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Governor Haley Barbour
State of Mississippi
State House
Jackson, MS

Dear Governor Barbour:

I am writing this letter because of recent and past actions of yours which are impediments to racial justice in Mississippi and our nation.

This past week, after the verdict and sentencing in the Edgar Ray Killen trial in Neshoba County, you indicated your belief that this closed the books on the crimes of the civil rights years, and that we all should now have “closure.”

A day or so earlier, when Ben Chaney, the brother of the murdered African American, James Earl Chaney, criticized you for wearing a confederate battle flag pin on your lapel daily, you responded by saying it was the symbol of the Mississippi National Guard, and if anyone didn't like your wearing it, “tough.”

Not long ago, you actively resisted the effort in Mississippi to remove that confederate symbol from the state flag. The confederate battle flag has long been the banner of segregation and racism, not to mention that it has been widely embraced by the Ku Klux Klan throughout the Klan's hateful history.

While Chairman of the National Republican Party, you attended functions of the Council of Conservative Citizens, known as the successor to the White Citizens' Councils in the State of Mississippi. When called on your participation with the CCC, you publicly refused to apologize or disassociate yourself.

Nor, it must be said, have you acted alone. In the same week that the Neshoba jury returned its guilty verdicts, your two Republican colleagues, United States Senators Trent Lott and Thad Cochran, refused to join 92 other Senators in a resolution of apology for the Senate's repeated failures to pass anti-lynching legislation. Had such federal legislation been passed, it is possible that many lives would have been saved. Mississippi had the highest number of lynchings of any state in the country; the Jackson Clarion Ledger counted 581, and presumably there were others never included in the count. The message to those who would continue to do harm is loud and clear—murder of African Americans deserves no apology.

So long as such symbols and coded messages are conveyed by high public officials, your state continues to encourage racism, and the potential for violence which it spawns. The venom is spread, and hatred continues to flourish.

Restorative justice can only come with recognition of the past, acknowledgement of wrong doing, and acceptance of responsibility in the present by government and individuals to ameliorate the harm done.

People in positions of public trust, such as you, must take the lead in opening the window upon the many years of criminal conduct in which the State, and its officials, engaged. Only with such acknowledgement will the present generation understand how these many terrible crimes occurred, and the responsibility which present officials, voters, and indeed, all citizens, have to each other to move forward.

It is unfortunate that it is not yet well known that the State of Mississippi funded the State Sovereignty Commission from 1957 through 1973. The funding came from taxes paid by the citizenry—which means that the African American population of the state, some 40% of Mississippi's population, was forced to pay for the governmental entity which spied upon them, caused them to loose jobs, to be forced off the land they farmed, and participated in crimes of beatings, church burnings, and murder.

The Sovereignty Commission funded the White Citizens Councils, which used this money to launch a campaign of disinformation both within the state, and in the northern states. The Councils spread racist ideology which served to encourage violence.

The Sovereignty Commission used its funds to hire staff investigators and private detectives. It employed informants. The information gathered included license numbers and vehicle descriptions for persons identified as civil rights activists, as well as physical descriptions of these persons and their day to day activities. Medgar Evers was spied upon in this manner for years before his death. So were Mickey Schwerner and I. The information gathered was passed on to law enforcement officers around the state, many of whom were themselves members of the Ku Klux Klan. There was no secret that the Klan and the police, sheriffs' departments, and state highway patrol officers were often one and the same.

Bankers were notified of the identity of African Americans who attempted to register to vote, and bankers then called in loans. The Commission contacted employers and land owners about persons attempting to register, or who were otherwise engaged in civil rights activities, resulting in people losing jobs, or being forced off land which they had sharecropped for generations.

At the request of the defense, the Commission investigated the jury panel in the first trial of Byron de la Beckwith for the murder of Medgar Evers in 1964. The Commission reported back to the defense its findings as to which members of the panel were not expected to be favorable to de la Beckwith. The defense was then in a position to eliminate these jurors from the panel. An

arm of the state was assisting the defense in a case the state was supposed to be prosecuting. This is a grotesque perversion of the criminal justice system.

The Commission provided its investigative reports to the Clarion Ledger and other newspapers in the state until 1967, which reports were then used by the newspapers to distort and defame the civil rights movement. (The Clarion Ledger has recently apologized for its activities.) The Commission requested newspapers to suppress the reporting of violence against Black persons. For example, the Commission succeeded in preventing the reporting of the beatings and church burning in Philadelphia on June 16, 1964. This coverage was omitted from news reports to accommodate the request of a Philadelphia banker, who was seeking to convince an out-of-state investor to bring his business to Mississippi.

Each successive governor served as the Sovereignty Commission Chairman. He was sent the investigative reports of the Commission. Each governor had knowledge of the full range of shameful, illegal, and often violent activities encouraged or directly engaged in by the Commission staff.

Why else can there not yet be closure? There were many acts of brutality, and far too many murders, which were never acknowledged. There are many violent criminals, living their lives among their neighbors in communities throughout the state, who have never been charged or punished for their crimes.

After 41 years, the state brought murder charges against one man, Edgar Ray Killen, for the Neshoba murders. However, some seven other men known to be involved in those murders are still alive but have never been charged. The bodies of at least four other young men were found during the search for Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner. Their killers have never been brought to justice. The men who burned the Mt. Zion Church in Philadelphia, and the scores of other Black churches throughout the state were never charged with those crimes.

Certainly, as the present governor, you must be aware of this history. This history must be known and understood by everyone.

I spoke with many people in Neshoba County last week who are striving to understand the truth, and who are burdened by the responsibility they carry with them for the actions of their community and their state. But, there are still too many people who see only what they are comfortable recognizing. Just as some members of the jury in Philadelphia could refuse to acknowledge the premeditation in Edgar Ray Killen's acts, some of the people I met are unable to acknowledge any responsibility for the many horrors which occurred. Until individuals and their government understand why they do have responsibility, they cannot ensure racial justice and equality.

So, please do not assume that the book is closed. There is yet much work to be done. As the Governor of Mississippi, you have a unique opportunity to acknowledge the past and to

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participate in insuring a meaningful future for your state. Please don't squander this moment by proclaiming that the past does not inform the present and the future.

Respectfully,

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formerly Rita L. Schwerner