Civil lion

Attorney John Doar battled for equal rights. By Diane McWhorter
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 com-
plex 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 move-
ment—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 blocking them from
Jackson’s “white” business district. Doar emerged from a
nearby café into an escalating melee, 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 Jus-
tice 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 des-
tinies, the United States government in consort with the
Klan-police conspirators in the execution of 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 ver-
dicts (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 coun-
sel for the House Judiciary Committee’s inquiry into Water-
gate, 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 out-
side 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 Manhat-
tan. “He said ‘shucks’ a lot, didn’t he?” he says slyly, not-
ing that one of his high school English teachers considered
Cooper the worst actor. Deflecting credit, of course, is the
soul of the myth.

Diane McWhorter is the author of Carry Me Home: Bir-
mingham, Alabama, the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights
Revolution, which was awarded the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for
General Nonfiction.