

White Conspiracy in the Mississippi Delta: The Trials and Triumph of Eddie James Carthan

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Book Overview

On October 19, 1982, Eddie James Carthan, among the first Black mayors to be elected since Reconstruction in a biracial town in the Mississippi Delta, went on trial for his life. For refusing to be the white power structure's "good little boy," he was accused of ordering the murder of his "political rival" and of planning a bank robbery to finance payments to the hired killers. This culminated a four-year period of harassment by the white supremacist power structure designed to make his governing impossible. Despite the state's extraordinary efforts to secure a conviction, including—according to Amnesty International—subornation of perjury, an all-Black jury acquitted Carthan after the longest and most dramatic trial in Holmes County's history. This book relates the gripping tale of prosecutorial misconduct in post-civil rights Mississippi and the dramatic multiracial civil and human rights campaign that rallied to Carthan's defense. In *White Conspiracy in the Mississippi Delta*, I take readers into the Mississippi Delta, the heart of the Old South, a land of fierce contradictions and dark secrets, where the appearance of racial progress hides widespread political corruption and where America's "original sin" is dressed up in new clothes. The ramifications of Carthan's story, however, extended far beyond his poverty-stricken town of Tchula, Mississippi, possibly up to the highest levels of the federal government, as well as to the New York headquarters of the United Methodist Church.

I have written this book as a participant in the events surrounding Eddie Carthan's several trials, as I served on his national support committee. Among the questions the book seeks to answer are the following:

- Why would the State of Mississippi go to such extraordinary lengths to send the young Black mayor of a tiny Black majority town in one of the poorest counties in the country to the gas chamber?
- After he had already been convicted on three trumped up charges, what enabled him to be acquitted on a charge of murder?
- Why would this case precipitate a major crisis in the national United Methodist Church?
- How is this story, which takes place in the early 1980s, related to the Ku Klux Klan murder of three civil rights workers in the 1960s?

The story is woven of five motifs. The **first motif** is the story of a complex racial and class struggle in the Delta. In Tchula (81 percent Black), the town served by Carthan, full implementation of the liberal reforms of the civil rights era took on the character of revolutionary threats to the long-standing system of white control. The book describes the effect Mayor Carthan's election had on the Black population of Tchula and surrounding towns, his accomplishments as mayor, and the tensions that emerged among Blacks when Carthan's administration became the object of a white supremacist campaign to drive him from office.

The **second motif** examines the historical and political significance of the Carthan story which some have compared to the Scottsboro case of the 1930s and to the overthrow of Reconstruction a century earlier. It serves as an example of attempts by Blacks to achieve economic and political self-determination in areas where they are numerically strong and exemplifies the nature of the white backlash that has often arisen whenever these efforts promise success. Carthan's case is one of the most extreme examples of a nationwide campaign of harassment directed at Black elected officials who came into office because of the gains of the Civil Rights Movement.

The **third motif** is the story of the murder and the trial that followed. This part of the story reads like a fast-paced action thriller with masked gunmen, a dramatic car chase, gunfire and explosions, a hunt for two of the gunmen who fled into the woods, and a district attorney who was willing to send an innocent man to the gas chamber in exchange for greatly reduced sentences for the two killers. While Carthan's supporters assumed this was a simple civil rights case, investigation of the circumstances surrounding the murder suggested a more sinister reason for the state's effort to send Carthan to the gas chamber: namely, the existence of a large drug trafficking operation run by prominent whites that Carthan's appointment of his own police chief threatened to expose.

The **fourth motif** explores the people and organizations who came to Eddie Carthan's defense, the strategies they used, and the difficulties they encountered. These included local and national leaders and organizations in the civil rights, labor, legal, and religious communities.

The **fifth motif** concerns one of the most contentious debates within the 9.5 million-member United Methodist Church since its division over slavery. This controversy arose over the national church's support for the effort to assure justice for Eddie Carthan, marking it as a crucial juncture in the denomination's current split into two separate churches. The opposition of white Mississippi United Methodists known to be hostile to Carthan's defense, resulted in the loss of my job with the church, the suppression of a major study by the denomination's Committee to Eliminate Racism under threat of blackmail, and the weakening of the church's social justice ministries.

Why This Book is Important

Although the events in this book happened more than forty years ago, the story is relevant to what is happening today in our national political climate. It shows how America's "original sin," once thought to be behind us, keeps reoccurring in new guises. Undergirded by a culture of racism and misogyny, all the elements of Carthan's story are in place today. Moreover, my book contains new evidence that links Carthan's story to the KKK murder of the three civil rights workers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, in Mississippi during Freedom Summer, as well as to a vast religious right-wing surveillance network bent on destroying the social justice ministries of the liberal Protestant denominations. Readers will come away with a clearer understanding of how patterns of oppression operate both historically and in the contemporary world.