

MISSISSIPPI REDEEMED

Despite powerful evidence against him, a fanatical white supremacist called Byron De La Beckwith twice escaped conviction by all-white juries for the murder in 1963 of the Mississippi civil rights leader Medgar Evers. Now, nearly 30 years later, a more modern, less racist Mississippi is seeking to try him again – and do it properly this time. By WILLIAM GREEN

On 12 June 1963, a pale blue Oldsmobile drew into the driveway of a modest, ranch-style house in Jackson, Mississippi. Medgar Evers, unofficial leader of the state's civil rights movement, parked behind his wife's station wagon, gathered together a bundle of T-shirts imprinted with the anti-discrimination slogan JIM CROW MUST GO, and stepped out into the stifling heat. It was past midnight but his wife, Myrlie, and their three small children were waiting up for him. They had been watching President John F Kennedy on the television that

evening, urgently addressing a divided nation: "In too many parts of the country, wrongs are inflicted on Negro citizens and there are no remedies at law... We face therefore a moral crisis as a country, as a people. It is time to act."

Two hundred feet from Evers' house on Guynes Street, a sniper watched through the scope of a 1917 Enfield rifle. Lying hidden in a thicket of honeysuckle, his bolt-action gun ten inches from the ground, he took aim. Evers, silhouetted by a light in the garage, slammed the car door. At the same

Right: Myrlie Evers and her children with the body of her murdered husband

Below: Less than two weeks before his murder, Medgar Evers (wearing a placard) was arrested at an anti-segregation picket outside Woolworths in Jackson, Mississippi.

Roy Wilkins (left), the executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, was also arrested







instant, there was a single shot, the high-power bullet tearing into Evers' back beneath the right shoulder blade. It passed straight through him, breaking a window and penetrating a four-inch wall, before coming to rest beneath a watermelon on his kitchen counter.

Hearing the gunfire, his children – Reena, Darrell Kenyatta, and Van Dyck – dropped to the floor as he had instructed them. Myrlie rushed from the bedroom and threw open the front door, finding her husband face down on the steps, his keys in his hand. A neighbour ran to Medgar's aid and fired a revolver once in the air to scare off the gunman. Minutes later, Evers was laid on a mattress and driven in a station wagon to the medical centre at Mississippi University. As legend has it, his dying words were, "Turn me loose."

The murder of Medgar Evers is at the heart of Mississippi's reputation as a state where white supremacists drive around at night, shooting with impunity at "niggers" and "nigger-lovers". Reinforced by films like Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning*, this stereotype of violent, ignorant tobacco-spitters in reflector sunglasses, twisted by bigotry and hatred, still survives.

Three decades after becoming America's most notorious racial battleground, Mississippi is still preoccupied with changing its image. A striking symbol of this attempt to purge itself of its past is the re-trial of Byron De La Beckwith, an avowed segregationist who was twice acquitted of Medgar Evers' murder in 1964. The frail, stooping 70-year-old – known to his friends as "Delay" – has recently been charged for the third time with killing Evers, and the new investigation has been hailed by liberal newspapers as proof that Mississippi has changed.

Now, Beckwith is in Hamilton County Jail, Tennessee, waiting for the state Supreme Court to decide whether to extradite him to Jackson for re-trial. After I had talked extensively with his wife, Thelma Neff, Beckwith agreed to meet me. But two days before the interview, Calvin Sidley, Chief of Correction at the jail, informed me with quiet glee that his charge was no longer available: visitation rights, I was told, were a privilege that Beckwith would be denied as long as he remained "uncooperative".

After eight months in jail, Beckwith has – as always – ruffled some feathers. According

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Byron De La Beckwith arrives at Jackson City Jail on 22 June 1963, after being charged with the murder of Medgar Evers

to Sidley, he has refused medication and has barely eaten. Beckwith thinks he is being poisoned: "He feels like he's dying," Thelma told me. He is a victim, she said, of "Jews who want to rule America".

Back in the Fifties the reality of Mississippi was as bleak as its image. Forty-five per cent of its people were black, a higher proportion than in any other state, but only five per cent of them – America's lowest rate – had registered to vote. The disincentives were considerable. When Medgar Evers returned to Decatur, Mississippi after serving in World War Two, he and four other blacks attempted to vote, but were turned away by a mob with knives and guns. "All we wanted to be was ordinary citizens," Evers wrote years later. "Now, after the Germans and the Japanese hadn't killed us, it looked as though the white Mississippians would." He left without even seeing the voting booth.

Another key form of discrimination was the exclusion of black children from all-white state schools. In May 1954, on a day known to white Mississippians as "Black Monday", the United States Supreme Court declared this unconstitutional. Defying the interference of outsiders, local white supremacist leaders altered the state constitution so that they could close schools in danger of desegregation. For good measure, they legislated against common-law marriage: as a result, thousands of black children woke up to find themselves "illegitimate", and consequently ineligible to attend white schools in their home state.

Above all, Mississippi led the nation in lynchings, beatings, and disappearances. A notorious but hardly unique case was that of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black boy who breached local standards of racial etiquette by saying "Bye, baby" to a white woman as he left her store in a town called Money. Till, a city boy visiting from Chicago, was showing off to his Mississippian relatives, laughing at the backwardness of Southern values. Later that night, the woman's husband and brother-in-law are said to have dragged him at gun-point from his cousins' house and left his body floating in the Tallahatchie River. After an hour of deliberation, an all-white jury acquitted both men.

Between 1960 and 1962, the state's deep racial tensions rose to the surface, and Medgar Evers became the focal point of white hatred. As field secretary for the Mississippi branch of the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People), he investigated those murders of blacks that the police dismissed as "accidents". He co-ordinated voter

registration drives, won a lawsuit to desegregate Jackson's privately owned buses, sought to integrate secondary schools, and led a boycott of shops in the city centre that refused to employ blacks.

By Christmas 1962, Mississippi seemed ready for its own large-scale civil rights movement. There would be an intensification of "all legal means of protest", wrote Evers to Ross Barnett, Jackson's segregationist mayor – "picketing, marches, mass meetings, litigation". In the fortnight before Medgar Evers' death, the white supremacists hit back. Six hundred and eighty black protesters, most of them teenagers, were arrested in peaceful demonstrations and boycotts that Evers had organised, and were herded into a makeshift prison camp on the site of Mississippi's fairground. Many of them were beaten with clubs or set upon by police dogs. "There are a lot of young, hot-headed Negroes here who are ready to die for what they believe in," remarked a Jackson courthouse official. "And we've got a lot of white men who are ready to kill them."

Evers had become the state's leading target. "The whole mood of white Mississippi", Myrlie said later in a television interview, "was that if Medgar were eliminated, the problem would be solved." His name was on a widely circulated nine-man death list, his telephone was tapped, he received death-threats by the hour, and his wife and children were followed to school. Evers kept a gun in his house and in his Oldsmobile, but the explosion of a Molotov cocktail in his carport early in June 1963 showed how vulnerable he was. Aware that he was being followed everywhere, he confided to a friend in the Civil Rights movement that he was "looking to be shot" any time he stepped out of his car. Myrlie recalled, "We both knew he was going to die."

When news of Medgar Evers' murder spread on the morning of 12 June 1963, Mississippi ran wild. That afternoon, thousands of black demonstrators marched spontaneously through Jackson, waving American flags and chanting, "No more Jim Crow. I'm dead before I'd be a slave." The police used clubs on them and arrested 13 ministers, along with 145 black youths. Two days later, at Evers' funeral procession, three or four thousand blacks gathered to pay tribute to him. "Medgar was more than just an opponent," said one speaker. "He was a constant threat to the system. The system murdered him." Again the police attempted to disperse the crowd, but Evers' death had hardened the will of Mississippi's blacks. "At that point," Myrlie

has written, "a new motto was born: 'After Medgar, no more fear.'"

With the eyes of the nation on Mississippi, Jackson's chief of police called in 16 detectives and five FBI agents to track down the sniper. Within hours, they found the murder weapon, a .30 calibre rifle, hidden in a clump of vines opposite Evers' house. The Golden Hawk telescopic sight that was bolted to the weapon was dusted, and a single, near-perfect fingerprint was lifted from it. The FBI followed the lead by interviewing the Chicago dealer who imported the scopes from Japan, and by dispatching 75 agents to trace the Golden Hawks that had been sold in Mississippi.

All but one of them was located. The sight that was missing belonged to Byron De La Beckwith, a gun-collector who had bought it only a month before. Asked to account for the scope, Beckwith refused to talk. The FBI laboratory in Washington, which had a collection of 168 million fingerprints, was alerted. There, a print of his index finger was unearthed from a World War Two marine corps file and was compared to the print found on the rifle. They were a perfect match. Ten days after Medgar Evers was murdered, Delay Beckwith turned himself in. His arrest was announced by J Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI.

Beckwith was 42 years old, a fertilizer salesman living in Greenwood, Mississippi, 97 miles north of Evers' home in Jackson. Short, trim and upright, with black hair slicked back over the hint of a bald spot, he was known locally for his Southern charm. Walking in the street, he tipped his hat to women and greeted passers-by with pleasantries such as "Top of the morning." According to Hardy Lott, the lawyer who defended him in 1964, Delay "was brought up to be nice to everybody". "He had unusually good manners," Lott told me, and "was very well liked".

Beckwith came from Confederate stock and was proud of it. In the Civil War, his grandfather, Lemuel P Yerger, had ridden with General Nathan Bedford Forrest's Confederate cavalry. Yerger returned home with a bullet in his leg and took to calling himself the Colonel (Forrest returned home and became the first "Imperial Wizard" of the Ku Klux Klan).

As a child, Delay spent his summers on what was left of the plantation, surrounded by black servants and farmhands who called his uncle "Master". I asked Thelma Neff what the young Delay thought of them. "Lord," she laughed, "they had over a thousand niggers on the plantation and he got along beautifully with them. They called him 'Little Captain'." According to

Thelma, Beckwith still fondly remembers asking his uncle why they weren't white: "If you don't behave," he was told, "you fall down in the mud and you turn black."

At 20, Beckwith joined the marines and won a Purple Heart at the Battle of Tarawa, where he was hit by Japanese fire. Coming home wounded to Mississippi, he married his first wife, Mary Louise, a segregationist descendant of Roger Williams, the pioneer who founded Rhode Island. Delay took a job selling cigarettes and snuff to corner shops, and moved into the crumbling house that the Colonel had built at the turn of the century. The family fortune had by now been dissipated and the wooden structure was rotting. Its windows were covered with cardboard, its white paint had peeled, and the master bedroom, where Beckwith and his wife slept on his army-issue cot, was lit by a single naked bulb. It was an inauspicious start to a marriage that would end in 1960, amid accusations that Delay had beaten her and threatened to kill her.

Meanwhile, in May 1954, a week after the Supreme Court's ruling against segregation in schools, Beckwith attended a meeting of the Sons of the American Revolution. The speaker, Judge Tom Brady, ranted against the new ruling and dismissed blacks as chimpanzees. Beckwith was reborn. "That speech", said a relative of his, "changed Delay overnight. He became rabid on the race question." He immediately joined the White Citizens' Council, a state-wide network devoted to preserving segregation; he printed his own anti-integration leaflets and handed them to strangers on the street; and in his spare time he was seen standing guard at his local bus station, making sure that blacks never entered the white waiting-room. Greenwood residents say that he carried a gun to church for the same reason.

Beckwith was more dangerous than the average eccentric with a yearning to return to the "good ol' days". An acquaintance from Greenwood, quoted in a recent magazine article, recalled, "He looked like a little timid book-keeper with Coca-Cola glasses. But he wasn't anything like he looked. He was a crack shot, and he had a streak of iron in him." Delay's hobbies were guns and hunting, and he could shoot a matchbox off a fence post from 125 yards.

Before Beckwith could be tried, William Waller, the District Attorney in charge of his prosecution, had to select a dozen jurors from an all-white jury pool. He began by asking them, "Do you believe it's a crime for a white man to kill a nigger in Mississippi?" It took four days to find 12 who did.

Nobody imagined that Beckwith could be convicted. "They'll acquit him in 15 minutes," said a spectator to a journalist from New York. "The jury'll go back and play a few hands of Rook, just to make it look like they are studying the evidence. Then they'll walk back out and turn him loose."

Beckwith himself was not unduly worried by the charges. In court - flamboyantly dapper in his red tie, blue silk trousers, and crimson socks, smiling at friends in the audience, and offering cigars to Waller - he had the air of a man expecting to receive homage. For a few intoxicating months, Delay had become a hero of white Mississippi. Governor Ross Barnett made a point of patting him on the back and shaking him by the hand in front of the jury; at Rankin County Jail, where he was held for 12 weeks before his trial, local housewives vied for the privilege of fetching him hot meals; admiring prison guards allowed him to keep his gun collection and his television in his cell; and more than \$16,000 was donated to the "White Citizens' Defence Fund" to pay the fees of his three lawyers.

Waller's evidence, accumulated from the testimonies of 36 witnesses, should have been strong enough to send Beckwith to the state gas chamber. Presented with the murder weapon and asked if it was his, the defendant, enjoying his charade, worked the bolt, aimed the gun above the jury's heads, and pulled the trigger. He thought it was his, he answered, but the day before Evers' death it had inexplicably "disappeared", either from his car or from a closet at his home. "It just left my possession."

The evidence of two white taxi-drivers further incriminated Beckwith. Three days before the killing, they said, he had approached them while they stood talking outside a Jackson bus station, and had asked them where "the Nigra Medgar Evers" lived. "I've got to find him in a couple of days," Beckwith explained.

There was also a barrage of his letters, which provided an insight into his concept of the white gentleman's duties. One sample from this correspondence was a call-to-arms that he had sent to the National Rifle Association, warning: "We here in Mississippi are going to have to do a lot of shooting to protect our wives, children and ourselves from bad niggers."

Beckwith's defence was a last-minute alibi provided by two white policemen from his home town. They claimed to have seen him at a petrol station in Greenwood - a two-hour drive from Evers' house in Jackson - 30 minutes after the shooting. Their story conflicted with the testimony of a 17-year-old grocer's son, who was convinced that he

had seen Beckwith's white Valiant car that night, cruising slowly four or five times along a street with a view of Evers' driveway. Six jurors opted for the policemen's account and voted for an acquittal. The verdict was inconclusive, with the other six jurors calling for a conviction, and the judge was obliged to declare a mistrial.

Beckwith was re-tried in April 1964. In February, he had been cross-examined for two hours and 20 minutes. This time, Waller grilled him for more than four hours, questioning him relentlessly about the disappearance of his Enfield rifle. But again the jury failed to reach a unanimous decision, voting seven-to-five in Beckwith's favour. The case was dismissed and he returned to Greenwood a minor celebrity, greeted by crowds of cheering supporters. Stretched across the motorway was a banner that read WELCOME HOME DELAY.

Fame was addictive, and in 1967 Beckwith decided to run for lieutenant-governor of Mississippi. He came in fifth out of six candidates, with 35,000 votes, and left the public arena. For the next nine years, Beckwith sold fertilizer products and lived alone in the Colonel's house. Then, in 1973, he was arrested in New Orleans with a bomb and several rifles in his car. His map was marked with directions to the house of AIBotnick, a leader of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League. According to Hardy Lott, Beckwith regarded his arrest as "a frame-up". "He had done nothing," Lott told me. "He'd led a quiet life and hadn't bothered anyone." This time, Beckwith had no all-white Mississippi jury to depend on, and was sentenced to five years imprisonment for illegal possession of dynamite.

On his release from Angola jail, Beckwith set up a business in Greenwood, selling spare parts for cars, and married Thelma Neff, a retired nurse who was on the board of a right-wing paper called the *Spotlight*. He moved into her bungalow in Tennessee, with its 20 acres of land, and hung a Confederate battle flag over the front porch. "He was happy here," says Thelma, "and everybody just fell for him." Soon, however, Delay's health began to deteriorate, and by 1986 he needed heart surgery.

Nevertheless, Beckwith remained dedicated to his cause, sending diatribes to newspapers and politicians, working on his memoirs, and frequenting white supremacist meetings. When I asked Thelma about his relationship with the Ku Klux Klan, she told me, "Delay has never been a member of the KKKs, but he admires them and he's lectured to them on religion." His favourite among the dozen or so racist organisations to which he belonged was called the Identity

Group: "They live by the Bible," says Thelma. "They just don't like what the Jews have done, killing children in rituals."

On 1 October 1989, the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* revealed that the Sovereignty Commission, a state agency created in 1956 to preserve segregation in Mississippi, had screened potential jurors for Beckwith's second trial. As a result, Jews and liberals, it was claimed, had been excluded from the jury. The District Attorney's office agreed to reopen the case, but discovered that all the evidence from the two 1964 trials had been lost. The rifle, the scope, and the fingerprint had unaccountably disappeared from Mississippi's court vaults, and transcripts of the trials had been destroyed. Beckwith, now suffering from high blood pressure and skin cancer, seemed destined to live out his last years in Signal Mountain, Tennessee.

At this point, Bobby DeLaughter, the Assistant District Attorney heading the investigation, was presented with the mur-

der weapon by his own mother-in-law. Her late husband, a segregationist judge called Russell Moore, had apparently taken it from storage as a souvenir, and kept it in a closet for over a quarter of a century. Then in spring 1990, DeLaughter was shown an obscure book called *Klandestine*, written by William McIlhenny, which describes Beckwith's alleged antics at a Ku Klux Klan rally on 8 August 1965. In a crucial passage, Beckwith is quoted telling the crowd, "Killing that nigger gave me no more inner discomfort than our wives endure when they give birth to our children." Delmar Dennis, a former KKK officer and FBI informer, who was the author's source for the story, was hauled in for questioning.

Other new witnesses have come forward to dispute Beckwith's claim that he was in Greenwood at the time of the shooting. The Reverend Robert Smith, now 90, presided over a meeting at which Medgar Evers spoke hours before his death. Beckwith, says Smith, was at that meeting, seated in the second row of the New Jerusalem

Baptist Church: "There was something about him. I felt like he beared watching." Willie Osborne, a retired deacon, makes the same allegation. Asked why he kept quiet during the 1964 trials, Osborne explained, "I was afraid I would have been killed."

On 19 December last year, Beckwith, still unaware of the extent of the new evidence against him, was charged once again with Medgar Evers' shooting. When the Tennessee sheriffs arrived to arrest him, he greeted them nonchalantly. "It's good to see you boys. I'm ready to go. You want to search my pockets to see if I've got a bomb?" In court for his bail hearing, it was as if nothing had changed in three decades; Beckwith dismissed the charges as "just something to incite the lower forms of life to get violent against the country-club set".

But for the first time, Beckwith is scared. Since May, he has ranted about violations of his "civil rights", claiming that "a handful of Jews, white trash, Negroes, and non-white immigrants" have launched a "criminal conspiracy" to destroy him.

Mississippi's reaction to Beckwith's arrest has been almost unanimously favourable. George Smith, a black local councillor whom Evers persuaded to vote the day before his death, explains, "Finally we can dispel the notion that you can do anything to certain citizens in this state and get away with it." David Sansing, a professor of history at the University of Mississippi, sees the re-opening of the case as a way of healing wounds that have tormented the state for too long: "Mississippi", he says, "will never be rid of its past until it comes to terms with it. I think this indictment represents the beginning of the cleansing process." Beckwith's trial may still be several months away, and he is not a man to surrender without a fight, but the evidence against him is overwhelming. "As long as he stays alive," DeLaughter told me, "I think he's just delaying the inevitable."

In 1964, when Beckwith first stood trial before a "racially pure" jury, he basked in the approval of white Mississippi. He was a hero - the archetypal white supremacist, upholding the values of generations. Twenty-eight years later, Beckwith is still singing the same tune, but Mississippi has moved on and abandoned him. In February, the local chapter of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan organised a parade in his honour. Fewer than 20 Klansmen turned out to march.

Byron De La Beckwith whispers to his lawyer during a bail hearing in Chattanooga, Tennessee, last December. The state of Mississippi wants to extradite him for a retrial



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