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6516R – Race Relations in Mississippi

Guest: Ross Barnett

Morphew: Introduction...former governor of Mississippi...you have a very busy schedule and we're very grateful for your appearance...

Barnett: Dick, it's been my pleasure to participate in your program several times, and I'd like to say that it's been my privilege to travel throughout the length and breadth of America during the last few years. One thing that has impressed itself upon me throughout my travels and that is how similar the people of this great nation really are. No matter where they happen to live they're all about the same. The American people are about the same wherever you go. While our geographic location might present each of us with a different set of local problems it has been my observation that the vast majority of the American people when confronted with the same fundamental problems will arrive at similar conclusions as general rule.

Morphew: You have always made it a practice to accept as many speaking invitations in all parts of the country as you could...recently you've spoken to some college audiences up in Iowa

Barnett: Yes, and I received every courtesy that anyone would expect.

Morphew: Was one of those talks at the University of Iowa?

Barnett: Yes sir. I talked at the University of Iowa about 2 weeks ago and possibly a thousand people were turned away because there wasn't room in the auditorium for them to be seated. In fact, they are hungry to hear the message from the South.

Morphew: What did you tell them about the South's views on current social problems?

Barnett: Well, I told them that it would be meaningless for me to attempt to explain to the people of Iowa the deep feelings of the people of Mississippi on the matter of race relations without first pointing out that 42 percent of the people of our state are Negroes, the highest percentage in the United States. And likewise, I told them that I would submit that it would be an exercise of futility for the people of the state of Iowa, where the Negro population is less than one percent to attempt to tell the people of Mississippi how to solve our problems when we have 42 percent Negro population and the people of Iowa have less than one percent Negro population. I told the people that I was not up there to even tell them how to grow more and better corn, that they are experts at that. And I also told them that I doubted that anyone in the audience there at the University of Iowa was prepared to tell a Mississippi farmer how to grow more and better cotton. This is just good common sense and all I asked them to do was apply this same common sense rule to their thinking on other situations with great regional differences. I also told them that they were old enough and they had sense enough, that is the students, they'd had enough experience in life to realize that there are many problems which are absolutely incapable of instant solutions. In fact, you must live with many problems for quite a while before it's even possible to do any intelligent thinking about how to solve those problems, and I told them that the point I wanted to leave with them is that this statement is just as true when talking about race relations as it is in a discussion of raising corn or cotton.

Morphew: Did you find that the students in Iowa had a lot of misconceptions about the true state of affairs in Mississippi?

Barnett: I told them that I knew that many of them had been exposed to so much propaganda about Mississippi and the South that they probably thought that we were the backwater of civilization. And I also referred to some statistics. I asked them to just let me point out that contrary to what they've been hearing that the people of Mississippi are the most law abiding people in the United States and that is exactly right. According to the FBI records, Mississippi has the lowest crime rate of any other of the 49 states, and we are determined here in Mississippi to keep it that way. The people of Mississippi, I told them, have the highest percentage of church membership and the greatest number of churches for our population than any other state in the nation, and I told them we intend to keep it that way. And you know, they were surprised to hear that. Now, I told them also about the capital city of Jackson which is about the same size as their capital city, that is, Des Moines, Iowa. It has an overall educational level unsurpassed in the nation. The figures show that the adult residents of Jackson, Mississippi, both white and black, have completed an average of 12.1 grades of schooling. There are only four other cities in the nation which can even come close to equaling Jackson's percentage of college graduates, and those cities are Cambridge, Massachusetts, Madison, Wisconsin, and Pasadena and Berkley, California. So I told them that they could easily see that the people of Mississippi are well educated and we intend to keep it that way.

Morphew: You were asked about the state of race relations in Mississippi, what was your answer?

Barnett: Well, they always ask that question about race relations and I told them in substance that until all the communist inspired agitation began Mississippi actually enjoyed the best race relations of any other state in the nation. I told them that our white and colored citizens knew one another as individuals and that they cared about one another as individuals and despite all of the efforts to create ill will and hatred that I honestly believe that on a person to person basis that the people of Mississippi still have the most cordial race relations in the nation. And I told them that we are all going to try to keep it that way, both the white and the black.

Morphew: One question in many minds today is that of the voter registration bill being considered by congress, I'm sure you were asked many questions about this, could you summarize your reply?

Barnett: Yes, they brought that question up and I told them that despite the level of educational achievements in Mississippi, which I mentioned there, there is legislation now pending in the Congress which if adopted would absolutely deny Mississippi the right to proscribe reasonable standards of literacy which must be demonstrated by every applicant for registration as a voter. I told them that our voting qualification laws are sound and they are, that they have been upheld by the federal courts time and time again and there's no question about that. I told them that our registration officials understand that these laws must be administered fairly with no one placed under any undue burden, that all are to be treated alike. I told them that the record will show no proof whatsoever that any qualified applicant in Mississippi has ever been actually denied registration because of his color or his race or national origin. But whatever mistakes have been made, if any have been made, probably were errors of judgment by part time registrars. To put it in simple language, it is not that some qualified nigras have been denied the right to vote. It is probably a matter of some perhaps unqualified white applicants who have been registered to vote.

Morphew: Many people have said that this proposed bill is aimed at only a few southern states so why should people in the rest of the country be concerned about it?

Barnett: Well, we must remember that even though the backers of this voting law admit that it's aimed at only six southern states, once a precedent is established then it will be a simple matter for any power hungry, greedy, selfish politician in the future to amend such a law and to include any other state. And when I said that they might include the state of Iowa they seemed to be amazed.

Morphew: Our senior senator from Mississippi, James O. Eastland, who is chairman of the Internal Security Subcommittee has recently made a number of remarks in the Senate about the communist backgrounds of many of those who are leading the Negro revolution in Mississippi...

Barnett: I certainly agree with every word that Senator James O. Eastland said. Here's what he said, "The people of Mississippi have borne the brunt of the battle up to now. Mississippi has been the focal point of the communist drive for Negro revolution in this

country.” Now, I’m not saying that, but Jim Eastland’s saying that and I’m quoting word for word what he said, “and although, as I have pointed out,” he said, “the plans for the months ahead which have been made and which are being made by the communists and those they manipulate call for spreading their poison over a much wider area and lighting new fires of racial disorder in other southern states.” And he further said, “I know the people of Mississippi and I thank God that my knowledge of these people and of their character and of the strength of their beliefs gives me confidence that the people of Mississippi will not faint in the heat of the battle. Their courage will not ooze away. They will not become discouraged to the point where they throw in the sponge.” He further said that, “they will not quit and someday the people of this nation will come to realize that they owe the people of the state of Mississippi and to the people of other areas of the South who are now being called upon or who may soon be called upon to resist in their own communities the forces of racial hatred and violence and civil disorder which have been unleashed in the name of civil rights, but which serve most effectively the purposes and the objectives of the world communist conspiracy.” Those are words from Senator Jim Eastland.

Morphew: I know you share his sentiment that the people of Mississippi will not quit.

Barnett: I certainly share in his faith and in his belief and I think that he is a hundred percent correct.