluation Report of Bolivar County CAP April 16, 1969. RG 381 Box 3 Folder: Mississippi Bolivar County CAP Inc. NARA SE. Between 1964 and 1969, Bolivar County had received approximately \$15 million in OEO funds, the majority of which went to BCCAP and its delegate agency, the rest to the Delta Medical Centre in Mound Bayou. In addition to two Head Start programs, BCCAP ran Neighbourhood Youth Centre, Emergency Food and Medical Services and coordinated the county's Food Stamp Program.

taught Black Power, but it did have a profound impact on the entire African American community. The white threat to Head Start united the limited and isolated activists operating in the county in defence of the program.<sup>38</sup> ACBC gave poor blacks independence from oppression and deprivation, as employment in Head Start ensured African Americans could exercise their newly-acquired right to vote without fear of losing their jobs. It liberated the black community, getting the poor off welfare lists and providing them with a little dignity. The programs' impact was not limited to the poor community. ACBC united the whole black community of Bolivar County. This unity engendered in support of the program enabled the election of Kermit Stanton, the first black official in the county.<sup>39</sup> BCCAP Executive Director Earl Davis, having been unsuccessful in his attempts to ensure BCCAP was the sole recipient of Head Start funds in the county, turned to the press to air his grievances. Davis was the main source for a 1967 *Wall Street Journal* article, which characterised the War on Poverty as a goldmine and even contained reference to a Cadillac driving recipient of federal largesse. Davis gave several instances of alleged corruption in the delegate agency targeted to undermine ACBC, but his main complaint was OEO's profligate spending as a result of the county's parallel Head Start programs.<sup>40</sup> The adverse publicity proved ineffectual; after the CDGM debacle it would take more than unsubstantiated accusations of corruption to provoke a response from OEO. Though it did not prevent BCCAP from their continued attempts to exercise control of the program and prevent ACBC's efforts to promote meaningful engagement with the poor community. Head Start staff were prevented by OEO policy from engaging in voter registration activities only during working hours. BCCAP, in what an OEO Inspector euphemistically termed an 'over-application' of OEO policy, cynically prevented ACBC from engaging in any voter registration activities whatsoever. In frequent contact with

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<sup>38</sup> Activism in Bolivar County was limited to isolated towns with high black populations such as Shaw and Mound Bayou.

<sup>39</sup> Oral History Interview with Rev. Sammie Rash by Mike Garvey, March 30, 1977 University of Southern Mississippi Digital Collections <http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/coh/id/8450>

<sup>40</sup> Neil Maxwell, 'The Poverty Program as a Goldmine,' *Wall Street Journal* March 22, 1967

poor African Americans who were unlikely to have been reached during the earlier voter registration activities of either the middle-class oriented NAACP or the more radical SNCC, ACBC staff were perfectly placed to promote registration. BCCAP's Board, exercising power beyond its remit, curtailed the potentially significant mobilising activities of over three hundred ACBC workers.

Failing to undermine or gain control of ACBC, BCCAP's Board turned to its powerful supporters for assistance. The attempts of successive Mississippi governors and politicians to undermine ACBC proved more successful. Both Governor Paul B. Johnson Jr. and his successor John Bell Williams vetoed ACBC's funding, forcing staff to work voluntarily in order to keep a limited service running, until Shriver exercised his override of the governors' vetoes. An early opponent of CDGM when he was a Congressman, Governor John Bell Williams in particular targeted his opposition at delegate agency Head Start Programs.<sup>41</sup> In January 1970 his mass veto of four such programs based on his objection of their racial composition provoked angry demonstrations by the African American poor community who staged protests in front of the Governor's Mansion.<sup>42</sup> However, it was his demand for certain conditions to be attached to all Head Start programs that was most damaging. At his insistence, State Senator Arnie Watson sponsored a bill which required all Head Start teachers have at least two years of college education, and devolving power to the State Economic Opportunity Office.<sup>43</sup> ACBC Director Billy McCain Sr. was committed to providing opportunity for the wider community. He made it his mission to employ and train Head Start parents; in 1969 three quarters of the staff were Head Start parents and less than

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<sup>41</sup> Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*, (New York: Dutton, 1993) 211. Williams also used his vetoes to apply pressure on HEW Secretary Robert Finch to acquiesce to more lenient school desegregation guidelines.

<sup>42</sup> John Bell Williams to Cary Hall February 12, 1970. Mississippi Republican Party Records Series VII Box G-3 Folder PATA/FA: HEW Head Start Programs 1969-1970, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, MSU. In his veto, Williams cited the 840 black and 35 white children in the Hinds County Head Start program under Community Services Association.

<sup>43</sup> E. Williams, 'Senate gets bill aimed at Head Start project teachers' *Delta Democrat Times* February 27, 1970

half of the staff had a High School Diploma.<sup>44</sup> The bill drastically undermined the community involvement that ACBC had worked so hard to achieve as well as undercutting the main source of support for grassroots programs from OEO in Atlanta. Democratic politicians were not alone in their attacks on CDGM and its affiliated groups. The nascent Mississippi Republican Party took the opportunity to gain political capital by helping local whites eradicate CDGM remnants. The Mississippi GOP developed a relationship with the Republican OEO under Donald Rumsfeld and the Office of Child Development (OCD) at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. OCD passed audit reports and other information onto Mississippi Republican Party officials, who used the information to discredit or undermine the delegate agencies. While their involvement was more significant in Sunflower County, Mississippi Republican Party Executive Director W. T. Wilkins also used his connections with DHEW Regional Director Cary Hall to obtain internal DHEW reports alleging corruption in ACBC.<sup>45</sup>

In spite of the attacks of the wider white establishment and at least partially due to the attempts of BCCAP to subvert the program, the African American community united in support of ACBC. The program became a base around which black political activism was built, a source of unity and strength for the community which in turn strengthened and secured the funding of the Delegate Agency. ACBC still faced many of the difficulties of antipoverty programs; inadequate facilities, a hostile white community, governor's vetoes, funding delays and insecurities and a local government adept at finding loopholes through which to deny public assistance to poor African Americans. Led by Billy McCain Sr., a motivated and tireless if overbearing Director, ACBC staff remained motivated, creative and

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<sup>44</sup> Oral History Interview with Billy Joe McCain Sr. by Worth Long September 19, 1999. University of Southern Mississippi Digital Collections <http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/coh/id/5160>

<sup>45</sup> Harold B Hertsgaard to Edward Stepnick re Audit of Programs January 5, 1971. Mississippi Republican Party Records Series VII Box G-4 Folder PAT... DHEW – Head Start Programs. Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, MSU.

enthusiastic. Unusually for establishment CAPs at this time, BCCAP was also committed to providing a quality program, albeit on its own racial terms. So while race remained a potent source of tension, the two programs were partially united by this common goal. The existence of parallel Head Starts also served to ease tensions, BCCAP were less vicious in their attempts to undermine their delegate than many other establishment Community Action Agencies since it ran its own substantial Head Start. Competition between the two programs produced a 'creative tension' which benefitted both programs.<sup>46</sup> The unity engendered by ACBC and the existence of the second Head Start program, ensured that absorption into BCCAP in 1973 did not mean destruction for ACBC.<sup>47</sup> Combined, they survived funding cuts under Nixon, the demolition of OEO by Ford and Reagan's war on welfare. Billy McCain Sr., who had been BCCAP's Head Start Director since 1966 eventually served as Executive Director of the entire CAP for over thirty years. On his death in 2012, he was commended by the Mississippi State Senate as a Community Action pioneer dedicated to the War on Poverty, who enriched the lives of over 200,000 children and families in Bolivar County.<sup>48</sup> While the program developed strong links with the local community and over the course of the 1970s developed regular participation of the poor through the Policy Advisory Committees, few poor whites participated in the program. In 1979, 14 percent of the poor population of Bolivar County were white but only 6 percent of the white county population were involved in any of BCCAP's programs. Despite its success, the program remained racially divided and service oriented. Over half of the county's population remained in poverty by 1980 and BCCAP's most successful programs were those providing nutrition;

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<sup>46</sup> Evaluation Report of Bolivar County CAP April 16, 1969. RG 381 Box 3 Folder: Mississippi: Bolivar County CAP Inc., NARA SE.

<sup>47</sup> Oral History Interview with Billy Joe McCain Sr. By Worth Long, September 19, 1999. University of Southern Mississippi Digital Collections <http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/coh/id/5160>

<sup>48</sup> Mississippi Legislature, Senate Concurrent Resolution 658 (As adopted by Senate and House) 2012 Regular Session. <http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2012/html/SC/SC0658SG.htm> They also renamed the Mound Bayou-Shelby Head Start Center the Billy J. McCain Head Start Center.

Head Start and an Elderly Feeding program.<sup>49</sup> Earlier white opposition was largely displaced by an evolving pragmatic response to the realities of the situation. The determination of the white community to control the entire Head Start program eventually paid off, but only after it had the effect of uniting the African American community in ACBC's defence, unity which had significant consequences for black political progress in Bolivar County. When BCCAP had established their control, their racial pragmatism combined with a commitment to address the needs of the poor eventually enabled the successful operation of the biracial program.

### **Sunflower County**

SNCC staff, arriving in Sunflower County in 1962 characterised it was the 'worst county in the worst state' in terms of racial discrimination.<sup>50</sup> As the decade progressed, whites tightened their stranglehold on the county as they faced opposition from SNCC, NAACP and the MFDP. Though by no means the only planter to wield ruthless control over the lives of local African Americans, nor the only politician to exploit white opposition to *Brown*, Senator James O. Eastland and his home county became an emblem of planter domination and segregationist politics. While his correspondence reveals little of his direct involvement in his home county, Eastland's commitment to white supremacy, his political power and his belief in the power of white terror against the majority black population permeated Sunflower County.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, evidence of his opposition to antipoverty programs is easy to divine but rarely quantifiable. Characterised by his pragmatic approach to race relations in his county, Eastland made sure his opinion was understood and then let others

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<sup>49</sup> Community Impact Evaluation of the Bolivar County CAP November 9-15, 1979. RG 381 Box 3 Folder: Bolivar County Community Action Program, Cleveland Mississippi 1979 NARA SE. Despite remaining racially divided and service oriented, BCCAP was more successful than most Mississippi CAPs, which did not survive that long. Those that did were crippled by administrative defects and racial antagonism.

<sup>50</sup> Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 20

<sup>51</sup> Eastland operated 'in back rooms over cigars and Scotch whiskey'. Ibid.

enforce it. His absolute opposition to CDGM was understood, though he did not make a crusade of it like fellow Senator John C. Stennis. Instead Eastland let it be known CDGM would be refunded in his county 'over his dead body' and set spies to report on the activities of CDGM and its successor MAP, while local whites created antipoverty programs in 'his' counties.<sup>52</sup>

Such was the extent of white control and black fear of reprisals that when an African American grassroots Head Start program began operating in the county in 1965, they had to hold their classes in neighbouring Washington County. The group eventually opened centres in people's homes in Indianola and extending to Ruleville in October 1965, for over five hundred children. They received support from CDGM, for example with staff training and some resources but, in accordance with Eastland's dictate, were not refunded through CDGM in 1966. Organised by local women activists led by Cora Fleming, Alice Giles, Thelma May and Annie Mae King and including Fannie Lou Hamer, the group operated voluntarily for two years, facing ultimately insurmountable opposition from Sunflower County's white establishment.<sup>53</sup> The fame of Hamer, the presence of Eastland and the complexity of Movement struggles in Sunflower County have attracted many historians. The turbulent history of SNCC, NAACP and MFDP in the county, including the divisions in the local community caused by the grassroots Head Start program Associated Communities of Sunflower County (ACSC), have been detailed in biographies of Hamer and Eastland, in movement histories and studies of Sunflower County.<sup>54</sup> However, the role of the

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<sup>52</sup> Greenberg, *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes* 523, 819

<sup>53</sup> Mills, *This Little Light of Mine*, 205. The group also received financial support from national organisations such as the National Students Association.

<sup>54</sup> Biographies of Hamer include Mills, *This Little Light of Mine* and Chana K. Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999). On the Movement in Mississippi; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994) and Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*. On both Eastland and Hamer: Chris Myers Asch, *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggle of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008) and on Sunflower County Moye, *Let the People Decide*. Cora Fleming's account is recounted in Greenberg, *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes* 523-529

establishment CAP, Sunflower County Progress (SCP) has been largely overlooked. The group's opposition to ACSC illustrates unexplored changes and continuities in Massive Resistance in Sunflower County, while SCP's relationships with Democratic and Republican politicians further illuminates the national and local political significance of racial opposition to the War on Poverty.

The white establishment in Sunflower County had a long history of exploiting federal funding intended to aid the poor population. Eastland helped create federal welfare policy that he and other powerful landowners benefitted from, providing them with federal subsidies and forcing their workers to accept near-starvation wages in order to survive.<sup>55</sup> SCP was designed to serve as an extension of this control, to subvert federal funding away from grassroots African American groups so the 30 percent of the county population that was white could reassert control over the African American majority. Unlike the local establishments in Bolivar and the counties of Southwest Mississippi, Sunflower County's local officials did not even attempt to adhere to OEO's CAP Board racial requirements. Their application to OEO named an all white Board, only vehement opposition from local activists prevented the nomination of Police Chief Bryce Alexander, a man with a long history of perpetrating racial terror against African Americans, as Executive Director.<sup>56</sup> Though OEO's grant required SCP to include African Americans in their Board, SCP continued to exclude African Americans from the organisation.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 168

<sup>56</sup> Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Key Mailing List No.11 Counties report March 22, 1966, SCR ID # 2-165-6-28-4-1-1, Series 2515: Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records 1994-2006, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/result.php?image=/data/sov\\_commission/images/png/cd07/054452.png&otherstuff=2|165|6|28|4|1|1|53708|#](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/result.php?image=/data/sov_commission/images/png/cd07/054452.png&otherstuff=2|165|6|28|4|1|1|53708|#)

<sup>57</sup> Congressman Augustus F. Hawkins and Joseph Y. Resnick to President Johnson March 14, 1966. WHCF GEN FG 11-15, 9/25/64 Box 127 Folder: FG 11-15 11/19/65-3/19/66 GEN, LBJL.

Having secured their control of the federal funds entering Sunflower County, the Board of SCP turned its efforts toward eradicating ACSC. Board members petitioned to OEO to defund ACSC, staff wrote to their local politicians and to OEO accusing ACSC of corruption. Raising the familiar spectre of Black Power, the white SCP staff alleged links between the Head Start program and militant activism.<sup>58</sup> OEO's attempts to encourage cooperation between the two groups failed. SCP's Board refused to meet with ACSC staff; Cora Fleming recalled how ACSC staff members were turned away from meetings arranged for discussion of both programs futures. After weeks of refusals to meet with ACSC, the group received an invitation from SCP Board Chairman and Assistant Director to a public meeting at City Hall. When ACSC representatives, including Fleming arrived they were met with police in crash helmets carrying billies and blackjacks, who ordered them to leave.<sup>59</sup> When African Americans were included the powerful Board members such as Chancery Clerk Jack Harper dominated the meetings to the exclusion of outsiders, meaning those from outside of Indianola.<sup>60</sup> Local white officials, experienced in uniting the minority white community against Sunflower County's African American population focused their attacks on Fannie Lou Hamer. Hamer was by no means the driving force behind Head Start in Sunflower County; indeed, she had serious reservations about becoming involved in a federally funded program. However, her notoriety amongst whites after her appearance at the Democratic National Convention in 1964 made her an ideal target, serving to link the pre-school program for poor children with militant activism in the minds of the local white community. When OEO forced SCP to hold elections to create a more representative Board of Directors Hamer, running against the white establishment's candidate – an African

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<sup>58</sup> Virginia Hughes to Congressman Thomas Abernethy April 18, 1968. Thomas G. Abernethy Collection Box 182 Folder OEO Sunflower County Progress Inc., Head Start Grant. Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi.

<sup>59</sup> Greenberg, *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes* 526. The police continued to intimidate Fleming and the ACSC representatives, following them back to their church and circling the building and later Fleming's home, for hours.

<sup>60</sup> Mills, *This Little Light of Mine*, 207, 199.

American man from Ruleville – lost. Hamer believed the election had been rigged, though federal investigators concluded the election had been fair. Rigged or not, local whites maliciously used Hamer's defeat in the election in attempts to undermine with OEO for years to come. When Hamer appeared before a Senate Committee hearing into the War on Poverty in Jackson in April 1967, SCP Director Colbert Crowe and R. J. Allen President of SCP Board of Directors reacted angrily to public criticism of SCP, ironically claiming that their organisation, not Hamer was representative of Sunflower County's poor.<sup>61</sup>

Appealing to their powerful supports for help in putting their case to OEO, the SCP Board accused ACSC of harassing and intimidating SCP employees, teaching children Black Power philosophies and of staging protests in SCP Head Start centres. Lawyer Douglas Wynn again petitioned Harry McPherson to clamp down on ACSC, through OEO and any other federal agency. Wynn enclosed a 'history' of Head Start in Sunflower County, written by the SCP Board which claimed ACSC was a completely controlled subsidiary arm of the 'Black Power MFDP' designed to 'manipulate the largely illiterate and ill-informed Negro citizens of Sunflower County to its own power politics ends'. Senator Stennis, who had been active in his support of establishment-controlled CAAs since the CDGM controversy, threw his support behind SCP. Stennis mediated with an unresponsive OEO and fought SCP's corner, even when it was SCP errors that created the problems.<sup>62</sup> OEO Director Sargent Shriver proved immune to appeals for support of SCP over ACSC. With the involvement of high profile Civil Rights Activists and the Senate Hearings having drawn national attention to Sunflower County's Head Start program combined with continuing support for ACSC from the Regional OEO Office in Atlanta, Shriver was unwilling to be seen again undermining the

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<sup>61</sup> Walter Gregory Head Start Director, Colbert Crowe, Director, and R. J. Allen President Board of Directors of SCP telegram to Senator John C. Stennis April 9, 1967. John C. Stennis Papers Series 1 Box 4 Folder 17: Correspondence, April 1967. Congressional and Political Research Center, MSU.

<sup>62</sup> Memo for files, November 28, 1968. John C. Stennis Papers Series 1 Box 5 Folder 1. Congressional and Political Research Center, MSU.

grassroots program in favour of the white establishment. OEO approved a \$360,859 grant on July 1, 1967 forcing SCP to accept ACSC as its delegate agency.<sup>63</sup>

However, the existence of delegate agencies was rapidly becoming a controversial issue. OEO under a Democratic Administration had provided support and protection for delegate agencies, providing protection (albeit of a limited nature) to grassroots African American groups against establishment attacks. In 1969, the administration of Head Start was moved from the Office of Economic Opportunity and into the Office of Child Development in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (DHEW). Planned in the final years of Johnson's administration and finalised in the first year of Nixon's Administration, the move was designed to protect the funding of the more popular Head Start while funding for controversial CAPs was allowed to dwindle. The move, combined with the change in administration had a significant impact on Head Start programs at the grassroots. The Republican DHEW showed little interest in fostering community participation and were unwilling to disrupt the control of powerful potential supporters. Cary Hall, Southeast Regional Director of DHEW provoked an angry response when he supported Governor John Bell Williams' racially motivated vetoes against delegate Head Start agencies in 1970.<sup>64</sup> Former Mississippi Action for Progress Executive Director Dr Aaron Shirley accused Hall and DHEW of engaging in the racism characteristic of the Governor.<sup>65</sup> Head Start staff and parents staged protests outside the Governors' Mansion. ACSC Board Chairman Jimmy Herron accused Cary Hall of deliberately attempting to abolish delegate agencies in

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<sup>63</sup> ACSC Audit Report July 1, 1967–February 29, 1968. John C. Stennis Papers Series 1 Box 5 Folder 1. Congressional and Political Research Center, MSU. This initial grant was followed later that year with a \$30,000 supplement.

<sup>64</sup> John Bell Williams to Cary Hall February 12, 1970. Mississippi Republican Party Records Series VII Box G-3 Folder PATA/FA: HEW, Head Start Programs, 1969-1970. Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, MSU. For example, Williams cites the 840 black and 35 white children in the Hinds County CAP.

<sup>65</sup> 'Two Groups Protest Head Start Veto' *Delta Democrat Times* February 25, 1970

Mississippi because they gave poor people and black people too much control.<sup>66</sup> Head Start in Sunflower County was caught in the middle of this debate.<sup>67</sup>

The growing Mississippi Republican Party latched onto white opposition to delegate agencies as a way to gain the support of prominent local officials and businessmen. Party Executive Director W.T. Wilkins established a rewarding relationship with Office of Child Development and DHEW officials in Washington and Atlanta.<sup>68</sup> Cary Hall supplied him with inside information on Mississippi's antipoverty programs, while the party in turn passed on to the OCD allegations and accusations of wrongdoing in delegate agencies. Their collaboration was particularly successful in Sunflower County. Bill Gresham, civic leader and powerful businessman from Indianola, member of the Citizens Council and active in the Republican Party, solicited the help of the Mississippi GOP to eliminate ACSC.<sup>69</sup> Gathering unsubstantiated reports of ACSC wrongdoing, exerting their influence on OCD and dangling the prospect of the political advantage should they be the ones to defeat Hamer, Wilkins was central in securing ACSC's demise. Some support remained in Washington for the grassroots group. Washington OCD employee Dick Orton's attempts to convince Atlanta OCD staff to protect ACSC prompted a flurry of concerned correspondence between the Mississippi GOP

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<sup>66</sup> Jimmy Herron to Secretary Elliot Richardson January 27, 1971. Mississippi Republican Party Records Series VII Box G-4 Folder PAT... DHEW – Head Start Programs. Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, MSU.

<sup>67</sup> 'The Council Newsletter' Vol. I, No. 5, June 1971. Citizens Council Collection Box 1 Folder 9. Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi. Head Start was in a precarious position for a number of reasons. Head Start supporters in Congress were increasingly alienated by its social activism while debate was raging over the effectiveness of Head Start in the wake of the Westinghouse Learning Corporation and Ohio University Report. Maris A. Vinovskis, *Birth of Head Start: Preschool Education Policies in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) 106, 185

<sup>68</sup> Cary Hall to W.T. Wilkins January 5, 1971 Mississippi Republican Party Records Series VII Box G-4 Folder PAT... DHEW – Head Start Programs. Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, MSU. Cary Hall sent internal HEW correspondence reporting on Audits of Mississippi CAPs to Bill Wilkins, with the message: 'This is for you, now what can you do for me?'

<sup>69</sup> Moyer *Let the People Decide*, 182. Moyer also notes Gresham is listed as a donor to the Coordinating Committee for Fundamental American Freedom, through the Sovereignty Commission.

and DHEW.<sup>70</sup> Working together Cary Hall, Watson Munday, Barbara Whitaker and Bill Wilkins were able to overcome the remaining support for ACSC both in Washington and Sunflower County. Their hard work paid off. The decision on the future of the delegate relationship remained on the local level in the control of SCP, Wilkins and his contacts in DHEW ensured ACSC's eradication at the hands of Sunflower County's white establishment.<sup>71</sup>

By January 1971, Wilkins, Reed and Gresham were celebrating their achievement of 'putting Hamer out of business'.<sup>72</sup> However, Hamer had already come to accept that ACSC's absorption into SCP was inevitable. Her acceptance of what amounted to the destruction ACSC created divisions in the group and provoked an angry response reaction from many in the poor African American community. Cora Fleming refused ever to talk to Hamer again. Hamer suspected that a firebomb, thrown into her home but failing to explode, was the work of angry ACSC supporters. Fleming continued to fight for ACSC's survival, searching for other sources of funding for the group and refusing the position of Assistant Head Start Director created for her within SCP.<sup>73</sup> While some ACSC employees realised that the only way Head Start would survive in Sunflower County was through SCP, Fleming refused to 'sign away the rights and toil of my people' by leading them into the 'devil's arms'.<sup>74</sup> The incorporation of ACSC (or as they termed it, 'this boondoggle') into SCP was undoubtedly a

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<sup>70</sup> Handwritten note by WTW February 9, 1971 Mississippi Republican Party Records Series VII Box G-4 Folder PAT... DHEW – Head Start Programs. Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, MSU.

<sup>71</sup> William T. Wilkins to Clarke Reed February 10, 1971 and attached letter from Barbara Whitaker to Jimmy Herron. Mississippi Republican Party Records Series VII Box G-4. Folder PAT... DHEW – Head Start Programs. Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, MSU.

<sup>72</sup> WT Wilkins to Clarke Reed January 18, 1971 and Bill Gresham to W. T. Wilkins, n.d. Mississippi Republican Party Records Series VII Box G-4 Folder PAT... DHEW – Head Start Programs. Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, MSU.

<sup>73</sup> Mills, *This Little Light of Mine*, 213-214. Though he culprit was never discovered Hamer told FBI agents she was convinced the people responsible were associated with the ACSC program.

<sup>74</sup> Jack E. Harper to Congressman Thomas Abernethy February 2, 1971. Thomas G. Abernethy Collection Box 182 Folder OEO Sunflower County Progress Inc., Head Start Grant. Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi. Greenberg, *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes* 528.

victory for the Mississippi Republican Party. Mississippi's Republican officials' hoped their role would bring substantial credit to the Nixon administration, DHEW and the Mississippi GOP.<sup>75</sup> While their role in support white supremacy was a factor in the slow but steady building of a base of support at the grassroots, it was perhaps the high point in their relationship with the Republican Administration. While their relationship with Rumsfeld was occasionally mutually beneficial – and with Cary Hall at DHEW and later Director of OEO Howard Phillips definitely so – Nixon's support for Senator Eastland over Republican candidate Gil Carmichael in the 1972 election undermined the connection. While Mississippi Republicans remained opposed to grassroots African American run programs and supportive of white establishment CAPs, their contacts with DHEW and OEO never again aided with the destruction of a grassroots program.

While SCP eventually absorbed ACSC, it was not the complete victory the white community could have commanded only a few years earlier. The volunteers of Freedom Summer had gone, leaving behind local activists to face the backlash from the white establishment. Racial murder, though less common in the 1970s still occurred; when a young black woman was murdered in 1971, the response of Sunflower County's white establishment was silence and indifference.<sup>76</sup> Freedom Summer received wide publicity, but the quieter local struggles of Head Start evinced small but significant changes in the nature of white opposition. ACSC's incorporation into SCP served sustained white control, though some ACSC centres run by ACSC staff survived under SCP. It was another fifteen years, in the midst of a crisis over the appointment of the schools Superintendent before a biracial

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<sup>75</sup> Clarke Reed to Cary Hall January 18, 1971 Mississippi Republican Party Records Series VII Box G-4 Folder PAT... DHEW – Head Start Programs. Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, MSU.

<sup>76</sup> 'The Council Newsletter' Vol. I, No. 5, June 1971. Citizens Council Collection Box 1 Folder 9. Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi.

Committee provided an arena for Sunflower County's black and white residents to negotiate as equals and then with middle class, not poor African Americans.<sup>77</sup>

In the two case studies this paper has explored, white opposition to African American Head Start was varied and often contradictory, reflecting Mississippi's complex and slowly changing racial landscape. The commitment of local white establishments to maintain their control over local communities combined with sporadic and often less-than-strategic accommodations. Unlike the response to school desegregation, white resistance and accommodations to antipoverty programs did not follow an orderly, linear pattern that the epithet strategic implies. The measure and indeed existent of what Erle Johnston Jr. termed 'pragmatic segregation' depended in large part on the widely varying local conditions; the impact of white opposition in creating unity or discord in the poor African American community, the strength of white supremacist influence on the white population and the level of national attention not just from OEO and DHEW, but from politicians and the media. Sunflower and Bolivar were by no means the only counties in which battles between CDGM-remnants and establishment CAAs raged. In the east of the State, five former CDGM counties opposed involvement in state-wide CDGM replacement Mississippi Action for Progress, and instead formed the Friends of the Children of Mississippi. By March 1967, FCM were operating 130 centres for nearly 2000 children with 435 employees, on a voluntary basis.<sup>78</sup> The group battled with MAP to retain control of its program and petitioned OEO for independent funding, eventually achieving an uneasy delegate relationship with MAP in May

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<sup>77</sup> Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 196. Jack Harper and Bill Gresham were both involved in resolving the crisis, using their influence for moderation. Harper, as Chancery Clerk was instrumental in creating in the mid-1980s which for the first time provided and Gresham was one of sixteen businessmen who put up \$90,000 to buy the Superintendent out.

<sup>78</sup> FCM Fact Sheet April 25, 1967, Hodding Carter III Papers Box 1 Loose Materials. Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, MSU.

1968.<sup>79</sup> The unwillingness of MAP to compromise on the level of control it wanted over the operation of FCM and the militant and often violent opposition of former CDGM staff to MAP created a volatile mix. Commission Director Erle Johnston Jr. exploited the situation to the full, seizing upon instances of violence against MAP employees in the FCM counties, eager to blame the violence on former CDGM employees.<sup>80</sup> In Southwest Mississippi, the white population alternately bolstered and intimidated by the pervasive influence of the Klan ensured the former CDGM program met with violence, hostility and intimidation. The efforts of the Governor, State Sovereignty Commission and most significantly the establishment CAP Southwest Mississippi Opportunities combined with OEO's incompetence and inaction in the face of the rampant racism crippled the former CDGM program.<sup>81</sup>

The legacy of CDGM is not limited to the positive impact on Mississippi's pre-school education system or a tradition of grassroots activism.<sup>82</sup> CDGM ignited another phase of Massive Resistance. Although white opposition to CDGM was not entirely successful it served as an important learning curve for Mississippi's white establishment. The initial blast of opposition trickled down into local communities so that the mechanisms of white opposition could function where they did best, away from national attention and on the streets of poor Delta communities. Taking the lessons, though not always successfully, of what did and did not work in opposing CDGM, Mississippi white establishment forged a new opposition to African American advancement through antipoverty programs. Clothed in the rhetoric of earlier Massive Resistance, it opposed federal intervention and outside influence but drew on newer language incorporating Goldwater conservatism and post-race riots fears of Black Power, utilising the mechanisms of Massive Resistance such the Sovereignty

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<sup>79</sup> Memorandum of Agreement between MAP and FCM, May 2, 1968. Hodding Carter III Papers Box 1 Loose Material. Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, MSU.

<sup>80</sup> Memo to File by Erle Johnston Jr. March 16, 1967. John C. Stennis Papers Series 39 Box 4 Folder 62. Congressional and Political Research Center, MSU.

<sup>81</sup> OEO Evaluation Report, May 9-11, 1971. RG 381 Box 19 Folder: Mississippi SMO Inc. NARA SE

<sup>82</sup> Jordan, 'Fighting for the CDGM', 280-307. Greenberg, *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes* 786.

Commission and local white Citizens Councils in new ways. Councilmen now sat on CAA Boards and controlled federal funds. The Commission, instead of propagating threats of violent retribution or facilitating white terror, spied on Head Start programs, interviewing the staff and gathering audit reports to send to Stennis and to OEO. While the local Democratic Party had been the vehicle for earlier Massive Resistance, such efforts were frustrated by OEO in Atlanta and Washington. Though neither the White House nor Sargent Shriver had any wish to repeat the national humiliation of the CDGM debacle, this did not amount to capitulation to the demands of establishment CAPs, even when put forward by powerful Democratic politicians. The Mississippi Republican Party however, had greater success. Establishing themselves (albeit briefly) as white Mississippi's key to gaining the support of Republican Washington officials in destroying the delegate agencies.

## List of Abbreviations

ACBC	Associated Communities of Bolivar County
ACSC	Associated Communities of Sunflower County
BCCAP	Bolivar County Community Action Agency
CAP	Community Action Program
CDGM	Child Development Group of Mississippi
DHEW	Department of Health, Education and Welfare
MFDP	Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
OCD	Office of Child Development
OEO	Office of Economic Opportunity
SCP	Sunflower County Progress