

# Reflections on the Events of May 1970

The events of May 1970 ~~which we remember today~~ were happening of far greater significance and of wider scope than many of us supposed at that time. When we remember the two young men, Phillip Gibbs and James Earl Green, who lost their lives here, and consider the serious injuries of others at that time, nothing seems more fitting than the words Lincoln uttered at Gettysburg and nothing seems more tragic than the cold reality of our specific situation. Even now, two years later, we recall our deep physical malaise and our even greater mental anguish as we suffered the trauma of those immediate and terrible days.

Although it may be small comfort now either to the bereaved families or to their friends and comrades of all concerned, we must recall those painful hours and re-examine what happened here and know why we must never forget those martyred men nor misunderstand the significance of the trouble then if we would understand our lives today and what is happening to us now.

The future of our world, our country, and community, and yes, even of our college, depends on a clear understanding of what was hanging in the balance then and what continues to hang in the balance now. And by balance, I mean the scales of justice where all our hopes of freedom, pride, and dignity are weighed. It is not enough to say that the events of May 1970 at Jackson State College were only a precious fragment of the whole rage of dissent and discontent that spread itself across the nation if not the entire world at that moment. For if we fail to understand the national and international implications of our local predicament, we fail to understand what is most challenging to all our people everywhere in this crucial decade of the 1970s.

We know now that the eruption of violence on campuses all over the nation was not a spontaneous thing. It was planned and organized and powerfully manipulated by forces outside our control. We also know that, although the Committee on Campus Unrest reported the deaths of two students here as "The Killings at Jackson State," none of the murderers was apprehended, indicted, or even reprimanded. In the words of a high official of the state, "The responsibility

rests with the protesters.” This is what the forces of repression would have us believe. And so, in this sense, justice remains blind, and their deaths go unavenged.

On the other hand, we may not know to what extent the depth charge or bombshell set loose at that time succeeded in retarding and repressing three national movements. As black people, we witnessed systematic attack by local white police on black communities throughout the length and breadth of the land for the next six months. Sometimes these attacks were disguised under the ambiguous term of “shoot-outs,” and their victims were specified as Black Panthers or rioters, or merely restless and violent blacks. Specific cities can be recalled but what is more significant is that ninety percent of the United States was affected. Whether we realize or recognize the fact the racist forces of white control considered a growing wave and movement of black people as a real and present danger to the security of this country. Consequently, the black people were systematically repressed. And no one knows how many of our blacks were killed.

The youth culture or organized student movement was moreover berated and vilified as being constituted of “bums,” “hippies,” “junkies,” and young hoodlums. This radical and revolutionary student group was openly attacked and summarily put down as a part of total repression.

And finally, but probably most significantly, the rapidly growing and overwhelming tide of a peace movement was regarded as a definite menace to government foreign policy and the conduct of the Vietnam or Indo-China War. The monthly moratorium marches and demonstrations that began in October 1969 reached a climax in May 1970, and although many white youths risked serious head-breaking in Washington, D.C. in the first week of May of 1971, the multiple and mass arrests with costly fines and/or jail sentences served eventually to restrain this very volatile and voluble mass of war-weary demonstrators.

Obviously no amount of force could contain it for <sup>even</sup> ~~in~~ <sup>in</sup> this chaotic year of 1972, we ✓ observe the same effort to quell the peace demonstrations. Nothing confused and deceived us then of the far-reaching implications of death at Jackson State in May 1970 and nothing confuses or deceives us now.

This was more than a local or isolated incident. The social and political meaning in the local trouble had national and international significance.

On August 13, 1970, it was my painful duty to testify before the President's Commission on Campus Unrest as to what I thought were the reasons behind the awful outburst of violence on this campus where I have worked for more than twenty years. I refer you to that report for details of testimony, but I mention it here in passing because of the kind of repercussion it received. As I have already indicated, I expressed the personal belief that this act of violence perpetuated against our people and our institution was an overt act of repression indicative of national repression and the direct results of racism and the widening of the war in Asia.

As a consequence of my testimonial, I received a number of pieces of hate mail which were quite revealing. These letters and marked clippings revealed a sad state of sick minds; definitely psychotic and full of paranoid fear. All of them revealed the same obsessions, misunderstandings, and racist aberrations. These, in the order they were listed, were: (1) fear of the Black Panthers; (2) complaints about their tax burdens as though no black people pay taxes; (3) resentment of welfare recipients; and (4) attacks or charges of wanton illegitimacy leveled against all black people. This is the usual racist gimmick of taking half-truths and making whole cloth from them. Each of these prejudicial expressions placed in its proper frame of reference and with explanations of statistics in true percentile ratios would reveal startlingly opposite conclusions from those drawn so hastily here.

I was amazed at the tremendous amount of fear and hostility in the white community against the Black Panthers. Perhaps their fears are well founded but when they tell *me*, a black person, to get rid of the Black Panthers, I don't know what they mean nor what they think I can do. I do recognize why the white police have wantonly murdered Black Panthers even in their beds but in spite of the national efforts to exterminate the panthers, I do not believe they have yet succeeded.

As for illegitimacy, black people have no monopoly on illegitimacy any more than what some consider adultery. There are reasons why the statistics reveal so many cases in the black

community, and we should understand first that our system of welfare forces the black man out of the home so that his wife or woman can get the check. If he and she work, no matter how little they make, the check is affected. Moreover, the masses of black women are less educated concerning contraceptives or birth control and less willing to perform abortions once they are pregnant. But don't tell me the white girls *never* get pregnant unless they are married! They do have more homes for white unwed mothers, and they are not exposed as often as black women to the public records of county hospitals but, again, this is a racial gimmick used against all black people. And, as for as the tax burden of whites, that is a national joke. Not only are the statistics clearly showing that rich corporations pay no taxes, the rich whites who live in the suburbs pay no city tax. It seems to me that the black people could also have something to say about the tax burden. We are the residents of the inner cities, and don't tell me we don't pay taxes. Enough about answering my hate mail.

What we must understand above all, at the base of these attacks, is a fundamental racism with the false assumptions of white supremacy and racial superiority, "Cause the white man's got a God complex."

These letters imply a deep hatred and resentment of all black people and all of them attempted to justify the violent deaths here at Jackson State in May 1970. Most of all, they confirm our belief that racism is a moral and mental sickness that pervades and permeates all American life.

Granted that we are aware of all these facts—and granted that polarization of races in this country continues, that a perpetual foreign war which began at the beginning of this century continues in Asia after twelve years of neither winning a political or military victory, the deaths of hundreds of thousands and the destruction of other nations' land and property, not to count the materials cost running into billions of dollars. Who do you suppose profits from a war—the factories who make the uniforms? —the munitions factories? —the bombs and guns? —nuclear weapons and germ warfare? Granted that these facts are obvious in the face of obdurate hatred and violence, war, and racism: How best can we memorialize these two young men who were

victims of disaster on the morning of May 15, 1970? How can our lives best serve their memory? What dedication can we bring to this occasion of horror so easily accepted by the white community and flimsily excused by white racists? Are we dulled in defeat or are we awakened to a new awareness of man's continual struggle to be free? Must we forget so soon or do we dare to remember? What is the mandate these martyred men have handed us?

Do we accept our fate as colonized people less than slaves, or is there such a destined dream as freedom, peace, and human dignity to bless us with their truth?

A nation cries out to be delivered from the death and despair and destruction that pervade our world. Two black youths have spilled their blood on these hallowed grounds where we daily tread. Do we dare forget? The least we can do is remember.

What is your role as students in this black struggle for freedom? Our first step is an understanding of the forces that seek to enslave and re-enslave us. Recognizing the forces of repression as an enemy to all black people is our first step. As Mari Evans says, to identify the enemy is to free the mind. And when the mind is free, the people *will* be free to build a new and better world. The second step is understanding the potentials and the uses for your education. Is it relevant and viable? Can your class establish, lead, and maintain an entire dynamic community? You may be called upon to do just that. Your service is needed in your communities. And that is the third step—your dedication to the struggle for the complete liberation.

I challenge you to remember what happened on this campus two years ago. Remember and think again. Ask yourself, and remember. On pain of your own death—do not dare to forget.