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Mississippi Burning

"A STANDARD TO WHICH WE COULDN'T LIVE UP"

Rupert Anderson (Gene Hackman) and Alan Ward (Willem Dafoe) investigate the murders of civil rights workers in *Mississippi Burning*. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

When the time came for announcing the Academy Award for best picture of 1988, Hollywood suspected that one of the nominees was unlikely to get the Oscar because of its controversial treatment of history. The manipulation of facts and fictionalizing in *Mississippi Burning* had angered many citizens, journalists, and professional historians, sparking lively debates about the degree to which filmmakers ought to feel obligated to produce reasonably authentic and representative pictures of the past. *Mississippi Burning* does not tell the true story of the Freedom Summer of 1964, said the critics; it tells Hollywood's distorted version. Some of the harshest criticism came from African Americans who complained that the movie largely overlooks the important role of blacks in the civil rights struggle. *Mississippi Burning* makes the civil rights victories in the South seem to have been almost totally the result of work by whites, they said. In this context director Alan Parker's moving examination of the murders of three civil rights workers in the Deep South fell into trouble. Popular objections appeared to taint the film. As expected, when the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences got around to delivering Oscars, *Mississippi Burning* did not receive the prize for best picture.[1]

This run-in with history was unfortunate, for when the movie portrays events from the historical record, it offers riveting drama. *Mississippi Burning* communicates the ugliness and viciousness of racial prejudice in the South about as well as any Hollywood film of the post–World War II period. It focuses on a murder case that was naturally appealing as the source for a motion picture screenplay. The killing of a black civil rights campaigner and his two white companions had outraged the nation in 1964 and provoked a massive response from the federal government. President Lyndon B. Johnson threw numerous federal agents into the effort to capture the murderers. Congress reacted to the tragedy by voting a wide-ranging civil rights bill into law. After a tremendous effort the FBI found the bodies and identified the culprits. Conviction was

difficult, because all-white juries in Mississippi tended to look the other way regarding such crimes, but eventually a number of the conspirators went to prison for civil rights violations. This was the stuff of good Hollywood storytelling, a historical case that offered fascinating possibilities for dramatic portrayal.

To appreciate how *Mississippi Burning*'s handling of this story provoked heated controversy, it is useful to consider a brief chronicle of the principal events in Mississippi during the historic summer of 1964. This is the record on which the filmmakers drew to create their movie; this is the evidence that they incorporated with considerable detail and yet sometimes contradicted and distorted.

The tragedy that *Mississippi Burning* dramatizes occurred during the summer of 1964, after civil rights workers launched a broad campaign to register black voters in the state. The campaigners hoped that their efforts would draw national attention to the racial problems in the Deep South. To win sympathy from the American public, they practiced a strategy of nonviolent resistance, even when confronting physical abuse from segregationists. A number of white Mississippians did not look kindly on the intervention from Yankee do-gooders or the evidence that local African Americans were organizing politically. Some of these whites took action, practicing intimidation and terror as members of the Ku Klux Klan. These racists harassed civil rights activists and attacked homes and churches where the organizers congregated. In 1964 they burned thirty-one African-American churches in Mississippi.

The tragedy occurred near Philadelphia, Mississippi, after three young men left Meridian to drive into the countryside and investigate the burning of a black church. One of the travelers was Michael Schwerner, a white social worker from New York City who had moved to Mississippi with his wife to coordinate community programs for the Congress of Racial Equality. The second was Andrew Goodman, a student at New York's Queens College who arrived in Mississippi just a day before the fatal trip. The third was James Chaney, a black youth associated with the Congress of Racial Equality who worked with Schwerner in the drive to register black voters. Local members of the Ku Klux Klan were determined to attack these campaigners and send a message of fear to other such activists. The Klansmen believed that they could act almost with impunity, for whites in Mississippi were rarely brought to trial for injury to African Americans or harassment of whites who operated as allies of black "troublemakers."

While the civil rights workers were driving along a Mississippi highway, the Neshoba County deputy sheriff took the three to the local jailhouse and then released them. With the deputy sheriff's assistance, members of the Klan later assumed control. They forced Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney into the woods and shot them. The murderers hid the car near a river and buried the three bodies. When FBI investigators began to look for the missing persons, the local sheriff of Neshoba County, who knew about the murders, said that the civil rights campaigners probably were hiding out somewhere to get publicity. This idea became popular across the state of Mississippi; many segregationists laughed and claimed the disappearances to be a publicity stunt.[2]

The Mississippi case did not seem a laughing matter in Washington, D.C. President Johnson saw this tragedy in the Deep South as a stain on the nation's record, and he wanted the spot removed quickly. Johnson pressured the FBI to beef up its activities in Mississippi. The bureau's director, J. Edgar Hoover, was unsympathetic toward the rights movement and reluctant to intervene much in the affairs of the Deep South. He responded to Johnson's appeals, however, and suddenly threw the bureau's weight into Mississippi. As the search for the bodies expanded, three busloads of sailors from the U.S. military arrived to aid the effort. The sailors searched over a large and marshy area of the Pearl River in a busy weekend of body hunting. Nothing turned up. The search continued, as FBI agents gathered over 150,000 pages of information in the search for clues.

Collecting documents and scouring the Mississippi terrain in the heat of summer did not prove to be as useful as the FBI's efforts to bribe informers. The news that helped to break the case came from Klan members who responded to rewards for information (informants received $30,000 for cooperating; plea bargaining for reduced sentences also helped to bring out evidence). Eventually agents found the three bodies at the base of a dam. Investigators were able to pry more information loose by telling various Klansmen what they knew about their activities. When it became evident that the investigators were beginning to learn the identities of the culprits, several of the Klan members became suspicious of their fellow conspirators. Fearing arrest, they related valuable information about their associates in the crime. Several arrests followed, including that of the sheriff and deputy sheriff of Neshoba County. Eventually a jury of Mississippi whites found the two law enforcement officers and six others guilty of depriving Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney of their civil rights (a more serious con-

viction on murder charges could not be obtained in the state, because local jurors of whites would not convict).[3]

This is the history that served as the basis for *Mississippi Burning*'s story. The case of violence in Philadelphia, Mississippi, contained abundant elements suitable for portrayal in a motion picture. The film's developers did not need to stray far from the facts to create a compelling drama. Indeed, the individual who first developed the movie project intended to design a script that stayed relatively close to the evidence. Over the course of production planning, however, his project began to spin away from history and move considerably into the realm of fiction. By the time *Mississippi Burning* reached the screen, it had become a melding of sophisticated re-creation and regrettable distortion, exposing its makers to claims that they had abused their artistic license.

The individual who thought that this historical case could serve as the foundation for attractive Hollywood entertainment was Chris Gerolmo. He initiated the planning and followed the project through to completion. Gerolmo had studied at Harvard and taught documentary film production there for a few years. He had been enthusiastic about the direct cinema of Frederick Wiseman and encouraged students to make documentaries about social issues such as the problems of the handicapped. Eventually Gerolmo moved into theater production (his father was already a noted producer). He wanted to develop a career as a director in Hollywood but sensed that he would have to enter the movie business on the basis of his writing talents. Gerolmo began looking for a story that offered potential as a screenplay and discovered an intriguing possibility in an article in the *New York Post*. The selection was a chapter excerpted from a book by Neil J. Welch and David W. Marston entitled *Inside Hoover's FBI*. It describes how J. Edgar Hoover encouraged FBI agents to "take the gloves off" and infiltrate the Ku Klux Klan to find the murderers of civil rights campaigners in Mississippi. Gerolmo then decided to approach a friend, theatrical producer Fred Zollo, for help with the project. He made Zollo the producer. Together Gerolmo and Zollo went off to Hollywood to sell the concept for the movie.[4]

Marketing the concept proved difficult. Some young studio executives had never heard of the murder cases in Mississippi and wondered whether audiences would show much interest in what seemed like an obscure story about racism in the South. Others simply were not convinced that the film could make money. Unable to get a financial com-

mitment, Gerolmo returned to New York and decided to write the script "on spec." He investigated the historical evidence related to the cases, prepared a screenplay, and tried to get the necessary financing by submitting a more complete proposal. His perseverance paid off, but he needed four and a half years to bring the project to completion.[5]

As production planning moved forward, Orion Pictures secured the services of Alan Parker, a talented British director who brought strong personal views about ways to depict racist terrorism in the South. Parker did not have much personal knowledge of the civil rights confrontations in Mississippi in the 1960s (he had been living in England at the time), but he had firsthand experience with class tensions and economic inequality from his youth in a working-class area of North London. Building on these memories, he stressed the notion that class antagonism was at the core of much of white racist thinking in Mississippi. Parker also brought a reputation for making films that dramatically contrast "good" and "bad" characters, and he pursued this approach in portraying the Mississippi figures. In adjusting the script and selecting actors, Parker took care to characterize many of the Mississippi whites as ignorant and prejudiced. Members of the Ku Klux Klan got particularly emphatic treatment, appearing as vicious, contemptible bigots.[6]

Parker's contributions toward script design added tension and excitement to the story, but they also pulled the portrayal from its historical base and pushed it in the direction of fiction. Some of these adjustments disturbed Gerolmo, who felt that the changes could lead to a kind of story different from the one originally intended. Gerolmo was troubled, for example, about Parker's decision to alter a scene depicting FBI-sponsored intimidation of a Mississippi white man. Gerolmo's script has a Mafia member who owes the FBI a favor threatening a white racist conspirator by holding a gun to his mouth. Gerolmo based this depiction on rumors he heard about the FBI's tactics. Parker redesigned the incident so that the movie shows a black FBI agent using a razor to threaten the town's mayor with castration if he does not reveal what he knows. This powerful image seemed to offer great potential for exciting movie audiences, because it suggests a nightmare for a white Mississippi racist. The scene reverses the predator/victim relationship evident in much of southern history. Americans were familiar with stories about white racists castrating southern blacks; now Parker intended to symbolize a form of revenge by depicting a black intimidator with a knife to the groin of a white man. Gerolmo was

uncomfortable with the change. He knew that there had been no black agents in the FBI in 1964, and nothing existed in the records or the rumor mills that even remotely resembled the proposed scene. Inclusion of Parker's idea might draw unwanted criticism.[7]

Gerolmo had tried to base much of his screenplay on actual events. He supplemented material from *Inside Hoover's FBI* with material from William Bradford Huie's book on the Philadelphia murder case, *Three Lives for Mississippi,* and another book that deals, in part, with the history of the period, *Attack on Terror.* Additionally, Gerolmo examined newspaper reports from 1963 and testimony from the lengthy court case against the Klansmen.

Gerolmo had decided to focus the screenplay on the FBI's fight against the Klan. His story was not to be about the civil rights movement; rather, it would deal with the struggle of law enforcement agents to catch the racists responsible for the deaths of Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney. The general shape of his drama would "be a lot like what really happened," he explained later, but he intended to condense the action in time and collapse several FBI characters he read about into two principal figures (and then add fictional material about their exploits). In the movie Gene Hackman and Willem Dafoe play the two FBI protagonists (under the fictitious names of "Anderson" and "Ward"). Gerolmo's original draft uses many real names from the Mississippi case, but later versions substitute fictitious names throughout ("to protect the guilty," as producer Fred Zollo put it).[8]

The movie's focus on the exploits of two fictitious FBI agents made interesting drama, but this approach created grounds for controversy once the movie reached the theaters. Critics observed that the two principal characters in the story are fictional and that their prominent roles tend to exaggerate the FBI's importance in the civil rights case.

The relationship between Anderson and Ward portrayed in the movie came not from historical evidence but from the theme of a popular Western, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance.* Gerolmo liked the plot to the movie, which features Jimmy Stewart as a young peace-minded lawyer toting books and John Wayne as the tough cowboy who befriends him. When one of the meanest bad men in the West (played by Lee Marvin) intimidates the lawyer, destroys the town newspaper's press, and beats up the editor, the lawyer finally recognizes the need for a violent response.[9] He goes for his six-gun. With assistance from the cowboy, the lawyer ends the threat from the bad man. Building on this idea of two men with different outlooks learning to cooperate

and catch a criminal, Gerolmo accentuated the contrast between Anderson and Ward. He made Anderson a native-born Mississippian with little tolerance for by-the-books crime solving. Gerolmo portrayed Anderson as a practical man who sees that legal procedures against the Klan are useless. In the story Anderson believes in fighting fire with fire. He urges Ward to allow him to hit the Klan with the FBI's own forms of threat and intimidation. Ward, on the other hand, is a neatly dressed agent with a Harvard education and a Kennedyesque point of view. He is a liberal, one of the "Best and the Brightest," and his approach to solving the case is to throw more law enforcement personnel and more money at the problem. Eventually he sees the wisdom of Anderson's extralegal approach and reluctantly sanctions the FBI's own brand of vigilantism. The rough tactics quickly succeeded in breaking the Klan's resistance.

Although much of the screenplay for *Mississippi Burning* contains fictional material about a battle between the FBI and the Klan, a substantial portion of the movie features authentic evidence from the actual murder cases. Throughout the film there are numerous references to real people and real situations associated with the tragedy near Philadelphia, Mississippi. This hint of authenticity appears in the opening seconds of the film, when the caption "Mississippi, 1964," clearly identifies the time and place of the story. Audiences then watch the Ku Klux Klan's cat-and-mouse chase of the three civil rights workers on a dark Mississippi highway, and they see the first of the brutal murders at gunpoint. As in the actual case, federal law enforcement authorities learn about the missing car from a Choctaw Indian, naval personnel hunt for the bodies in a marshy region, and investigators keep a paper bag over the head of a witness so that he will not be recognized as he is driven through the streets of Philadelphia. Some of the dialogue is a verbatim reproduction of language recorded in the court records. Also, the characters often resemble the real figures. Michael Schwerner wore a goatee, as does the actor in the movie who portrays him, and the actor representing Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price resembles him in appearance and mannerisms. Even the title of the movie reflects historical authenticity. The FBI gave its investigation the code name MIBURN (for "Mississippi Burning"). In these and other ways the filmmakers gave the audience abundant signals that *Mississippi Burning* is Hollywood's representation of a true story.

Director Alan Parker worked carefully to incorporate a number of authentic details. He traveled to Mississippi with coproducer Bob Coles-

berry, for example, and tried to retrace the steps of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman. The two filmmakers located a spot where they believed the murders to have been committed and spent some moments of silence. Parker then traveled extensively across the state of Mississippi, talking with people from a variety of backgrounds. His location department labored for weeks trying to identify numerous towns across Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia that might serve as the principal location for the filming. Parker and Colesberry eventually chose Lafayette, Alabama, as the site to represent Philadelphia, Mississippi. In the production notes for *Mississippi Burning* (a portion of the press kit) Parker identified the choice of Lafayette with an apparent note of apology, pointing out that the bulk of shooting for the movie was in Mississippi. Moreover, Parker could boast that for some scenes he used authentic settings (for example, the morgue at the University Medical Center, where the bodies of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman were taken). Thus, the director articulated a sense of pride concerning the attention to historical detail.[10]

Parker's finished product effectively conveys a strong feeling for the social tensions that troubled Mississippians in 1964. *Mississippi Burning* communicates a sense of the terror that blacks and whites felt when they worked together in the state for civil rights. Scenes showing the highway chase, the murder, the nighttime attacks on African Americans and their homes, and the burning of churches contributed an understanding of the troubles civil rights advocates experienced when confronting racist vigilantism. Much of the drama has the appearance of a horror picture, except that it deals with actual dangers created by real people rather than threats carried out by imaginary monsters. Indeed, during the tense summer of 1964 there were four shootings, fifty-two serious beatings, 250 arrests, and ten cars damaged or destroyed in connection with the civil rights campaign.[11]

The movie also correctly portrays ways in which representatives of the media were intimidated in Mississippi. Newsmen did worry about physical harm as they covered events during the summer of 1964. David Halberstam, who had worked for a small-town newspaper in Mississippi in the 1960s, later recalled the tensions. Writing about the movie in 1989, Halberstam remembered, "There always seemed to be a pickup truck . . . following me as I left a small town, threatening to bump me off the road."[12] Bill Delgado, an NBC camera operator, suffered more direct intimidation. He covered the Philadelphia murders for the television network and discovered that some Mississippi whites

were determined to frighten the press away from their community. A segregationist drove a car into Delgado's automobile and then chased him with a hunting knife. When a police officer arrived on the scene, he issued Delgado a citation for reckless driving. Later Delgado tried to get television footage of the countryside from a helicopter, and a farmer aimed a gun at him. After that experience Delgado asked NBC to transfer him to a new assignment.[13]

Although *Mississippi Burning* effectively demonstrates some of the ugly incidents of intimidation and violence in the Philadelphia area, it also provides some insights into the kind of thinking that supported racial bigotry. The movie's attention to this subject is brief, but the dialogue does manage to convey a thesis. The message comes across particularly in a scene in a motel when Ward asks Anderson where all the terrible hate comes from. Anderson recalls his father's prejudices and suggests an explanation based on economics. The old man used to ask, "if you ain't better than a nigger, who are you better than?" Anderson explains that his father took comfort in knowing that blacks were worse off than he was. Racial prejudice blinded him to the larger realities. The old man was so full of hate, says Anderson, that "he didn't know that being poor was what was killing him."[14]

The movie does an impressive job of communicating a feeling for the conditions in Mississippi in 1964 and the attitudes of the segregationists, but its presentation of the events raised serious questions from critics in three important respects. Detractors said that the movie portrays blacks essentially as sheeplike victims who took almost no steps to influence the course of events in Mississippi; they argued that *Mississippi Burning* creates a distorted view of the FBI's tactics in the murder case; and they claimed that it misinterprets the role of violence in bringing social change to the South. These criticisms sparked a lively debate about Hollywood's responsibility to represent history authentically.

A number of observers, particularly African Americans, charged that almost all the black characters in the movie look like passive victims. They said that the blacks seem frightened, withdrawn, and unaware of how to change their fortunes. With the exception of the fictional African-American FBI agent, black characters in the movie stand on the periphery of events, patiently watching and hoping for a better day while white FBI agents and Klan members battle each other. Critics especially pointed to the example of the chase scene in the opening moments of the movie. *Mississippi Burning* shows Michael Schwerner driving the car containing the civil rights workers, while James Chaney,

the black, sits in the back seat. Actually Chaney drove the car, said the critics. Furthermore, Chaney was not just a passive black youngster who looked to the whites to give direction to the fight for justice, as he appears in the film. Chaney was a dedicated civil rights campaigner and full-time organizer for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).[15]

Critics argued that the movie's portrayal overlooks the major role African Americans played in shaping their own destiny in Mississippi during the important civil rights campaign of 1964. Hundreds of African Americans who were trained in the tactics of nonviolent resistance worked bravely for their rights in Mississippi through the summer project, they noted. The Klan-led assaults on black churches revealed how successful blacks were becoming: segregationists observed their progress and then tried to frighten them into retreating from their campaign. The civil rights crusaders did not give up, despite the intimidation and physical injuries they suffered, and they made a significant impact on the nation's thinking about conditions in the Deep South. *Mississippi Burning* fails to show these contributions, said the critics. Vernon Jarrett, an African American and member of the *Chicago Sun-Times'* editorial board, summed up the reaction when he said, "The film treats some of the most heroic people in black history as mere props in a morality play."[16] Similarly, Coretta Scott King, wife of Martin Luther King Jr., asked, "How long will we have to wait before Hollywood finds the courage and the integrity to tell the stories of some of the many thousands of black men, women, and children who put their lives on the line for equality?"[17]

Julian Bond, a prominent African American in the Democratic party who had served as a Georgia state senator, found an opportunity to articulate these objections on ABC Television's *Nightline.* A few years later he reviewed his objections to the movie, recalling that he found it to be "condescending" in its treatment of blacks. *Mississippi Burning* leaves the impression that African Americans in the South did not exercise any leadership, he observed. The blacks that appear in the movie seem to be set up to be victims. Bond said that when he saw an African-American character portrayed on the screen as a passive figure, he thought, "That person's gonna die." In making the FBI agents the heroes of the story *Mississippi Burning* badly distorts history. Clever police work had nothing to do with the victory against the Klan, argued Bond; the FBI simply paid informants, "as police often do," and obtained leads that led to prosecution. By misleading audiences regarding what really happened in Mississippi, the movie turns history "upside down." The main char-

acters in the Mississippi story were not the whites but the African Americans from the South, as well as the young workers for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and CORE who had been putting their lives in danger for civil rights long before the tragedy occurred in Philadelphia, Mississippi. In short, the movie fails to give the blacks credit for winning their own freedom.[18]

Chris Gerolmo and Fred Zollo, the writer and producer, believed that charges about the movie's insensitivity to the role of blacks were unfair. They said that they were well aware of the heroism of many black Mississippians in challenging white supremacy under very dangerous circumstances. They noted that the African Americans' contribution to the fight for equality is well documented in the history books. Gerolmo and Zollo emphasized, however, that they were not making a movie about the civil rights movement. *Mississippi Burning* is about the fight between the Klan and the FBI, which was essentially a drama about the activities of white men. Zollo took particular issue with the claims that *Mississippi Burning* should have shown the black figure, James Chaney, driving the car. The criticism came to him in an emotional way one day when he was lecturing about the movie at Queens College. Chaney's sister was in the audience, and she protested the fact that the movie shows her brother as a passenger in the car, not as the driver. Zollo maintained that Schwerner did drive the car during *some* of the civil rights workers' travels.[19] He argued, however, that evidence about which person was driving at specific times was contradictory and subject to debate (to support his position, Zollo referred to pages in the book *Three Lives for Mississippi*, as well as to testimony by the white conspirators).[20]

Mississippi Burning focused on whites for purposes of box office popularity, and Alan Parker acknowledged the reasons for the decision openly. "Our heroes are still white," the director explained. "And in truth the film would probably never be made if they weren't." He, as well as Gerolmo and Zollo, understood that the movie's primary audience was going to be whites (both in the United States and abroad). The filmmakers believed that a movie about white FBI agents trying to solve the murders would constitute a much stronger attraction than a movie that focused on the African-American struggle.[21] Furthermore, "one of the perverse ironies of the case was that two white kids got killed and the whole of America was interested suddenly, because it wasn't just a black problem." This reality undoubtedly disturbed many black activists, Parker noted, "because it underlined a national hypocrisy."[22]

A related complaint concerned how *Mississippi Burning* attributes the ultimate victories over Mississippi racists to vigorous actions by the FBI. Critics said the movie implies that FBI investigators were the real heroes of the summer campaign, not the black civil rights organizers and their white colleagues. *Mississippi Burning* suggests that the campaign succeeded because men like Anderson and Ward demonstrated the skills necessary to trick racist criminals. Historian Harvard Sitkoff summarized the plot sarcastically by saying that it shows blacks in the South winning their civil rights because "two white guys learned to work together and like each other."[23] The film gives particular credit to Anderson (Gene Hackman) for finding a way to catch the guilty men. "These people crawled out of the sewers," he tells Ward in the movie. "Maybe the gutter is the place we have to be." When Ward fails to find the criminals (and makes conditions worse for the blacks through his naive intervention), he reluctantly accepts Anderson's plan for a no-nonsense assault on the Klan; Anderson and other FBI agents then assault suspects, threaten castration, participate in kidnapping, and fake a lynching to get the information they want. Anderson emerges a hero for these efforts. The FBI's extralegal measures force confessions and send the criminals to prison.

Critics of the movie were quick to point out that these scenarios were fabrications and had little to do with the actual FBI operations in Mississippi. They emphasized that the FBI initially played an insignificant role in investigating violence in the South, because bureau director Hoover loathed blacks. Hoover was deeply suspicious of the civil rights movement, they noted, and he worried about the possible involvement of communists in its organizations. Hoover also disliked Martin Luther King Jr. and authorized wiretaps of his phone conversations. Under Hoover's leadership the FBI seemed to be on friendlier terms with segregationist law officers than with the civil rights campaigners, they observed. President Johnson then intervened and forced the bureau to take an active role in solving the case. As for the violence and intimidation Anderson practices in the movie, nothing of the kind occurred in Mississippi, the critics pointed out. The FBI did not break the case in the manner of action-adventure movie heroes. Instead it used a form of bribery—the payoffs of $30,000 that helped to squeeze information from informants and bring indictments.[24]

Gerolmo acknowledged that the FBI had been dragging its feet in civil rights cases and that Hoover was bigoted and promoted reprehensible acts of intimidation against Martin Luther King Jr. Nevertheless,

argued Gerolmo, Hoover responded quickly to LBJ's insistence that the bureau help to apprehend those guilty of the Philadelphia murders. The director put numerous agents on the case, and in this instance, his organization performed admirably in its detective work. *Mississippi Burning* was not intended to be a representative picture of FBI activities in the civil rights era, Gerolmo insisted; it is about the bureau's success in breaking the Klan's silence and intimidation in one specific case.[25]

In this respect Gerolmo regretted that director Alan Parker cut a particular scene from the early drafts of the script. The scene takes place at a church where a small group of blacks and white civil rights organizers meet Anderson and Ward. When one of the youngsters says that he does not trust the FBI, Anderson becomes hostile and Ward has to ask him to step outside. "That would have helped us a lot," Gerolmo believed; it would have given some voice to reservations about the FBI's role in civil rights matters. Without that scene the movie seems to paint the FBI agents as fully welcomed heroes in the minds of civil rights workers.[26]

Alan Parker took a very different view of the moviemakers' relationship with history. He maintained that Gerolmo's original draft was a very simplistic, superficial, and fictionalized story. When taking the director's assignment, said Parker, he immersed himself in the factual materials, attempted to get back to the truth of the story, and politicized the drama with his own "voice." The result was "a better and more meaningful film" than the one Gerolmo originally designed. Parker said that he took what looked like just another buddy cop film and turned it into a new form, imbuing "it with detail based on actuality." At the beginning, explained Parker, "I was presented with fiction and marginal historical background, and I reversed this balance when I re-wrote the script."[27]

Whether Gerolmo or Parker showed more consideration of historical truths is not clear, but certainly the story presented in *Mississippi Burning* could not have placated all the critics. The movie features far too many fictional situations to escape objections from the champions of authenticity. Most of the FBI activity that dominates the second half of the movie is simply invented. Indeed, Welch's and Marston's book, *Inside Hoover's FBI*, which according to Gerolmo inspired the movie project, only vaguely suggests the use of extralegal tactics by the bureau's agents and says nothing about the specific FBI actions seen in the movie.[28] Furthermore, *Mississippi Burning* gives too much credit to

the FBI for defeating the Klan and too little credit to the black and white civil rights workers whose actions provoked the Klan to commit atrocities in the first place. The movie confuses the lessons about history, for it fails to show the impact of public opinion in forcing integration on the South. Essentially, the film delivers an incorrect message about the role of violence in effecting change. *Mississippi Burning* leaves the impression that the forces of progress defeated the forces of tradition in the Deep South by adopting the very tactics of violent vigilantism that civil rights campaigners had been denouncing. It appears to argue that segregationist terrorism could not be stopped in legal ways; therefore, the FBI *needed* to resort to extralegal coercion.

In taking this approach the filmmakers overlooked the political context of events and lost sight of one of the most important lessons historians can draw about the murders' effects on the nation. Racist violence backfired in Mississippi. Its effect was opposite to what the assailants expected. The murderers hoped to frighten away the civil rights campaigners, but instead, they prompted the federal government to intervene in Mississippi's affairs. News about the tragedy near Philadelphia, Mississippi, as well as reports of other violent acts, aroused the nation. The public became upset with the evidence of physical intimidation and murder. Televised news footage and photographs in newspapers featured graphic evidence of the segregationists' abuses. In the years before the triple murder in Mississippi, the media had shown police dogs biting civil rights demonstrators and firehoses blowing them across streets; the media also revealed pictures of burned-out buses and homes and churches in ashes. As the reports of new outrages mounted, the political environment in Washington turned toward reform. Members of Congress began to sense a need for stronger federal action to protect citizens and to save the country from additional embarrassments. The reports from Mississippi and other states in the Deep South were disturbing for a society that advertised itself to Third World nations as an attractive example of freedom. It certainly represented bad press in the global competition with the Soviets for respect and influence. Reports of racist killings also made political moderates and business leaders in the South cringe. People who were working hard to promote the image of a modern South believed that the ugly reports about white violence badly undermined their efforts.

Thus, it was not violence by law enforcement agents that brought progress to the civil rights movement (as *Mississippi Burning* implies) but the terrorist violence of southern white racists. That aggression

excited revulsion. The 1964 cases came relatively late in this sequence of disturbing news; reports of atrocities in the Deep South had been building for years. When news broke about the Mississippi murders, President Johnson came under tremendous pressure from the victims' relatives and the public to crack the case. Public outrage then helped to put teeth in the Civil Rights Act, which had passed the Senate shortly before the murders and became law a few weeks after the tragedy. Violent events of the next year, such as the killing of Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, helped to build political support for the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In sum, segregationist violence contributed to the extraordinary passage of major civil rights reform that had been delayed for years. Ironically, the enemies of civil rights helped to bring about the very changes they were trying to prevent.

Mississippi Burning not only misses this conclusion but also suggests that journalism and public opinion had little influence on events in the era of the civil rights campaign. The film conveys this assessment in an especially important scene. Toward the end of the story Anderson concludes that the effort to find the killers was frustrated because it "turned into a show for the newsmen." The historical record of that turbulent period, however, demonstrates that the violence of white racists and extensive newspaper and television coverage of their atrocities contributed significantly to the gains realized by the fighters for racial justice. The "show for the newsmen" was critically important.

When details began to appear in the press about *Mississippi Burning*'s liberties with history, harsh criticism quickly emerged. The *New York Times* argued in an editorial that the filmmakers tampered with the facts, for the FBI never used the tactics displayed in the movie. "It's disturbing to think that people will leave the theatre believing that lawlessness is just if it serves a good cause," said the editorial. "Legitimizing that idea traduces the principles for which so many sacrificed so much to advance civil rights."[29] A letter writer to the *Los Angeles Times*, who was himself the author of screenplays for the entertainment industry, called *Mississippi Burning* an insult to the memory of "the real people who were not afraid to risk their lives while acting with moral integrity." The writer said that it was all right to alter some facts from history to enhance or clarify the story, but *Mississippi Burning*'s designers did not understand the crucial difference between "art" and "a lie."[30] Historian Harvard Sitkoff also gave a damning assessment in a review published later, concluding "this film does such injustice to the events with which it deals that its ultimate lynching is of history itself."[31]

Conservative columnist Patrick Buchanan criticized the film for entirely different reasons. Buchanan said that *Mississippi Burning*'s portrayal of southerners reveals how intensely "Hollywood hates the South." He claimed that Mississippi was not one-tenth as dangerous in 1964 as Washington, D.C., was in the 1980s. Buchanan said that Parker's film "slanders an entire state" and "indicts an entire region for a single atrocity committed there."[32]

Mississippi Burning's treatment of the historical issues sparked a lively debate about the artist's responsibility in interpreting the past through film. A reviewer for *The Economist* recognized that questions about fictionalizing history had been asked since Shakespeare's time. "But now television and films are fast replacing books as the chief source of information," said the reviewer, making the questions more vexing.[33] Some commentators excused the filmmakers for their excesses, arguing that a Hollywood movie does not intend primarily to be a documentary. "The truth of its testimony is not so much literal as gospel," explained Richard Schickel in *Time*.[34] David Halberstam was less comfortable with the idea of defending the filmmakers. Halberstam acknowledged that Hollywood is a city more of fantasy than of reality, and artists must enjoy considerable flexibility if not poetic license. "But in the making of this film there is a carelessness, a lack of accountability, that is simply unacceptable," wrote Halberstam. The moviemakers had a right to create a fictional vision of Mississippi, Halberstam thought, but they chose to use the specific case of the three slain civil rights workers for their centerpiece, and that significantly changed their responsibility to history.[35]

Alan Parker took the most active role in promoting the movie with the media, and he found himself facing numerous questions about historical representation. Reporters constantly asked him about an artist's responsibility to present the past with a degree of authenticity. Parker responded in the manner that many directors before him had handled such queries: he danced around the questions. Sometimes Parker implied that *Mississippi Burning* is based in fact, and at other times he suggested that it is a work of artistic imagination. Parker boasted, for example, that he had made the movie "in a realistic way" and claimed *Mississippi Burning* has "a truthful ring to it" because it is fiction based on fact.[36] More typically Parker tried to remove himself from questions about authenticity, appearing to regret that the movie's story was being compared with the historical record. *Mississippi Burning* is not the definitive story of the civil rights movement or the FBI's

involvement in it, he said. "It's one story, our story and very obviously fiction."[37] Like Gerolmo, he pointed out that the movie is not really about the civil rights movement, and therefore, it is unfair to expect it to re-create the campaign's history exactly as it occurred in Mississippi. The movie is really about why there was a *need* for a civil rights movement, Parker explained. He said that he had a good purpose in mind when making the film: to get the public to pay attention to an important subject that had been ignored by moviemakers. "I'm trying to reach an entire generation who knows nothing of that historical event," said Parker, noting that young people needed to react viscerally to the movie's message because of the racism that was around them.[38] Arguing essentially that the ends justify the means, Parker said that it was better to alter the facts to make audiences think about racial injustice than to be fastidious about details and risk never getting the message across at all. "There have been a lot of documentaries on the subject" on PBS, Parker observed, but "nobody watches them." *Mississippi Burning*, on the other hand, was going to reach millions in fifty countries and arouse their emotions about racial injustice. "And that's enough of a reason, a justification, for the fictionalizing," he concluded.[39]

Chris Gerolmo, the originator of the film project, found the assaults on *Mississippi Burning*'s treatment of history disheartening. He had wanted to create "a great detective story with a lot of heart." He had hoped that the exciting drama would stir the audience's interest in history, encouraging viewers to think seriously about the relevant moral issues. Gerolmo planned to make the story "relatively consistent with what had happened." It would be close to history "in spirit," communicating history's important messages with fictional flourishes. He believed that the initial advertisements for *Mississippi Burning* undermined this goal. The ads announced boldly that director Alan Parker had examined the rights struggle in a dramatic film, implying that the movie would be Hollywood's first major statement on the history of the civil rights movement. In this manner the promoters "set a standard to which we couldn't live up," Gerolmo lamented. Had the advertising been less ambitious about the film's connections with history, audiences would not have expected *Mississippi Burning* to be a precise historical re-creation.[40] Zollo agreed that audiences and critics were judging the movie with criteria that were difficult to meet. Instead of appreciating the way in which *Mississippi Burning* throws light on the horrors of racism and Klan-style terrorism, commentators were

reduced to asking petty questions about details such as the color of the car that Schwerner and Chaney drove and who was really in the driver's seat.[41]

Zollo found Patrick Buchanan's complaint about the movie's ugly portrayal of Mississippi rednecks to be unfair. He stressed that key individuals in the Philadelphia crime story were very much as the movie had presented them—"truly creatures from the deep."[42] Zollo raised a legitimate point, for news photographs of the conspirators did indeed reveal them to be a frightening-looking bunch. Yet Buchanan, too, had raised a valid observation. Director Alan Parker had chosen many of the extras for the movie himself, seeking people with ugly, stereotypically redneck features. Virtually all the individuals representing common folk and segregationists in the movie reflect popular images of the southern "cracker." One of the few exceptions is the character of Mrs. Pell, the deputy sheriff's wife (played by Francis McDormand). In the movie she provides information to the FBI (the real informants were men). Mrs. Pell is supposed to represent the conscience of decent Mississippi moderates, but her singular presence in the story does not do enough to reveal that in the 1960s more than a few white Mississippians entertained thoughts of fairness and decency.

In general, Gerolmo, Parker, and Zollo raised some valid questions about the severity of the attacks heaped on *Mississippi Burning*. Often their movie was expected to be something other than what they intended. They had tried to examine a historical situation much as Shakespeare had portrayed Richard III. The drama was designed to be, as Zollo said, "reasonably true." Also, their movie was primarily about the FBI and the Klan, not about African Americans who struggled for justice or about the campaigns for civil rights.[43] Furthermore, advertising for *Mississippi Burning* created a mistaken impression about the subject of the story. The ads' attention to historical themes helped to excite public interest in the movie, but it also raised expectations that could not be realized.

Despite these problems, *Mississippi Burning* succeeded at the box office both in the United States and abroad, and it aroused the audiences' curiosity about an important subject from American history that had received very little attention from Hollywood. The motion picture reached many people who were not going to read about racial violence or watch *Eyes on the Prize* on PBS. *Mississippi Burning*'s powerful indictment of segregationist resistance stirred audiences to consider the history of race relations in the United States. It stimulated the movie view-

er's interest in probing America's troubled past. Carolyn Goodman, the mother of the slain rights worker Andy Goodman, thought that the movie made a significant contribution to the thinking of many young people in the United States who were unaware of the history of the rights struggle in the South. Mrs. Goodman regretted the moviemakers' fictionalizing, and she was unhappy with their portrayal of the African Americans' role in the civil rights movement, but she recognized that a film like *Mississippi Burning* could raise the consciousness of the viewers.[44]

Ultimately, *Mississippi Burning* represents a lost opportunity. It successfully communicates a perspective on the southern tradition of violent vigilantism that had oppressed African Americans since the days of slavery, but many lost sight of that message when focusing attention on the debates about authenticity. The moviemakers took far too many liberties with the facts to win accolades for offering a powerful social comment to the public. In later years many remembered the movie better as a catalyst for a fiery debate about Hollywood's relationship with history than as a movie that effectively portrays an important problem in human relations.

If the filmmakers had based their motion picture vaguely on the generic qualities of white terrorism in Mississippi, they might have faced very little criticism about authenticity. In building their story around an actual event, however, they invited scrutiny over details and concern for the truth. By drawing so many parallels with the actual Philadelphia, Mississippi, case while also creating significant fictional elements, the movie appropriately generated controversy. Audiences as well as historians had good reason to complain that the filmmakers moved beyond the proper bounds of artistic license and manipulated the evidence excessively. *Mississippi Burning*'s treatment of the past is unfortunate, because where the movie reflects the record (particularly in the first half of the film), it projects vivid images of the racist South. Had the filmmakers followed the fascinating historical record to its conclusion, they could have produced riveting drama while escaping much criticism about the movie's interpretation. The real Mississippi story was so inherently theatrical that it did not need the degree of fictionalizing that Gerolmo, Zollo, and Parker applied to it.