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Guest (s): Guest: Attorney General Joe T. Patterson (MS)

Title: Connection Between Freedom Riders and Cuba

Note: Questions were paraphrased and/or shortened by the transcriber. For the exact question, please consult the audiotapes.

Morphew: Introduction...you're one of the busiest men in state these days, I'd like to thank you for taking time out to be with us...last week on the show, an officer of the Mississippi Highway Patrol discussed the involvement of Cuba's dictator Fidel Castro and his Russian communist friends in the so-called Freedom Rider movement. He pointed out that some 200 students had gone to Cuba some months back to take part in a communist-training seminar. Some of these students were later involved in the Freedom Rides...this revelation hasn't generally been made in the northern press...I'd like your help in clearing up some misunderstandings particularly in the minds of listeners who live in the North and West in this country, people who have not really gotten the facts on the Freedom Riders. There has been a lot of biased reporting and propaganda on the so-called Freedom Rides and I'd like to get the situation some perspective if we might. As of now, more than 200 of these so-called Freedom Riders have come to Jackson, been arrested, convicted and jailed. How has the pattern proceeded? About the same way, hasn't it?

Patterson: Yes, it has. And of course it should be borne in mind by everyone that the people of the state of Mississippi did not ask for this situation. In fact, when we saw it brewing we tried every way we could to keep it from happening. We did not ask these people to come into the state. In fact, we asked them to stay out of the state, but they deliberately came into the state for the avowed purpose of creating chaos and disorder and deliberately violating the laws of the state. They said that's what they were coming for. And of course, we found out later that they spent some time training and getting ready to come into the state of Mississippi to do this very thing. Now, I don't think any state in the Union would permit a group to come into their state for the deliberate purpose of violating their laws and creating problems in their state that these people came here deliberately and determinately to do.

Morphew: These so-called Riders will arrive in Jackson in groups of one on up to 30 and when they arrive, what will they do?

Patterson: The first thing they do is go deliberately violate the law.

Morphew: What law? Does it have anything to do with segregation of the races?

Patterson: None whatsoever. The state of Mississippi, like every other state in this Union, has a law on breach of the peace, conduct calculated to lead to a riot and disorder. And it is those laws that they deliberately violate.

Morphew: Naturally, there will be policemen stationed at the various transportation depots, just as you would find in every other state, and these officers would observe these Freedom Riders violating these laws.

Patterson: Certainly. We have advanced notice that they are coming, that they are coming for that deliberate purpose and of course the officers are there to cope with the situation in the same identical way that they would do in New York or Chicago or San Francisco if a group should announce in advance that they are going there and going to do things deliberately calculated and designed to create a breach of the peace.

Morphew: Is this breach of the peace statute something unique to Mississippi?

Patterson: Not a bit in the world. Breach of the peace, the crime of breach of the peace, is as old as the common law and it was recognized as a crime under the common law before you ever even had any statutes on it.

Morphew: Do you believe the so-called Freedom Riders actually wanted some violence to occur when they came into the South?

Patterson: They definitely did. That's what they came to create.

Morphew: Why? Because this would bring federal intervention?

Patterson: They wanted federal intervention and obviously had already arranged for federal intervention before they even started.

Morphew: Do you think they've been disappointed with the way they've been received in Mississippi?

Patterson: I think they've been terribly disappointed. They came here, they wanted the same incidents to happen in Mississippi that happened in Alabama. And be it said to the credit of law enforcement officers in Mississippi, we saw to it that it didn't happen.

Morphew: I know quite a number of these Riders have various unsavory personal instances in their backgrounds. Would you care to mention the background of some of these riders?

Patterson: Well, some of them have backgrounds of numerous arrests. Others have backgrounds of being professional demonstrators, whatever that is. That is that they have engaged in these various demonstrations in different cities of the United States and have been in the jails of other cities of the United States long before they came to the state of Mississippi.

Morphew: Professional pickets, in other words, and some of them took part in the student riots in San Francisco from what I understand.

Patterson: That is our information. And not only that, but it's in direct keeping with what Mr. J. Edgar Hoover pointed out to the American Congress just a few months ago that the communists were going to step up their activities in America and were going to concentrate their activity on college campuses among the students.

Morphew: some of the leadership, some of the older people who have accompanied the students on the rides have records as draft dodgers and dishonorable discharges from the army, have they not?

Patterson: That's right. Running true to form, they want to parade under guise of American liberties and the American flag, yet their record shows when they're called on to defend it they prefer to stay in jail rather than defend their country.

Morphew: Do you think there is any doubt that some communist influence is behind these Freedom Rides?

Patterson: Not a bit in the world and they have endorsed the program and it's in direct keeping with their plan of activity in the Southland to go in and create chaos, confusion, strife, and discontent among the races.

Morphew: This is not out of any actual concern for so-called civil rights for the colored citizens of the South is it?

Patterson: Not a bit in the world. In fact, you'll notice the chief agitators, while they agitate and encourage, like Luther King, while they agitate and encourage these demonstrations, when they go get their crowd in jail then they take off to dine and wine with higher ups in other states of this nation and of course always pass around the hat.

Morphew: It seems almost daily that some of these freedom riders who have been jailed and transferred for safe keeping to the state penitentiary will get themselves bailed out and go promptly to New York or Chicago, call a so-called press conference and proceed to issue blasts at the law enforcement of Mississippi for alleged mistreatment in the jails. Is there anything to that?

Patterson: Not a word of truth in it. In fact, representatives of the governor of Minnesota were down here and they made a thorough inspection of the jail facilities and even talked with some of the citizens from their state who are among those that are in jail and I don't believe that they're going to go back to Minnesota and report that the conditions here are

deplorable whatsoever. And must not forget, they deliberately put themselves in jail. The judge in the city of Jackson, in levying his first sentences upon them, levied a small fine and a suspended sentence and they preferred to go to jail rather than pay the small fine or even appeal their cases to a higher court.

Morphew: So those who come now know that it is for the single purpose of going to jail.

Patterson: Coming for the sole purpose of getting put in jail. They first said they wanted to test the constitutionality of our laws. Well, all they needed to do was send the first group here and stop because the test was underway then.

Morphew: In fact one person could have made the test.

Patterson: One person could have made the test.

Morphew: This brings us to another question and that is, there is a very sincere doubt in the minds of some people in the North as to the motivations of the so-called Freedom Riders and of the groups behind them. As you said a test case could just as easily be instituted by one person being arrested for a law violation and then taking it up on appeal. Why do you think they are coming in such large numbers?

Patterson: Just for one purpose only. They want to create chaos and confusion and preferably riot. That's what they are driving for, and want to provoke it to such extent that they can then turn around and call on the United States Department of Justice to send six or eight hundred United States marshals to Mississippi as they did in Alabama. They are attempting to provoke and bring about that situation.

Morphew: How is it that the federal government can encourage or at least do nothing to discourage these wholesale violations of state laws?

Patterson: Frankly, it's beyond me to understand why they would do it. There can't be but one answer and that is it's the usual bid for the radical element of voters in this country. That and that alone.

Morphew: It should be pointed out that the Riders have not enjoyed a large acceptance among the Negro community in Mississippi, have they?

Patterson: That is very correct and be it said to the credit of the colored population of Mississippi that up to the present time not a one of the so-called Freedom Riders, and I don't call them Freedom Riders, I call them agitatin' Riders, but not a one of them has been a Mississippi nigra. They have all been outsiders and these wild-eyed radical whites that have come along with them.

Morphew: In conclusion, I would like to get a statement from you as to the state's position on these riders...will Mississippi laws continue to be enforced?

Patterson: Mississippi laws will continue to be enforced. They are not going to break us financially and they are not going to send them in in such numbers that they cannot be jailed somewhere in the state of Mississippi and jailed in a lawful manner when we do it.

Morphew: And will trouble, violence and disorder be prevented?

Patterson: It will be to the full extent of our law enforcement authorities' physical ability to prevent it. Of course they could keep on and adopt some other method and bring it about, but it won't be brought about with the sanction or the encouragement or the knowledge of law enforcement officers in our state.