

RACES

A Southern Tragedy

For a time, it looked like nothing more serious than a bit of virulent '60s nostalgia. All the basic props were there at Louisiana's predominantly black Southern University: the band of students occupying the administration building, the crowd milling about on the lawn, the stolid cops in riot gear wielding nightsticks and absorbing epithets. Right on cue a miasma of tear gas blanketed the tableau, screams pierced the air and the players scattered. When the smoke cleared, however, the scene was not another Berkeley or Harvard, but was somewhat more reminiscent of Kent State or Jackson State. Lying dead on the ground were two 20-year-old black students, Denver A. Smith of New Roads, La., and Leonard D. Brown of Gilbert, La.

Initially, at least, authorities could not even determine whether the two men died of gunshot wounds or shrapnel from tear-gas canisters. Some 200 lawmen, including state policemen and Sheriff Al Amiss' deputies, had set up a U-shaped cordon in front of the administration building that about 200 students had occupied. The officers were armed with both shotguns and tear-gas canisters; but television film suggested that it was the students who tossed the first tear-gas bombs. Both Amiss and the state police claim that their men fired no shots, only tear gas, while students insisted that the shots had to come from the troopers. No one was really sure. As Amiss admitted: "There were no orders. There was just confusion."

Trouble had been building on the Baton Rouge campus for weeks. One of the largest black universities in the country (11,000 enrollment, including the New Orleans campus), Southern has

been the scene of a widespread student boycott for the past three weeks. The student demands included better living conditions, a greater voice in university affairs and the ouster of President Leon Netterville, whom many consider an aging Uncle Tom. Last week, in simultaneous predawn raids, police arrested four student leaders—three men and a woman—on charges of criminal mischief for breaking into the school gymnasium and holding a massive protest rally.

News of the arrests carried quickly and students gathered before the administration building. A group of them knocked on President Netterville's door, demanding to know why the four had been arrested. Netterville, according to the students, said he would try to find out. The students occupied the building, they said, to await his return. Instead they found themselves confronted by the troopers called out by the president. Governor Edwin Edwards, who later ordered up the National Guard, said in defense of his action: "We cannot agree to let them have control of the campus, as they insist they want. And we cannot agree to give them Dr. Netterville's head."

The Governor got a lot more than he had bargained for. Citing Coroner Hypolite Landry's report, Edwards announced that the two young blacks had been killed by buckshot that "possibly" could have come from police shotguns. Since there were what he termed obvious "discrepancies and inconsistencies" in the various accounts of the shootings, Edwards asked for an investigation by the state attorney general. The FBI also was ordered into the case. Whatever the answer was, it meant still more tension and bitterness for Southern University. Governor Edwards judiciously suspended classes until at least after the Thanksgiving holiday.

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