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John A. Peoples

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The Killings at Jackson State University, May 1970

Reminiscences of Dr. John A. Peoples, President, Jackson State University, 1967-1984

I hardly expected to receive the call in early February of 1990 from the Jackson State University Student Government Association requesting me to speak to a student assembly about the May 14, 1970, killings. However, I was not surprised that they wanted to know more about the incident, even though it happened twenty years ago. Half of the present day students were not even born at that time, the rest were babes in arms. To me it was refreshing to know that this current generation of Jackson State University students were something more than a partying apolitical group, as they had been characterized. I accepted the invitation to speak to the students at one of the several Black History activities scheduled for February 20. My presentation to the students was not a formal address. I thought it more appropriate to talk to them informally, and to entertain questions. The following is the gist of my remarks:*

Importantly, it should be understood that the events of May 14,* 1970, did not occur in a vacuum. There were indeed some salient antecedents going back at least ten years. Starting in the early Sixties, the "Black Civil Rights Movement" had erupted into a bloody struggle all over the nation and certainly more intensely in the South. An integral part of this struggle was the "Black Student Movement," which had a strong Southern counterpart. In Mississippi, the State government authorities placed tremendous pressure on the Black college presidents to restrain their respective students from any kind of racial protest. One Black college president had been fired in the late Fifties reportedly because he did not handle an on-campus protest to the satisfaction of the State authorities.

When I accepted the presidency of Jackson State in March, 1967, I found it necessary to make it clear to the Governor, as well as to the State College Board, that I would not suppress peaceful student protest on campus. Right away I would have the opportunity to test out my manifesto. In May, barely two months after I assumed my duties, I had to deal with my first riot. The Jackson police chased a student driver down Lynch Street onto the campus

*The shootings actually occurred shortly after midnight on May 15, 1970.

with sirens blowing and blue lights blinking. They didn't catch the student, but they stopped at a men's dormitory where students were jeering them out of a window. One of the policemen fired a shotgun into the window, wounding a student football player in the face with bird shot. The students subsequently staged a sit-down on Lynch Street in protest of the unwarranted shooting. I brought in a delegation of students and street boys into the President's home in an attempt to calm the students. When I thought I had it under control, a bus load of Tougaloo students accompanied by young white faculty drove onto Lynch Street and enticed some of the Jackson State students to come back into the streets, keeping the disturbance going. The next day the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), sent a representative over from Atlanta, who attempted to get the Jackson State students to march on the city of Jackson. The Jackson State student leadership, after conferring with me about the danger of such a march, refused to participate. Not to be outdone, the SNCC representatives organized a group of non-student "corner boys,"¹ who were marched back and forth down Lynch Street. At the corner of Lynch and Rose, two blocks from the campus, one of the corner boys, Ben Brown, was shot and killed by policemen after an altercation.

In March of 1968, in the evening of the day that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, the Jackson State students again took to the streets and threw stones through the windows of all white motorists passing through the campus. At that time Lynch Street was a major thoroughfare and the blocking of the street impeded the passage home of the whites who lived in the then-majority white community a mile west of the campus. The city policemen came in with "Thompson's Tank"² and tear-gassed the students out of the streets.

In April of 1969, a group of Jackson State students got into a fight with a gang of corner boys and were chased back down Lynch Street as the two groups threw stones at each other. It did not take long for both groups to turn their anger against the white motorists driving through Lynch Street. The situation became a riot and again the policemen came in Thompson's Tank and tear-gassed the students and corner boys away from the street area, ending the disturbance.

Thus, we come to the year 1970, the most tragic year in the history of Jackson State University. From my point of view, I kept hoping that students' riots, which had become an annual spring ritual, would cease. After all, the campus had experienced three consecutive years of major disturbances, all in March, April or May. I had importuned the City of Jackson to place three stop lights along the stretch of Lynch Street that ran through the campus. These stoplights were disliked by motorists who felt that they had to run an "obstacle course" to get through the campus. But I thought the lights were thoroughly necessary to provide for some four

thousand students to cross back and forth between dormitories and the Student Union on the north side of Lynch Street to the library, the classrooms, and the Dining Hall on the south side of this busy street. I had opposed proposals by the State to build a bridge across the street because the condition for a bridge was that I would have to force all students to cross the street only via the bridge. This would be impossible to do along a three-quarter mile stretch. So, with the three stop lights and three to four-hundred white motorists driving through the campus daily, I was acutely aware that Lynch Street at Jackson State was a riot waiting to happen.

And the riot did happen. On the night of May 13, 1970, one week after the Kent State killings, a gang of students who claimed that they had been called racist names by white motorists began to throw stones at cars containing whites. They were joined by corner boys and the disturbance got beyond the control of campus police who called for city police help on Lynch Street. The street was barricaded as during previous occasions and the situation cooled down during the late hours. On the next day, May 14, I pleaded with the city police authorities to keep up the street barricades so as to prevent any through traffic until we could be sure that the situation had cooled down. But they would not agree. They said that there were a lot of people driving home from work who would be inconvenienced if they could not drive through Lynch Street. That night, at about 10:00 PM, a crowd of students and corner boys began to throw stones at white motorists. At that time the city police agreed to close off the streets leading to Jackson State.

About 11:00 PM, some corner boys set fire to a dump truck and the city fire department had to be called. The fire department was provided an escort of policemen and highway patrolmen by the city of Jackson. The firemen put out the fire at the truck and then drove around the campus to another fire which had been started at the other end of Lynch Street. The police escort took the short cut directly east on Lynch Street, where they encountered a crowd of students standing in the yard of Alexander Hall. The policemen ordered the students to disperse and go inside their dormitories. Some of them did, but most of the men continued to stand inside the yard behind the fence. Someone from among the students threw a bottle into the street. When the bottle crashed onto the pavement, the policemen, both inside and outside of Thompson's Tank began to fire into the dormitory and the yard both on the north and south sides of the campus. Two men were killed, one a Jackson State student, Phillip Gibbs, and the other a Jim Hill High School student, James Green. Another twenty-two students, mostly women, were wounded. Considering the twenty-second fusillade, it was a miracle that twenty or thirty students were not killed.

The ordeal that the students and I went through during the night that followed is a story in itself, which I am dealing with in a more comprehensive work. I will say here that many heroes arose from among the students to help

me to gain control of the situation and prevent further bloodshed. There were obviously many villains who perpetrated the heinous act of violence. None of these villains were brought to justice, even after county and federal grand jury hearings. Some of the persons wounded still carry in their bodies the particles from the shotguns, rifles, and machine guns used in the merciless fit of rage of the lawmen.

Twenty years later, the only visible signs of the incident are the pock marks on the wall of the southwest stairwell of Alexander Hall and the "Gibbs-Green" monument on the lawn of Stewart Hall, the dormitory in which Phillip Gibbs resided. Lynch Street between the north and south side of the campus has been made a part of the Jackson State campus, and a plaza with a coordinating midway has been installed. The students of today know little, and officially are told nothing about this salient event in the history of Jackson State University. It has become unfashionable to talk about "negative" things in this era of "progress" in our State. But the Jackson State students don't seem to think so.

Notes

- 1 "Corner boys" was the name given to the group of young high school dropouts and unemployed young men who stood or sat on the corners of Lynch and Dalton and watched the coeds. There was enmity between them and the regular students. But whenever there was a campus disturbance, they would invade the campus and mix with the students. At night, neither policemen or campus authorities could distinguish between the corner boys and the students.
- 2 "Thompson's Tank" is an armored car of the type used by S.W.A.T. teams today. This vehicle was named for the late Mayor of Jackson, Allen Thompson, whose police force used it mainly to quell civil rights demonstrations. This same tank would be used in the fatal shooting of May of 1970, in which two students would be killed and twenty-two wounded. Noteworthy is that very recently there was a decision by the current Jackson city government, of which three of the seven City Council members are Black, to reactivate the tank for use by the city. This decision has received mixed reactions from the citizenry.