Civil lion

Attorney John Doar battled for equal rights. By Diane McWhorter

***A righteous man:** As an attorney in the civil rights division of the U.S. Justice Department, John Doar, J.D. '49, escorted James Meredith to class at the formerly segregated University of Mississippi. Nearly a year later, he helped quell a black riot following the assassination of civil rights leader Medgar Evers. He also helped draft the Voting Rights Act of 1965. At 85, he remains in private practice in New York.*

Photographed in his New York office by Jeff Jacobson.

JOHN DOAR ARRIVED LATE AT A PARTY ON THE Upper East Side of Manhattan a few years back, and upon spotting his tall, gray, and eternally reassuring form, women in the room began screaming. Such a reaction is rare outside the entertainment-industrial complex and 12-to-18 demographic, but then Doar is the man of little girls' dreams, the charismatic rescuer. No one who writes about him can resist the compulsion to invoke Gary Cooper. Albeit a lawyer, Doar is the last, lone moral man, the avatar of grace under pressure.

High Noon was in Jackson, Mississippi, on June 15, 1963, at the terrifying height of the civil rights movement—and 14 years after Doar's graduation from Boalt Hall. A very white, Northern-born lawyer from the U.S. Justice Department, Doar had spent the previous three years in the darkest heart of American apartheid, traveling the mean byways of the segregated South to eke affidavits out of disenfranchised blacks in order to sue the local voter registrars. His oracle in Mississippi was Medgar Evers of the NAACP, who had spread maps on his kitchen table to show Doar the remote rural addresses of black farmers willing to risk their lives to vote. Now Evers himself was dead at 37, shot in the back shortly after midnight on June 11 by a downwardly mobile fertilizer salesman.

After Evers's dignitary-studded funeral the following Saturday, June 15, younger black activists singing, "Before I'd be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave," and then shouting "We want the killer!" mounted a challenge to riot-gun-toting policemen and their dogs blockading them from Jackson's "white" business district. Doar emerged from a nearby café into an escalating melee, and "shifting slightly now and then to dodge bottles and brickbats," *The New York Times* reported, strode into the middle of Farish Street. Eminently targetable at six-foot-two-and-a-half, he raised his arms, shirtsleeves rolled up, and yelled "Hold it" to a hostile audience numbering approximately 1,000, some of whom seemed ready to start a race war with the police. "My name is John Doar—D-O-A-R. I'm from the Justice Department, and anybody around here knows I stand for what is right," he said. After he enlisted a civil rights organizer he recognized to help him wage nonviolence, as Doar now explains, "it stopped." Although history would romanticize the scene as a cinematic convergence of destinies, the United States government in consort with the civil rights movement, Doar insists, "It was no big deal, it really wasn't."

And it wasn't, compared with the international-news-making white riot in Mississippi the previous September, when the Kennedy administration had to send in the Army to quell the bloody insurrection greeting James Meredith's desegregation of the state university. That Sunday night, as the new student's handler from Justice, Doar had taken the dorm room adjoining Meredith's, on a campus melting down in teargas, Molotov cocktails, and rifle fire that ultimately ended two lives. The next morning he escorted Meredith to the registrar in a bullet-pocked government car, and he would remain at Ole Miss for weeks—the kind of hardship duty that prompted Doar's boss, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, to refer to him as "the best Republican in the country."

Doar (whose small-town Wisconsin background Kennedy also found quaintly amusing) had been tapped in 1960, at age 38, to take over the number-two position in the civil rights division of the Eisenhower Justice Department—a less-than-coveted job "they couldn't give away to anybody at Harvard and Yale.... They had to settle for someone from the sticks, a rube," says Doar, who had been captain of the basketball team at Princeton. His Southern classmates there had always insisted that the South would solve its own problems and now, more than 15 years later, in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education* and Emmett Till and Rosa Parks, the segregationists had only dug in their heels. And so did Doar agree to play Marshal Dillon (his other press-assigned alter ego) in the South's legendary civil rights showdowns of the 1960s.

In addition to voting rights, Doar specialized in prosecuting homicidal white supremacists: the mob that torched a busload of Freedom Riders traveling integrated through Alabama in 1961; the Klansmen (accompanied, if not abetted, by an FBI informant) who gunned down the white activist Viola Liuzzo at the end of the Selma-to-Montgomery March of 1965. His valedictory, in 1967, was the notorious "Mississippi Burning" trial. By now head of the civil rights division, he won miraculous guilty verdicts (under federal Reconstruction-era statutes) against some of the Klan-police conspirators in the execution of Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andy Goodman during the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964. Doar's devastating closing arguments ("not delivered very well," he demurs) were modeled on the prosecution's statements at the Nuremberg trials.

In 1974, Doar vindicated his slain boss's sardonic praise of him as the country's shining Republican. The chief counsel for the House Judiciary Committee's inquiry into Watergate, he imposed formidable discipline and a sense of historic mission on a staff of around 40 lawyers—one of them the young Yale law graduate Hillary Rodham—and, on July 19, backed by 36 volumes' worth of findings, recommended the impeachment of President Richard M. Nixon ("I'm sure I voted for him," he says). The "awesomeness" of the deed, he told the committee, rendered him hardly able to "believe I am speaking as I do or thinking as I do."

Out of all his good-versus-evil anti-star turns, the scene Doar's memory returns to most often is the long line of black citizens at the Sugar Shack, a tiny polling place outside Selma, Alabama, waiting patiently to vote in their first local election following the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965: the fulfillment of his behind-the-scenes leg- and paperwork. The Gary Cooper stuff, by contrast, doesn't much impress Doar, who continues, at 85, to report regularly to his private law office in lower Manhattan. "He said 'shucks' a lot, didn't he?" he says slyly, noting that one of his high school English teachers considered Cooper the worst actor. Deflecting credit, of course, is the soul of the myth.

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