



James Meredith wanted to become the first African-American to enroll at Ole Miss (situated in the segregated town of Oxford).

It wasn't an easy task, even after he obtained a court order—from the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, on September 24, 1962—allowing him to proceed. The governor of Mississippi opposed it - as did many others - which caused a showdown between state and federal authority.

On 30 September 1962, President Kennedy, pressured to take action allowing Meredith to enroll, dispatched federal law enforcement personnel to Ole Miss. Governor Ross Barnett, intent on preventing the enrollment, sent state troopers to the campus.

U.S. Marshal James McShane (on the left) and John Doar of the Justice Department (on the right) accompanied Meredith into the University on his first day of class (October 1, 1962). *TIME* magazine's report on the events—in its October 12, 1962 issue—is telling. The following is an excerpt from "Though the Heavens Fall" - the title of that story:

The campus was a nightmarish shambles, strewn with wrecked vehicles, hunks of concrete, countless tear-gas canisters, and the green chips of thousands of smashed Coke bottles. Oxford and its environs swarmed with soldiers - some 16,000 of them, more than the combined civilian population of town and university. As if making up for calling out troops belatedly, the Administration had finally called out far more than could possibly have been needed.

... Most of the attackers, operating in darkness as members of a mob, escaped not only injury but arrest. Marshals and MPs took about 200 prisoners, but most of them were soon released for lack of solid evidence. Of those prisoners, only 24 were Ole Miss students; another score or so were students from other Mississippi colleges and from Southwestern at Memphis College. The rest, pretty seedy specimens, were intruders who had nothing to do with any university. A dozen of them, including men from Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Tennessee and Texas as well as Mississippi, were arraigned on charges of insurrection, seditious conspiracy and other serious offenses.

The riots, over Meredith's efforts to desegregate Ole Miss, preceded the Cuban Missile Crisis by just a few weeks.

Undaunted by the riots, or by other problems in the strife-tossed country over which he presided, JFK still had peace as one of his goals. After all, as he once noted, it takes time and struggle to get there:

Peace is a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually changing opinions, slowly eroding old barriers, quietly building new structures.

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James Meredith attending Ole Miss on October 1, 1962 - from the U.S. National Archives, online courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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