"THE PLAQUEMINE STORY"
A Question of Law and Order

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THE PLAQUEMINÉ STORY

Until late in the summer of 1963, Plaquemine, La., was a peaceful, happy river town of around 8,000, with probably no more nor fewer problems than most American communities its size.

Certainly not among its problems was that of race relations, as both white and colored had long enjoyed life there in an atmosphere of mutual regard and of general prosperity.

Overnight, that atmosphere changed to one of bitterness and violence that made national headlines, including some that painted a distorted picture.

Disturbed by that picture, such Plaquemine leaders as city and other officials, businessmen, labor members and others decided to tell the real story.

Within their limited budget, they presented that story on television, with Col. E. Monnet Lanier, retired businessmen, as their spokesman.

As a public service, especially to citizens of other communities which might become "targets," the script of that television show is presented here by the Louisiana State Sovereignty Commission, Baton Rouge, La.

THE PLAQUEMINÉ STORY

"A QUESTION OF LAW AND ORDER"

(A Statement of Principles by the Responsible Citizens of the City of Plaquemine and Iberville Parish. Col. E. M. Lanier, Spokesman)

Until a very short time ago, Plaquemine, La., was generally unknown to the balance of the United States.

Those who had occasion to know of the city usually retained the impression of a typical small Louisiana city, wrestling with the normal problems that affect municipalities all over the United States, and, perhaps, all over the world.

One problem that Plaquemine did not have was a race problem, and in this respect it was more fortunate than many other communities in the nation.

Negroes had no problem in voting. Qualified Negroes registered and voted along with qualified whites. The percentage of Negroes registered in Iberville parish, where Plaquemine is located, is the fourth highest of all Louisiana's sixty-four parishes.

As of July 31, 1963, about 30 percent of all registered voters in Iberville parish were colored. The state-wide average for colored registration in Louisiana is less than 14 percent.

In many neighborhoods in Plaquemine white and colored live side by side. There is one single hospital in Plaquemine and its doors open to the sick and the infirm without regard for color. There is one practicing Negro physician in Plaquemine and he treats his patients in this 65-bed hospital.

Negroes enjoy a measure of economic opportunity that is rare in most communities. There are three Negro deputy sheriffs in Iberville parish. Two have been on the force for five years and the third has been employed for one year.
There has never been a single lawsuit in Iberville Parish involving civil rights or any other matter relating to race. We have never had a race riot or other demonstration of friction between white and colored.

We have had the equivalent of a bi-racial committee for many years, long before it became the fashion to create one. Our city and parish officials have never refused to meet with any group of citizens -- colored or white -- to discuss grievances. The right of citizens to petition their government is guaranteed by The Constitution, and we in Plaquemine have a traditional and abiding respect for The Constitution and for law and order.

Until June Third, this arrangement functioned well. It functioned in an atmosphere free from intimidation or coercion. On June Third, our city and parish officials received an ultimatum demanding that it accede to certain demands from three Negro organizations; the Iberville Industrial Voters League; the Congress of Racial Equality and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Here is one of these documents:

"We the undersigned organizations of Iberville Parish representing the Negroes of Iberville Parish, hereby appeal to you as our public elected official to commence taking initial steps to set up a Bi-Racial Committee on community relations in order to avoid civil domestic disturbances of racial tension and violence.

"We further request that the committee be composed of any white citizens that you desire, however, we reserve the right to submit an equal number of Negro citizens to serve on such a committee. We submit the subsequent aims as the primary objectives of the organizations:

"1. Desegregation of courthouse facilities.
"2. Equal job opportunities.
"3. Desegregation of entire Public School System.
"4. Desegregation of Public Accommodations, (to include Lunch Counters, Theaters, Parish Fair, etc.)
"5. Desegregation of Recreational Facilities.

"We respectively suggest the public officials be composed of the City Councilmen, School Board members, Police Jury members and other elected leaders of both races for a careful evaluation of this proposed resolution. Due to the fact of the pressing need of such a committee we urgently request action not later than June 15, 1963."

Now let me emphasize that this document calls for (and I quote) "action not later than June 15, 1963." It further states that this is to be done "to avoid civil domestic disturbances of racial tension and violence."

This was the first indication we in Plaquemine had that the colored people were being incited to abandon the traditional lines of communication between the races -- an arrangement that had worked well for both races.

Our officials had to bend to the threat of violence or reject the petition. It was rejected. Had our officials bowed to this ultimatum, our government would have placed itself at the mercy of any pressure group that came along, and eventually the conduct of our public affairs would have been determined by the strongest mob in existence at the time.

No government -- city, parish, state or national -- can afford to be-intimidated into bargaining.

Later, during the month of July, Negroes began to picket two retail establishments in the City of Plaquemine. This picketing is still going on and there has been no move to interfere with it.

On August 11, a group of Negroes attempted to ignore a segregated seating arrangement on the Plaquemine ferry which crosses the Mississippi River to the opposite bank. A disturbance followed and the participants were jailed.

Four days later, on August 15, there began the first of a series of events that would make the next two weeks a nightmare for every citizen of Plaquemine. We had already been made district headquarters for the Congress of Racial Equality. We figured prominently in what this group referred to as its "Louisiana Summer Project." Our town was flooded with negroes and whites, too, whom we
had never seen before. Whatever their mission, the net effect was to inflame, to incite and to strain to the breaking point the fine relations we had previously enjoyed between the races.

Our people were to be repaid for our tolerance and the genuine efforts we had made to provide opportunities for our colored people. We were to be repaid by a reign of terror such as we had never before experienced.

Ironically, it became general knowledge that it was precisely because Plaquemine had shown such extreme tolerance in the past that it had been selected as the setting for the demonstrations that were to occur later.

On August 15, a group of 250 Negroes marched on the parish jail. This march, like the others that were to follow, was accomplished late at night, under the cover of darkness, when citizens were asleep in their homes. This march, like the others that followed it, was supposedly to petition public officials. But it should be apparent to anyone that public facilities -- city halls, court houses and jails -- are normally closed to the public after dark.

The marchers converged on the jail. They chanted and shouted. They were met by the sheriff who asked them to disperse and who explained that it was impossible to visit the jail at that late hour.

The following day a group visited the mayor's office and delivered a typewritten, unsigned list of demands. This document was not publicly endorsed by the three Negro organizations that had sponsored the earlier petition. This petition was attributed to a "Citizens Committee," which to this date is unidentified. Here are the demands:

"To the Mayor and City Officials:

"The citizens of Seymourville and Dupont Annex make the following proposals to the Officials of the Town of Plaquemine, La.;"

"1. That the above mention (sic) areas be included in the improvement program as mentioned in the Iberville South on August 15, 1963, Page 1, Column 4.

"2. Reduction of Utility Bills.
   a. Service Charge
   b. Gas Rate
   c. Electricity Rates

"3. Employment of Non-White Citizens in City Hall above the mop and broom levels.
"On the above mention (sic) proposals the City Officials of the Town of Plaquemine are given 24 hours to answer."

Once again, city officials were told in effect to knuckle under -- "or else." Once again, the city officials refused to act under threat.

On August 19, three days later, James Farmer, of New York, the national director of the Congress of Racial Equality appeared in Plaquemine to participate in what CORE officially termed the "Louisiana Summer Project."

That same night, 800 demonstrators, led by Farmer, marched on the city hall. They sang, they shouted, they obstructed traffic and they overturned garbage cans. To cope with this mob the city could muster only the law enforcement contingent of the city of Plaquemine and of Iberville parish -- a total of less than 50 men.

The demonstrating mob advanced on and to the city hall. The mob began to get out of hand. Violence was imminent. The mob was dispersed.

The demonstrators moved away several blocks and regrouped, then they advanced on the city hall a second time. They were again dispersed. They proceeded to march yet another time and it was only when the state police arrived on the scene at about one a.m. that the mob finally dispersed.
The following morning -- Tuesday, August 20th -- a group of Negroes called upon the Mayor to insist that he accept the ultimatum delivered four days earlier. The group, led by Dr. Tyson, Plaquemine's only Negro physician, who practices with his white colleagues in Plaquemine's only hospital, was told that the city council would not meet until August 29, nine days later.

Dr. Tyson's reply was: "There won't be a Plaquemine by August 29."

The following day a restraining order, prohibiting further demonstrations, was issued by Federal Judge E. Gordon West. In spite of this court order the demonstrations continued -- one on the court house and one on the city hall. The marchers refused to disperse when requested and it was necessary for peace officers to break up the demonstration.

The next few days were consumed by a series of legal maneuvers. On Thursday, August 29, the restraining order prohibiting demonstrations was suspended by two judges of the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals. Saturday, August 31, two days later, the restraining order expired.

That Saturday night, after ten o'clock and under cover of darkness, an estimated 150 demonstrators marched on and to within one block of the home of Iberville parish sheriff C. A. Griffon, Jr. Now, I would have you understand that the target of this march was not a governmental building. It was not public property. This was a home, and the mob marched through a residential district to seek out a public official. The sheriff was not in his home at the time and when word reached him that the mob was headed in that direction, he called his wife and told her to leave immediately.

State and local police intercepted the marchers and dispersed them.

What happened the following night, Sunday, September 1st, has saddened the hearts of every responsible person in Plaquemine and should cause every person in our nation -- white or colored -- to think seriously about the question: Just what does constitute law and order? It was a dramatic demonstration of democracy versus mobocracy. Tempers ran high. Emotions were clouded. News of that night's happenings have been garbled, sometimes inaccurate and in many cases, the accounts have contradicted each other.

Here are some of the things that happened last Sunday night. And here, too, are some of the things that did not happen:

A second restraining order had been issued by the federal court prohibiting demonstrations. This order was not the making of the City of Plaquemine or of Iberville Parish. Nor was it the making of the State of Louisiana. It was a federal order.

The leaders of the mob had been served this restraining order. In direct defiance of it, demonstrators massed and marched in front of the court house. No action was taken by police officers on hand. Only when the mob regrouped and marched on the court house a second time did sheriff's deputies and city and state police move to disperse the demonstrators.

The mob hurled bricks, bottles and other objects at officers. The officers retaliated with tear gas. The mob began to retreat, still throwing bricks and other things. A butcher knife was dropped by one of the demonstrators as he retreated.

Some of the demonstrators ran for cover into houses where the doors were locked and the lights then turned out. Police followed them in hot pursuit.

Electric prods, which do no bodily harm but which are effective in these circumstances, were used to disperse the mob and restore law and order. Some have questioned the use of these devices, explaining that they were designed for use on cattle and not human beings. Perhaps they would prefer that bayonets or clubs be used.

Some may question whether peace officers should have used some of the tactics that were used. There are 20 law enforcement personnel who were there that night, and who still carry the marks of flying bricks and bottles, who would challenge that question.
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Much has been said about the role of the Plymouth Rock Baptist Church (a Negro church) in the action last Sunday night. One television station said the church was "desecrated" by tear gas and water from firemen's hoses.

We in Plaquemine will agree that the church was desecrated. However, it was not desecrated by tear gas and water. The desecration came hours earlier when the church was converted into a command post and a base of operations for what was to follow.

Four walls do not make a church. Its essential ingredients are love, and a desire to live at peace with one's fellow men.

But love had fled from the Plymouth Rock Baptist Church. Peace was declared expendable and this building served only to provide cover for a howling, cursing, catcalling, brick-and-bottle-throwing mob that had lost reason, perspective and direction.

Perhaps all of us would do well to place ourselves in the places of the men who were called upon to stand up to that mob Sunday night. These uniformed men were not in Plaquemine to start violence. They were there to avoid it, if possible, and to quell it if not. They were not there to breach the peace, but to preserve it, or, failing that, to restore it. None of them had any taste for the job that faced them. But they did have a duty and they did it; and, I might add, they did it well.

For those who might have forgotten, this is the same state police that was commended by the federal government for its spectacular work when two chlorine barges were safely removed from the Mississippi River near Natchez. This is the same state police force whose prompt action in assisting communities devastated by Hurricane Carla saved untold numbers of lives. This is the same state police force that has reduced traffic fatalities on Louisiana's highways to an all-time low.

The municipal police force and the sheriff's deputies are the same groups of men that have kept the peace in Plaquemine and have insured that justice is dispensed according to a man's conduct and not his color.

The sheriff of Iberville parish is the same sheriff who has served as president of the Louisiana Sheriffs Association and of the National Sheriffs Association. He has been judged by his peers and has been selected to lead. And the force under his direction is an integrated police force.

Many of you may ask: "Where does Plaquemine go from here?"

We in Plaquemine are asking: "Where does mankind go from here?"

Are we to degenerate to a level where law and order have no real meaning for our people? Are we to criticize qualified law enforcement personnel for restoring peace while we commend the ruffians and the hooligans who break it? Will we issue citations for valor to those who incite men to violence while we censure those who deal with that violence?

This is a question for all of us to answer.

We in Plaquemine have answered it already. The law-abiding people of our parish, Negro and white, have answered it. We will preserve the peace and we will not be intimidated by violence or the threat of violence.

The officials of the city of Plaquemine and the parish of Iberville are willing to sit down with any citizen or any group of citizens and discuss grievances. But we will not negotiate with a group of roving agitators who feed on headlines and who have demonstrated a peculiar sense of irresponsibility that makes them mortal enemies of peace, tranquility and order.

Our solutions must come from within ourselves. We ask no assistance from any who will not have to live with those solutions or abide by the decisions.

Just as Sunday night's demonstrations brought out the worst in some, it brought out the best in others. If there were 800 demonstrators of the colored race who believed in mob action, then let us not forget that there were many, many times that number who remained in their homes.
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Let us not forget that the white citizens of Iberville Parish -- although strained almost beyond human endurance -- have not been involved in a single incident.

While news media have tried to cover conditions factually, there are some who have allowed their own emotions to becloud their cool journalistic judgment.

We in Plaquemine are sick at heart that our community has been chosen by outsiders for this disgusting episode. But we are still firm in our conviction that law and order must prevail, and nothing will shake that conviction.

Among those citizens and officials appearing on the program and who signed a copy of the script were: Col. E. Monnot Lanier, retired businessman; Charles P. Schnebelen, Mayor of Plaquemine; Edward T. Supple, President, Iberville Parish Police Jury; J. E. Jumonville, state representative, Iberville Parish; C. A. Griffon, Jr., Iberville Parish Sheriff; Warren J. Herbert, Jr., member, Plaquemine City Council; Agnes Grace Grant, President, Plaquemine Iberville Chamber of Commerce, Dennis Songy, Chief of Police, Plaquemine; Carlton J. Bourgeois, President, Plaquemine Lions Club; J. M. Marque, banker; Archie Callais, member, Plaquemine City Council; C. F. Bean, contractor; J. A. Nadler, businessman; Wm. O. Templet, attorney; J. Evan Delahaye, attorney; W. Dale Barbay, Iberville post No. 167, American Legion; Robert A. Nadler, businessman; E. B. Schwing, Jr., businessman; Stanley R. Hebert, Iberville Lodge, Intl. Assn. of Machinists; W. B. Middleton, Jr., attorney; Theresa J. Delacroix, clerk of court, Iberville parish; Paul G. Borron, Jr, attorney; Sprague Pugh, banker.

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