

THE NATION

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Odds on Freedom

Gambler's Choice in Georgia . . . Peter de Lissovoy

Albany, Ga. Posters flapping, horn blaring, the King-for-Congress truck rolled suddenly into Harlem—the principal center of business and pleasure on the black side of Albany, Ga. — at about 4:30 on a Saturday afternoon in mid-April. With a gambler named Suitcase and two sharecroppers, I was standing in front of Ware's Place, a bar with few and ill-matched chairs and tables, a great deal of cement floor for dancing, and very fine acoustics. Ware's Place is on Jackson Street, Harlem's main drag. Suitcase was leaning slightly against the doorjamb, all his weight on his feet. He is a young man whose eyes are red at the corners because of the long nights, and both of whose cheeks bear knife scars, memories of sour losers with sharp eyes. His expression is habitually blank, or guarded; now, look-out for a card game inside, he was on the watch for cops. The two sharecroppers wore crisp, faded overalls and bright hats. They had hitchhiked into town about a half-hour earlier and were discussing ways of getting some wine. I had been expecting the truck, and when I pointed at it and commented, one of the sharecroppers said, "Ain' no nigger gonna go to Congress."

"Ain' none ever tried," said Suitcase.

The truck pulled into Gibson's Station, parking at a slant. The driver, a high school boy in

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paint-spattered jeans, jumped out to adjust the loudspeaker atop its cab. A dozen cars followed, made a line behind. After a moment, the other sharecropper mused, "The can't date kin'a favor *Martin Luther King*, don' he?"

The posters made a paper skirt round the trailer of the truck. They masked the cab: REGISTER NOW TO ELECT *Your CANDIDATE C. B. KING TO CONGRESS* against a background of the candidate's profile. Attorney C. B. King is the legal department of the Negro movement in southwest Georgia. For years he has defended almost every voter registration worker and demonstrator arrested in this corner of the South. He filed the desegregation suit that will effect the integration of the first and second grades in Albany public schools next fall. He has a deep, rounded voice, capable of sarcastic rises, confusing changes of pace; his lower lip has a trick of curling out when he is smiling at some irony—a way of staying sane in the "cracker" courts. He has a prodigious vocabulary, a weapon forged on a peculiar battlefield. (There is nothing quite so red as the cheeks of a cop on the witness stand who, grinning sheepishly at the black attorney questioning him, must say, "Uh, break that down a little, lawyer?") King bears the hopes of thousands for whom "the law" has never meant more than "the cops," and bears, at his hairline, a scar received two years ago at the hands of the late, cane-wielding Sheriff Cull Campbell of Dougherty County. On April 4, he became the first Negro since Reconstruction to seek the Democratic nomination for Representative to Congress from Georgia's Second District.

"Just on the poster," I said to the sharecropper.

"They're like an' they're different," said Suitcase. "Come on," he said to me. Behind us, the first sharecropper was saying, "It ain' nothin' but foolishness, nothin' but!"

High school kids were getting out of cars; SNCC and campaign workers, the campaign singers, movement regulars were crowding round the truck. The driver took a final look at the speaker and leaped back onto the trailer. Some of the girls, the singers, climbed up and began to chorus freedom movement and King campaign songs.

The loud-speaker carried more than a block — from the Cut-Rate Drugstore to Ware's and beyond. All along Jackson Street, cars slowed, heads spun around. A blind gospel singer, picking and shouting in front of Giles's Grocery, lost his audience of old women. The two sharecroppers in front of Ware's separated, the second ambling over to the truck, waving to us, the first shaking his head. Inside, the poker game noticed that its sentry had deserted. It appointed another, and when he too vanished, it came to the door to see what was happening. A part went back to play without cover, and a part started over to the gathering crowd. This Saturday afternoon, as on every Saturday afternoon, and like every bar in Harlem, Ware's Place was full of country folk looking for a good time, factory workers off for the day, barbers and clerks and cab drivers in for a quick one, pool players resting, crap shooters shooting, hustlers, down-and-outs, kings-for-a-day. When the girls started to sing, everyone not too drunk to move came out for a look. Curious, some waited and watched along the sidewalk. Suddenly frightened, or skeptical or indifferent, some moved

Labor donated

back inside. Proud, some crossed the street to stand by the truck.

The girl singers swirled down from the truck, and the candidate, in shirt sleeves, got up and stooped slightly to the microphone. He told the people that they had a question for him. Not just those listening, but everybody, all up and down the street: those brave or strong enough to stand around the truck; all those too fearful; the cynical ones; those in the bars who couldn't care less. There was a question in the air.

"Why does a Negro — a black boy — presume to run for the Congress of the United States? How does he dare?" King waited for the question to draw up memories of fear, and then he dispelled them: "Why not? I have the *right* to run." It was a challenge to those inside the bars and pool halls, an affirmation for those gathered by the truck. He waited again, while his audience whooped and applauded. Their response was as strong as their claim to the right of representation has been weak, and as sincere and long as their desire now to assume it at last. King talked about what politics have been in southwest Georgia: long years of representation for and by the rich. Why was a black candidate *needed* in southwest Georgia? That was a better way of asking the question.

"But black's got nothing to do with it. What you and I have in common is our experience, not our skin. I've picked cotton at a half cent a pound. I've shaken peanuts

for 50c a day. That was years ago, but things aren't much better now. The experience of poverty. . . ."

King's father was relatively well off, a small businessman, but as a boy King was sent to the fields now and then to help meet family expenses. He would usually want to work only one or two days at a time, and so he sought out planters who paid their help every evening. He remembers being deceived by one. When the day's work was over, he went to the white man for his money and was told that Friday was payday. But hadn't the man said he'd pay off tonight? Yeah, he'd said that, but he'd changed his mind. So King had to work out the week in order to make good what he had sunk in the job that first day. When Friday came, the white man handed King his few dollars, and then, a perverse afterthought, shoved him a drink of stump liquor as well. King rolled up the bills and said no thank you. The man said, "Drink." No, King said, really, he didn't want any. But the white man towered. It'd be funny, a laugh. And besides — and by God — he was being generous to the nigger. "Drink, lil' nigger, drink!" he bellowed. . . .

But why does a black man *bother* to run for Congress? What really might the faraway and inscrutable federal legislature do about poverty in southwest Georgia? King would work for federal aid to education; better job training for the young, retraining for the unemployed; an increase in the funds set aside for the old, sick, infirm; an increase in

the minimum-wage law and its extension to cover all domestic and agricultural workers.

"What I propose the whites on the Hill will call communism. But what do they call their subsidies to the cotton industry? Our women who toil in white kitchens, tend and nurse white children for \$10 and \$12 a week need a subsidy too. . . ."

I raised my eyebrows at Suitcase. It was fine to hear these things being said in Harlem, on a street corner, to these people. He nodded back. "It's a long shot," he said, "but it's worth it. I'm registered. You ever hear of that? A gambler registerin' to vote? It *must* be worth it."

After the rally, we walked back along Jackson Street to Ware's. Clouds of sound—rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll—waved and swirled in doorways. Men stood about or walked in twos and groups, bright dressed, talking about women, the possibilities of a drink, the campaign.

The cops on the Harlem beat were swaggering up and down, bouncing on their heels, shooting their eyes. The rally had not been announced. It had happened, bang, like a song, and they had had to stand on the corner and listen. The two sharecroppers were back in front of Ware's. The one who had crossed the street to listen to King said to us as we passed, "He be a help up in Washington, sho', but I sho' hate to lose our good lawyer here in Albany."

Inside, Suitcase bawled out the card players who had not bothered to come across to the rally. "It makes me hot, somebody tryin' to *do* somethin' for y'all an' you jus' sit back like you ain' got a care in the worl', you an' the white man on the bes' relation. . . ."

"Do somethin'!" interrupted one of the men. "All that meetin' gonna do, gonna make the law mean to-night."

The gamblers in Harlem say that Suitcase is "with the movement." It surprises them a little. (Nothing surprises them a lot.) Last year, he hadn't a kind word to say for it. That was a little surprising too, because the year before he had gone to jail for demonstrating.

Suitcase did not feel one way or the other about the very first demonstrations in Albany. They had had their genesis in the churches and schools, not in Harlem, and though



he watched them and listened to the talk, he was not moved to participate. Then one day a cop roughed him up on the street, saying that he had seen him in that "nigger mess." Suitcase protested loudly and the roughing got worse. That was what did it, he says. He saw then that, being black and poor, he was going to be part of the movement whether he liked it or not, and he decided that if he were going to be beaten, he might as well be beaten for something. So he joined a march. It was at least a way of getting back at the cop, a way of affronting the whites.

Leaders of the demonstrations—Martin Luther King, Albany preachers, professional people, students—did not feel themselves affronting anyone exactly. They were exposing social evils, protesting them non-violently, lovingly, in the spirit breathed by Gandhi and Christ. Even the voter registration drive reflected an essentially religious notion of how society changes. The emphasis was always on registering—the act, pure and simple; little effort was spent to get out the vote, to educate and organize Negro voters. When you registered, you pointed a telling finger at political discrimination. And the effect of it all, presumably, would be a softening of the oppressor's heart, as promised in the Bible.

But Suitcase never supposed his demonstrating would make the crackers see things any differently; he just wanted to shake them up. He saw that if enough Negroes got together in the streets and looked like making trouble, maybe the grays would scare enough to offer some concessions. But he knew that the whites did not need him to tell them they had been preventing Negroes from voting these many years. It was just a very fine feeling, a hard, deep pleasure, to stand in line at the courthouse and look the registrar in the eye. When, after a year of demonstrations, Mr. Charlie did not scare, but just hired more cops and persuaded nearby town and country governments to lend jail space; when there seemed no point to voting, even for kicks, in elections that only offered impossible choices between racists; when the Negro leadership in Albany responded to it all by clinging the more desperately to their worn-out tactics, Suitcase quit the movement.

After that he was full of venom



for a leadership that "was leading the people no place but into Chief Pritchett's arms." And he was full of stories about white insurance men being beaten up, or cops and red-neck turnip sellers being shot. A good many of the stories were true. He certainly enjoyed telling them; it was a way of getting back. I remember the night last fall when we watched a Harlem cop shoot up dirt around a little Negro boy suspected of stealing. The cop had chased the boy across the tops of several buildings; the boy had jumped to the ground and then, too frightened to break across the open street, had given up, and was hunched and shaking at the curb. The cop was firing from the roof of the South Grand Bar, directly over our heads, pumping away needlessly at the stunned kid.

Suitcase cursed the cop; then he cursed the crowd for merely gaping and muttering. Finally, he cursed the movement for not organizing the people to do something, and he continued to curse it all night.

Suitcase was no apostate from nonviolence. He had never seen demonstrations that way, did not believe in it. But contrary to the current glib logic, this did not mean that he *believed* in violence. Suitcase is a gambler. He acquired his name because he does a great deal of traveling. In Columbus, he plays stud poker; in Albany, he plays tonk

or shoots dice. Life has come to him too rich in surprises and contradictions, it has been too varied in its demands and rewards to allow his believing absolutely in anything at all. He plays the odds, whatever they are. When he felt the movement was hung up on a single ineffective tactic, he quit as fast as a card player's backer when he sees the kid is playing too straight. Violence and violent talk seemed to him no more the ultimate solution than had demonstrations, but they are a Southern tradition, a significant racial relationship, a familiar way of working out "the problem." When he saw the demonstrations failing, it was easy to revert to them. If you can't win the long money, at least pick up the short.

Suitcase's support of King is a qualified return. And his return reflects a change in the movement. Belatedly, many Negroes who were caught up only a year ago in the nonviolent dogma, have accepted its failure. A certain quaintness has passed. These days, movement thinking in Albany is richer, more pragmatic—in a word, American. Teen-agers, gang boys talk about self-defense, rifle clubs. SNCC is arranging that a group of Africans, touring the country with Operation Crossroads Africa, visit Albany this summer. A delegation attended a nationalist conference in Nashville on May 2 and 3. But, immediately, hopes center upon politics.

During a talent show at a Negro night club on a Saturday night in early April, someone grasped the microphone and announced King's candidacy, concluding, "We got a *point* in registering now!" The Democratic primary will be held in September, but the registration deadline for the primary passed on May 2, and King began serious campaigning as soon as he had filed in order to make the point clear. During the month of April, at night clubs, American Legion posts, in churches, recreation halls, on street corners, King and his campaign speakers explained the significance of a Negro candidate, the possibilities in Congressional representation, the importance of registering. His campaign manager, Thomas Chatmon, a local beautician, toured the Second District, talking with businessmen. Rev. Samuel Wells, who has been registering Negroes since the forties and been jailed literally dozens of times, spoke to the deacon

boards. SNCC donated placards, pamphlets, leaflets, and the southwest Georgia SNCC staff distributed them across the Second District. Afternoons, in the week following King's announcement, kids in the Albany Student Movement pounded and nailed and painted up wooden booths, at which Negroes might sign up for transportation to the registrar's office, and placed them at strategic points around the city. The chief effect of the campaign thus far has been to crowd the booths. In Albany, from the date of King's announcement to the closing day for registration, nearly 500 Negroes registered. In Tifton, Ga., the only other major town where figures were immediately available, about 350 were registered.

Almost automatically, King receives the support of the middle and lower-middle classes, and of the youth. But he is appealing to the poor, and it is significant that Harlemites, for instance, are registering. Poorer Negroes in southwest Georgia divide into two groups: those who have relatively steady jobs—or a little land; and those who do not. The first is markedly conservative, aware that in a bad show it at least has bit parts. For the second group, the hustlers, all of life that does not obviously and materially touch them has the aspect of a television quiz show—in any given instance, they can turn the set off or root for their side. The people who came out of Ware's Place that Saturday afternoon to listen to King are not afraid of the white man: they play his game according to his laws and customs and cops but, when they can, they cheat. They are likely as not to cheer a black man who is standing up to the white man. The image of King, running verbal circles around the crackers in court, has had them chuckling for years. And their kind of boisterous pride is educable.

Suitcase is back with the movement, but it doesn't mean he wants to become a SNCC field secretary. He figures King will lose, but thinks that a series of such campaigns will make a political force of Negroes in southwest Georgia. He spends some time every day going over these long odds for Harlem people and has taken at least a dozen of them down to register. It is something to do, one hope, a gamble.

Suitcase is a talker. Whenever I want to see him, I look first in Gay's pool hall and on the benches that edge the sidewalk and face the Harlem cafés and cab stands. Whatever the day's topic, he has his view. When asked how the campaign is progressing, he answers by referring to the April killing of Bobby Miller and the effect that it had upon the community.

Bobby was a slight, light-skinned 15-year-old, who lived in the impoverished, tracks-fringing section of Albany called CME—C for crime, M for murder and E for the electric chair. He was one of the wild, rambling group of boys who hang around "the Corner" of Flint and Davis, the heart of CME, and the Harlem pool halls: Not a gang exactly—just a like-minded, like-moving circle of youths who attend school rarely because the tired, segregated schools attend so rarely to their needs; who play so much pool because there is so little else to do; who fight often and drink whenever possible, because the conditions of their existences preclude



other kinds of intensity; who gamble for power—or its trappings—to overcome, or forget, their birthright of powerlessness.

Early Sunday morning, April 19, the day after King's street rally in Harlem, Bobby left a Harlem pool hall and with a friend, a 14-year-old known in CME as "Pop-bottle," made his way to the Chicken Shack, a CME night spot. After walking up and down in front of the place a few times, building up nerve—and betraying their presence to neighbors and the owner—they made a larkish attempt to enter through a window. The owner called the cops, and when they appeared, the boys tried to run for it. Patrolman J. M. Anderson fired a single shot. A witness heard him yell, "I got him." The police report of the incident claims that Anderson shouted several warnings before shooting. None of the witnesses heard him. The owner, standing next to his establishment, did not hear him.

News of the killing leaped like

bullets round the Negro community. Monday, in Harlem, men stood about in groups—a remembrance of the street rally two days before—talking, remonstrating, threatening:

What gonna help, that's what I wanna know. What gonna help it?

Help? I don't know 'bout no help, but I know 'bout need. What I need to do is get me a cracker.

I got my Winchester to the house right now. She sawed off jus' like this. . . . I got my heat on ice, jus' waitin'.

In the late afternoon, more out of shock than calculation, the cops swooped down and shattered a gathering of embittered cab drivers, pool sharks, shoe-shine boys—sent the bitterness calling through the streets.

A mass meeting that evening was full and overflowing. People jammed behind the pulpit in Shiloh Church, stood in the doorway, at the windows. A year or more ago, the meeting might have culminated in a demonstration. Now, from the young particularly, there were cries for vengeance. Yet in the weeks that have passed there has been no serious violence. In CME, when two cops left their car to chase a thief, several of Bobby's friends lifted the spotlight and battery, and went over the body with chains. The same boys have been preventing the delivery in CME of the racist Albany Herald, which printed only the police side of the shooting. But there has been nothing more than this, and in the five weekdays that followed Bobby's death, 138 Negroes registered to vote in Albany.

Suitcase is not surprised. "You winnin' that long money, you don't need no short change," he explains. He thinks that people expressed some of their anger by registering or seeing that others did so, that an awareness of the voter registration drive's success satisfied, or at least dulled, a need for vengeance.

At a rally in Tifton, Ga., in late April, Attorney King said, "You'll vote for me because I'm black, and if anyone asks you why, you can say, 'Well, we've tried the other color for 300 years now. . . .'" King is gambling that representation for Negroes will mean something, that our political process, like our legal process, can accommodate certain needs.

Suitcase is gambling too: playing for that long money and hoping that the day won't come again when he must look for nothing but the short.

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