

John Doar: A Hero of Justice

Mississippi was about to go up in flames. Three nights earlier, 37-year-old Medgar Evers had been killed by an assassin, hidden behind a bush under the cover of darkness.

By the afternoon of June 15, 1963, the air in Jackson, Miss., was combustible. On one side of Farish Street were hundreds of African-Americans filled with grief, despair and anger. Opposing them were local police in sweaty riot gear. The thermometer had topped out at 103 degrees.

Evers — the field secretary of the Mississippi NAACP — was among the most passionate, diligent and inspirational agents of freedom in the South. His funeral had brought many of the key figures of the movement to Jackson, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Following the ceremony, the mourners held a planned silent march, but when it ended, several hundred — mostly young African-Americans — lingered. They made their way down Farish Street, in the midst of white-owned businesses, singing ‘This Little Light of Mine.’

When the police formed a line to stop them, but Jackson Deputy Police Chief A.L. Ray’s order to disperse and return home was met with flying bricks, stones and bottles. The police drew shotguns; the crowd chanted, “We want the killer!”

The police dogs stretched their leashes and the demonstrators grew increasingly agitated. Media personnel backed into the entrances of storefronts for cover. Thelton Henderson, who would become a U.S. District Court Judge in San Francisco, was there.

“The blacks refused to disperse and proceeded to approach the police,” Henderson told students at San Francisco’s Thurgood Marshall High School in 1998. “The police drew their guns and gave them a final order to break up. I was in the front row between the police and the marchers, and it appeared to me that the police were going to shoot into the crowd.”

Then something happened that came as such a surprise that it caused both sides to stand down. A tall white man, his white dress shirt sleeves rolled up, walked between the opposing sides. He held out his hands, asking for quiet, and began to address the crowd.



“You’re not going to win anything with bottles and bricks. My name is John Doar — D-O-A-R,” he told the suspicious crowd. “I’m from the Justice Department, and anybody around here knows I stand for what is right.”

As bottles, bricks and stones began to crash around him, he urged the crowd to disperse, reminding them that Medgar Evers wouldn’t want them to resort to violence. He asked for help in moving people along and, surprisingly, many listened and complied. “I believe that had John Doar not done what he did, many people would have been killed,” said Henderson. “There would have been a riot of epic proportions.”

It is impossible to imagine what direction the Civil Rights Movement would have turned that day without Doar, a man trained for a courtroom, not to calm an angry crowd. That wasn’t his job. He was only there because he was a friend of Evers and wanted to pay his respects. Doar told Charles Portis of the *Los Angeles Times* that he took his life in his own hands because “it seemed the only thing to do.”

Portis wrote of the event, “The Justice Department’s John Doar, a 6-foot-2, 41-year-old unflappable Irishman from Wisconsin, is becoming the Marshal Dillon of the troubled South.”

But it wasn’t the first time Doar had risked his life for the cause. And unlike Marshal Dillon, he didn’t carry a weapon.

THE FEARLESS ATHLETE

Born into a family of lawyers in December 1921, John Michael Doar's childhood was more than a thousand miles from Jackson, Miss., both literally and figuratively. His father, W.T., joined a law firm in the small town of New Richmond, Wis., not more than an hour away from the Twin Cities, in 1908.

It seems unlikely that one of the most important figures in the history of American race relations would come from the homogeneity of Northwest Wisconsin. "It was all white, about 55 percent Protestant and 45 percent Catholic," Doar recently said. "There might have been one Jewish family and no black or Asian families back then."

Yet New Richmond was the ideal place for Doar, the place where he absorbed the values he would demonstrate throughout his life. Notoriously stoic and tight-lipped, when he would speak publicly, he would explain his actions with some variation of "it was the right thing to do."

Doing the right thing, regardless of consequence, was his guiding principle. Following the Evers' funeral, he did not gloat, draw attention to himself or claim victory, but instead worried that he might be fired for overstepping his boundaries. A call of congratulations from President John F. Kennedy finally washed away those thoughts.

His mother, Mae, was a school teacher, but she felt that her children could not get the education she wanted for them in New Richmond, so they went to St. Paul Academy in St. Paul, Minn. "(My brother and I) lived in a rooming house down the street from the headmaster," he recalled. "We shoveled his walk, and he drove us to school. We went home on the weekends. It was a good education."

Doar also proved to be a good athlete, even though his favorite sport — basketball — wasn't offered at his school. Most everyone played hockey in the winter in Minnesota, so Doar and the others who couldn't cut it on the ice played intramural basketball.

One of his classmates, Ted Brooks, recalled that his courage was evident, even back then. The St. Paul

football team entered the 1939 season finale against archrival Blake with a perfect record. But the game was close and Blake was threatening to score as the clock wound down. "Three times John Doar stood alone between the Blake ballcarrier and the goal line," Brooks told the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* in 1994. "He nailed the guy. Three crunching tackles. We won 7-0. He was fearless."

Doar did not mistake fearlessness for foolishness. Despite not playing a single minute in an organized game, he wanted to play basketball in college. He felt that his game would not be strong enough to play at Dartmouth, which was a national power in the 1940s, so he opted for Princeton.

He found out Cappy Cappon was building a powerhouse at Old Nassau, but he made the team and joined the likes of Bud Palmer and Butch van Breda Kolff. Those two would be key players for the New York Knicks later in the decade.

By his junior season, Doar had become an important member of the squad, averaging seven points a game for the 14-6 Tigers. But a more pressing matter — World War II — would interrupt his college career in 1943. Doar, a second lieutenant in the Army Air Forces, began training as a bomber pilot, but the war would come to a dramatic conclusion before he was deployed.

In the fall of 1945 he was headed back to complete his Princeton degree. Doar had a final season of basketball ahead, but his classmates were gone. The players remaining on the team from when he last played were the freshmen, who were now seniors.

One of the new guys was making history as Princeton's first black athlete, a quick guard from Chicago named Art Wilson. Like Doar, Wilson had spent the previous years in military service. "He was a good player and a good guy," remembered Doar. "I liked him."

Those two led the team get to a quick start, combining for 26 points in a 47-40 win at Villanova early in the season. They then led the Tigers to a victory before a record crowd at Rutgers. Princeton stumbled against Dartmouth and Penn, and was 5-5 after 10 games as the Eastern Intercollegiate season heated up.

But Doar, averaging eight points a game, broke his hand and missed the rest of the season as the Tigers lost seven of their last nine games.

Doar decided to give the other coast a try after graduation. He packed up for Berkeley, enrolling in the University of California School of Law. In 1950 he returned to New Richmond and the family law practice as his father became ill. Doar spent a decade in that uneventful career, but that was about to change in a dramatic way.

JUMPING INTO THE FIRE

In the Spring of 1960, President Eisenhower's chief civil right attorney Harold Tyler was looking for a No. 2 man for the division. The search led him to Doar.

As it turned out, Doar had an itch that he could not scratch in New Richmond. In his Princeton days he had had conversations about race with some of his classmates. He remembered his Southern classmates acknowledging "a problem," but one they felt should be solved locally and that was not the business of the federal government.

Then came Rosa Parks, the Little Rock Nine and the Greensboro sit-ins. Doar was well aware that very little progress had taken place in terms of segregation in the 15 years since his graduation from Princeton.

That wasn't his only motivation in accepting the position. He felt that the racial caste system in place in the South was unfair to the state of Wisconsin; the South's disproportionate national political power was based on elections that illegally denied black residents the right to vote.

"I thought it would be a good idea for some lawyers from Wisconsin to work at the Department of Justice," he said. "That was the main thing that possessed me, it was that Wisconsin was being treated as second class."

Doar moved his family to Washington, D.C., on July 4, 1960, as the Eisenhower Administration was in its final months. Doar wasn't guaranteed a spot in the next administration, but he knew he could always

return to the family practice.

That fall Doar became the first Justice Department lawyer to head South to investigate personally what it would take to ensure that black residents could exercise their right to vote. But it was clear that people in power did not long for change. Those who challenged their system faced repercussions. Reform was going to be both dangerous and frustrating work, but it was also tremendously important.

"When we got exposed to what the conditions were really like, we were committed to work as hard as we could, with all the tools we had, to do something to change it," said Doar. "We had some great young lawyers who knew the territory and who had learned the game and how to play it.

"The rural black residents down there were the finest people I ever met. When they saw people were there to help, they got involved. That was a wonderful experience."

Doar's reputation grew and quickly became legendary throughout the South. He traveled so much, everyone knew of him. He worked so hard, the black community confided in him. He was so honest, judges took his word as gospel. He was so resolute, sheriffs and mayors who opposed him also respected and feared him. He was so driven, the typically jaded media viewed him as a hero. He was so immersed, the federal government couldn't operate without him.

When John F. Kennedy took office, his brother Robert, as Attorney General, appointed Burke Marshall to replace Tyler and Doar remained the No. 2 man in the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice.

Doar was working with the young black men and women who he felt were the real heroes of the Civil Rights Movement. Folks like John Lewis, James Bevel, Diane Nash, James Forman and Bob Moses.

With limited resources, young African-Americans were organizing voter registration drives, sit-ins and other demonstrations under organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality.

While those organizations were trying to open

eyes and change hearts by shining a light on the culture, Doar and his Justice lawyers were quietly making slow, but steady, progress in the courtroom.

But Doar's level of visibility was about to change in the fall of 1962, when he found himself pitted against the state of Mississippi in an event that would turn deadly.

In what may have been his most dangerous role in the South, he was to escort James Meredith to the University of Mississippi, where he would become the first African-American student to attend. Mississippi's grandstanding, segregationist governor Ross Barnett knew he could take political advantage of personally blocking his enrollment.

"They had taken Meredith up there once, and they had been turned away," Doar said. "The president and the attorney general were determined he was going to get into that university. I went with him the next time, and we were turned away. On the fourth trip we got in. That night there was a riot. I lived with (Meredith) for the next few weeks."

That riot — on a late September night in 1962 — left two dead, the university in shambles. But just as he would after the end of the school year at Medgar Evers' funeral in Jackson, Doar had weathered a storm of prejudice.

FINDING JUSTICE

The assassination of Evers obviously caused a great deal of unrest among those in the Movement. The pace of change through the legal system was coming too slowly for the young activists.

"Bob Moses organized Mississippi Summer, bringing the white kids from the North to help with voter registration in 1963 and 1964," said Doar. "The Justice Department saw (heightened Klan activity) coming. There were columns in the *Washington Post* in the spring of 1964 saying that Justice was concerned."

On June 19, 1964, Doar was in Oxford, Ohio, not so much to prepare the Mississippi Summer volunteers, but to warn them of the danger. "There is no

federal police force," he told them. "The responsibility for protection is that of the local police."

Many in the young crowd booed, as if the man who had risked his own life time and time again in the South was an opponent. Few in the crowd understood that the Justice Department and the FBI did not have the manpower or the authority to protect hundreds of students traveling throughout rural Mississippi for an entire summer, but Mickey Schwerner and James Chaney did. Not that they were willing to accept it, but they were veteran Congress of Racial Equality workers in the Magnolia State.

Schwerner had already spent six months in Mississippi, partnering with Chaney, an African-American native of the state. Schwerner, a charismatic 1961 Cornell University graduate who had fought successfully to integrate his fraternity Alpha Epsilon Pi, was despised by the Ku Klux Klan. A Jewish New Yorker sporting a goatee and helping the civil rights cause was more than the racists could stomach. Twenty-year-old recruit Andrew Goodman was an idealist who couldn't have known what he would be facing as he traveled to Meridian with Schwerner and Chaney.

While the three Civil Rights workers headed South, Doar was off to Washington to receive President Johnson's Award for Distinguished Federal Civilian Service, the highest honor granted to a career employee.

That's where he was when he learned that Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman were missing. They had gone into Neshoba County to investigate the burning of a black church and wound up being jailed for speeding in Philadelphia, Miss.

"Neshoba County was a rough, tough, mean, insular place — a bootlegging rural outpost," Doar said. "It was awful."

Martin Luther King Jr. would later call Philadelphia "a terrible town, the worst I've seen."

The three Civil Rights workers were released into the waiting hands of the Klan at 10:30 pm that night. By the time CORE officials contacted Doar at his home in Chevy Chase, Md., the three were already dead, shot and killed by the mob that followed them

out of town.

The worst fears of the Department of Justice were realized — though it would take six weeks to prove it — when their bodies were uncovered in a nearby earthen dam on August 4.

Getting justice for Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman would be heart-wrenching, elusive and embarrassing.

The first step in the legal process would come on Dec. 4. Federal agents fanned out in Eastern Mississippi that day, rounding up 19 members of the Ku Klux Klan in the murders.

Among them were two Neshoba County law enforcement officials — Sheriff Lawrence Rainey and Cecil Price, the deputy sheriff who had arrested the three civil rights workers.

The charge — a violation of a 19th century federal civil rights law — certainly didn't have the bite of a murder charge, but the state would not file a single murder charge in the case until 2005.

Six days after the roundup, the federal charges were dismissed and the conspirators were boastful and arrogant.

Doar — now as Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Civil Rights Division after Burke Marshall resigned — then convinced a Jackson federal grand jury to indict the 19 men.

Again, the indictments would be thrown out, this time by Federal Judge William Harold Cox, who was known for his segregationist views.

With Doar's persistence, the appeal made it to the U.S. Supreme Court in March of 1966. The high court ruled unanimously to reinstate the charges against all the defendants.

Cox would preside over the trial, which began in Meridian on Oct. 7, 1967. Doar, arguing for the prosecution, would get little help from the bench, but the incriminating testimony of three Klan informants — Wallace Miller, Delmar Dennis, and James Jordan — would sway the all-white jury.

In closing arguments, Doar challenged the jury to do the right thing, telling them “what you 12 do here today will long be remembered.”

The verdict could be looked at as a mixed bag, but it was a victory for the image of the state of Mississippi. Seven were found guilty, including Price and Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers.

“To have that jury return that verdict was a great thing,” Doar said. “The jury paid attention; they were serious people.

“The trial helped Mississippi get beyond the caste system. Up to that time, no white person in the state had ever been convicted for violence against a black. After the trial, the good people of Mississippi became more confident that they could move away from their past.”

Judge Cox, who imposed sentences ranging from four to 10 years on Dec. 29, would later say, “They killed one nigger, one Jew, and a white man — I gave them all what I thought they deserved.”

Days later, Doar left the Department of Justice. He had announced his resignation in November after getting the Mississippi Burning convictions.

THE SOUTHERN CHANGE

The South Doar left in 1967 was remarkably different from the South he entered in 1960. His toughness, honesty and diligence helped blacks exercise their rights, and the spotlight on their own actions made many Southerners open their eyes to a different future.

Doar's departure was a sad one for those in the Movement. Mississippi NAACP President Aaron Henry called it “a tragic loss for the Civil Rights Movement.”

Charles Evers, who had assumed his brother Medgar's post as the state's field secretary, was informed of Doar's decision by a reporter. He responded by saying, “What? Are you serious? What are we gonna do? Who we gonna turn to?”

One of the Movement's most courageous activists, future Georgia Congressman John Lewis, summed up Doar's years in the South. “His job was great,” he said. “His will and talent even greater.”

Reporters had compared Doar to Marshal Dillon, Gary Cooper and James Stewart during his Justice days, but columnist Jimmy Breslin thought deeper of the man who had spent about 1,500 days on the road in his seven years at his post.

“His life has been in those nothing motels on the highways or in the dirty-windowed hotels of small cities,” wrote Breslin. “It has been spent with people afraid to help him or with people who think about shooting him, in courtrooms where you can’t win and with politicians who will not listen.”

But not everyone was sorry to see him go.

The folks in the Mississippi Attorney General’s Office were thrilled at Doar’s departure. Attorney General Joe Patterson told a reporter, “Doar was dedicated to his job all right, but overzealous on civil rights. He never sided with any side but the civil righters. He spent as much or more time in Mississippi than anywhere else.”

(It should be noted that in 2005, Neshoba County successfully prosecuted Edgar Ray Killen in the 1964 Mississippi Burning murders. Just weeks ago, on Martin Luther King Day, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour accepted an award, on behalf of his state, from the Congress of Racial Equality for taking that case to trial).

When Doar left the Department of Justice, he didn’t leave his dedication and commitment to make a better day for minority communities.

Doar became the executive director of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Development & Service Corporation, the national funding arm of a project intended to revive a dilapidated section of Brooklyn. The plan was to tap foundations, universities and the government for money to purchase land, build business and rent them to private owners who would hire and train people in the neighborhood.

“Robert Kennedy asked me to work there,” Doar said. “Three or four months later, he was killed. I felt I owed it to him to stay, he had done so many good things for me.”

In the office next to him was Franklin Thomas, a Bed-Stuy native who played basketball at Columbia and served as executive director of the Bedford-

Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, which was the local organization trying to improve conditions in the neighborhood.

Their corporations opened hundreds of businesses and helped create thousands of jobs. The restoration became the inspiration for thousands of other community revitalization programs in the U.S. and abroad. “It is amazing that ideas nurtured in a community in Brooklyn could be applied globally,” said Thomas.

Neither Doar nor Thomas thought they would be involved for more than a few years, but Thomas stayed 10 years and Doar six, before being tapped for yet another momentous event in American history.

New Jersey Congressman Peter Rodino called upon Doar to serve as chief counsel for the House Judiciary Committee’s investigation of Watergate and its connection to President Nixon’s Administration.

Doar, a lifelong Republican, earned bipartisan praise for his fair and objective investigation. As he had in the South with the Justice Department, Doar took an enormous amount of data and presented it in a concise and convincing manner. It helped persuade many Republicans to vote for impeachment. Nixon resigned in August 1974.

THE FAMILY LEGACY

Closing in on his 53rd birthday, Doar had one child finishing college, another starting and two others still at home.

He had stuffed a stunning amount of American history into a 14-year span of his life.

It was time to return to private practice and focus on his family. His wife Anne had long held the family together while her husband set out to deliver justice.

Their eldest child and lone daughter, Gael, would graduate from Bryn Mawr College and, for a time, serve as a special assistant in the White House Press Office during the Carter Administration. She is now a successful communications specialist in Connecticut.

The three Doar sons all followed in their dad’s footsteps at Princeton.

Michael, now a businessman in Indianapolis, earned a 1978 degree in English. Robert, the commissioner of the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, would graduate in 1983 with a history degree.

The youngest child, John Burke, would claim his English degree in 1986. Burke, now a company vice president in Connecticut, went nameless for six weeks as his father worked in the South in 1963. The staff of the Department of Justice finally forced his father to pick a name from a hat and he selected 'Burke,' the name of his boss Burke Marshall.

It seems like the work ethic of the father was passed along to the children. Even today, at 84 years old, John Doar continues to work at Doar, Rieck & Mack, a law office in New York City.

The truth is, he could have closed down his working career well before his 50th birthday and still been one of the most accomplished Ivy Leaguers ever.

On Jan. 7, the NCAA recognized him for his life's work by naming him as a recipient of the NCAA Inspiration Award. John Doar probably wonders why there is such a fuss. The rest are left to wonder what took so long.

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