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Lawlessness in Mississippi

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The confidence of students and blacks in the impartiality of the law cannot have been increased by the latest denial of justice in Mississippi. A county grand jury investigating the killing of two Negro youths at Jackson State College last May by local police officers and state highway patrolmen has concluded that the officers "had a right and were justified."

The shooting into a student dormitory is justified on the feeble pretext that "at least two shots from a small caliber pistol" were reportedly fired at the police from an upper window. Even if these shots were fired, and that is in dispute, no competent police officer with dozens of men at his command would order the shooting up of a crowded dormitory without first trying many other less drastic methods for bringing the situation under control.

The jury's fundamental misconception of the meaning of law and order is candidly set forth: "When people . . . engage in civil disorders and riots, they must expect to be injured or killed when law enforcement officers are required to re-establish order."

On the contrary, society has a right to expect that when police have to cope with a difficult situation they will use the minimum—not the maximum—of force necessary and that they will bear in mind the maturity of the lawbreakers and the particular circumstances of the case. A police badge is not a hunting license to shoot blacks. When a grand jury acts as if there were no restraints on the police and condones police recklessness, it undermines the lawful order it is sworn to defend.

Fortunately, Mississippi is no longer quite the closed world it once was. There is hope that the Federal grand jury which is also looking into the case will make a more searching and critical inquiry.