

Book Review

Price of Defiance: James Meredith And The Integration Of Ole Miss

Charles W. Eagles

Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

Reviewed by
Gary M. Lavergne

The University of Texas at Austin

Writing about race is emotional and difficult, and with the exception of lynching and assassination, the story of the integration of the University of Mississippi likely poses the greatest challenge to an historian of the Civil Rights Movement. Throughout my career I've counseled aspiring literary non-fiction writers to keep their passion in check. When I hear other writers advocate the opposite viewpoint, I remind them that the most regrettable decisions of our lives are most often made during a loss of control. Passion belongs to readers—not writers.

When chronicling bigotry and hatred, it is cheap and easy for historians to fall into the trap of name-calling and intellectual masturbation. The Price of Defiance by Charles W. Eagles of Ole Miss has many unsympathetic characters, like Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett, and dozens of Citizens' Council members whose bigotry is breath-taking. But Eagles gives us a valuable writing lesson by maintaining control. The result is a memorable and unambiguous portrait of insufferably ignorant hatemongers. Eagles never uses those terms in his writing; I am using them as a reader. That is how good this book is.

The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss begins with the founding of Ole Miss in 1848. Indeed, the book's title is somewhat misleading insofar as the first eleven chapters are back-story about the unique anatomy of Ole Miss as a symbol of white supremacy. Like many southern flagship universities, Ole Miss' history included political struggles between elitists wanting to keep the university small and highly selective and populists wanting to open its doors to as many white students as possible. But unlike most other flagships, it was also an institution founded for the specific purpose of withholding "dangerous" thoughts and ideas from the young adults of the planter aristocracy. It was a teaching institution that functioned as much

to prevent learning. The Ole Miss faculty and student body mostly perpetuated the status quo—white supremacy.

After rejecting the “Stonewalls” (20) as a mascot, over time “Ole Miss” became more than just a moniker. It morphed into a white feminine form needing protection from lecherous African beasts and dreaded socialist and communist influences. To the extent that an institution can be an actor in a drama, Charles Eagles’ character development of Ole Miss is first-rate.

Eagles sees much of the integration of Ole Miss and the larger issue of racism through the prism of threats to academic freedom. He dedicates much of his book to chronicling the fates of “dangerous” faculty and students, some of whom innocuously suggested moderation in the hatred of racial minorities or a reexamination of issues like the patriotism of Robert E. Lee. In an atmosphere where it was widely accepted that “racial amalgamation is against the will of God” (124) and “there will never be a white man who favors integration who is not a sex degenerate” (132), its own student newspaper felt compelled to ask, “Is Ole Miss truly a university?” (411)

James Meredith is a mysterious figure. Like many other African American veterans of world wars he is greatly affected by his military service in Japan and returns to Kosciusko, Mississippi to fight for freedom at home. Eagles characterizes Meredith as a “militant conservative” (201) who internalized both the conservative elements of Booker T. Washington the more radical tenants of W.E.B. Du Bois. Meredith accepted Booker T. Washington’s advocacy of a disciplined and virtuous life, but he also fervently believed in higher education and considered himself part of Du Bois’ theoretical intellectual elite. He could be opinionated, hardheaded, and impatient—hardly the traits of a plaintiff the NAACP considered ideal. (He ended his first conversation with Thurgood Marshall and Medgar Evers by hanging up on them.) And yet, his courage was undeniable, and he wanted to break the color barrier of the University of Mississippi.

Eagles’ portraits of James Meredith and his chief nemesis, Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett, are vivid and memorable, but unfortunately the other major players in the story are not as well developed. NAACP attorney Constance Baker Motley’s legal arguments are covered in detail, but in workmanlike fashion. There is little treatment of the internal workings of the NAACP or the Citizens’ Councils. The movements of Ole Miss Registrar Robert B. Ellis, Lieutenant Governor Paul B. Johnson, federal marshal James P. McShane, and Justice Department attorneys Nicholas Katzenback and John Doar are covered in detail, but readers don’t really get to know these characters in the same way Eagles treats Meredith, Barnett, and Ole Miss.

This is a book about pusillanimity. Mississippi politicians adopted rules for admissions that could only be applied to prevent access for African Americans, and they lacked the courage and honesty to admit it. Then they went before federal judges and seriously argued that James Meredith was not denied admission to Old Miss because of his race. Appeals Court Judge Elbert Tuttle snapped, “Don’t you think that we should take judicial notice of what everyone else knows?” (255) Governor Ross Barnett presented himself to adoring crowds at football games as an uncompromising soldier in the battle for the southern way of life, while secretly negotiating by telephone with the Kennedy administration to avoid paying the price of his lies and defiance. His pleas to Robert Kennedy for secrecy are sad and disturbing. President John Kennedy approached racial prejudice as an intellectual problem long before he was forced to acknowledge its human toll. Eagles notes that his fear of powerful southern Democrats and his promises to employ “as little force” (358) and create the “least possible disruption” (358) to do what he knew was right and enforce the law was truly a “profile in cowardice.” (278)

This book is also about delusion. Ross Barnett frequently ended his testy negotiations with JFK and RFK with absurdities like “Appreciate your interest in our poultry programs” (335) and “Come and see us at the mansion.” (320) On the day after a night of rioting and murder in front of the Lyceum, the very symbol of the University of Mississippi, carcasses of burned cars, buses, and trucks lay in the shadow of the Confederate Memorial. As more than 4,000 National Guardsmen patrolled the campus, four trustees announced that things were “completely normal.” (370) On that Monday morning James Meredith walked into the Lyceum for the first time and registered as a transfer student. The state of Mississippi paid a dear price for Ross Barnett’s defiance. On June 5, 1963, after nearly destroying the reputation of his state and its flagship university, he awoke from his delusion to declare that “It would be unwise and futile to enter into a physical or a shooting combat with the United States Army.” (416) He would have been far more courageous if he had said that in September of the previous year.

Finally, *The Price of Defiance* is an important book because it masterfully illustrates a simple truth: No matter how hard a ruling class may try, the oppression they sow can never be limited to the group they target. Many thoughtful Mississippi whites were not free to speak or act as they would have liked. As James Meredith said on Meet the Press, “The [white] students are not free to associate with me.”

