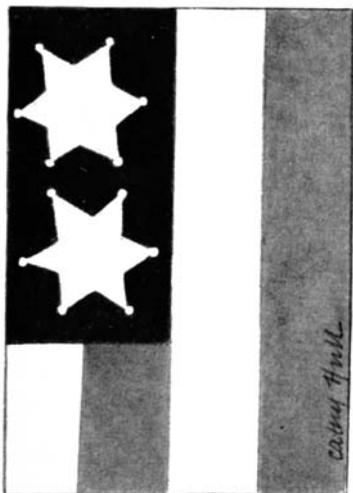


States of the Union

SHERIFFS NORTH AND SOUTH

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



"Then the Sheriff turned away with a sore and troubled heart, and sadly he rued his fine show of retainers, for he saw that . . . he had so many men about him and yet could not enforce the laws."—from *THE MERRY ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD*

THE ELECTION this year was to be the one that would stamp out Crime In The Streets. So, given the no-nonsense, no-knock mood of many voters, I

was both pleased and alarmed to hear that two of my more sensible friends had decided to run for sheriff (in two very different counties). I tried to keep track of their respective campaigns.

One of the candidates was my fellow townsman, Harvey Goslee, a white-haired, craggy-faced Yankee who hoped to dislodge the Republican sheriff of Fairfield County, Connecticut (population: 720,000). Fairfield County is not exactly a Democratic stronghold: it is one of the 10 richest counties in America. But Goslee, a retired publisher of political science textbooks, was counting on a strenuous campaign, and perhaps a general Democratic tide, to pull him through. The Reverend Joseph Duffey, that remarkable maverick of reform, was running for U.S. Senator, and state Democrats prayed he was wearing long coattails.

Goslee's big challenge was to stir up public interest in an office that seemed lackluster, to say the least. The sheriff's responsibilities in Connecticut had been whittled down to such relatively minor tasks as transporting prisoners from place to

place, protecting juries from corruption and disposing of abandoned automobiles. Goslee hoped to inject prestige into the office with his slogan, "The sheriff's job is as big as the man who holds it."

But the man who held it, Sheriff John P. Previdi, remained invisible. His campaign consisted almost entirely of billboard advertising around the county. "Come out from behind those billboards," Goslee kept saying to a presumed Previdi. (Billboards are expensive, but since the sheriff's office is a source of patronage, campaign funds are always available. Previdi appoints 45 deputies; they are mainly process-servers, and they get a fee for every process they serve. The deputies pay for the billboards.)

The other friend I worried about was John Hulett, a black man running for sheriff on an all-black ticket in Lowndes County, Alabama (population: 15,000). Black registered voters there heavily outnumber white voters (about 4,000 to 2,000); but black voters do not necessarily vote. Lowndes County is one of the 10 poorest counties in America. Hulett's most powerful oppon-

ents clearly were poverty, apathy and fear.

Both Hulett and Goslee were pursuing an ancient and (sometimes) honorable profession. The office of sheriff is probably the oldest law-enforcement institution in the Western world. It was invented in the fifth century by the Saxons and Angles, businesslike invaders of England who established "shire-reeves" there for the sake of law and order. In the intervening 1,500 years the job has seldom been a call to greatness—John Wayne may be an exception—but as every black American knows, it has remained largely a WASP preserve.

In the South, sheriffs loom large and threatening, like old Saxon gods. A prayer-poem, reputed to have been spoken by black slaves in Georgia, contains the lines:

*... And let the blessin' stay wid
us until we comes to die
And goes to keep our Christmas
wid dem sheriffs in de sky.*

Lowndes County—or "bloody Lowndes," as the blacks sometimes call it—is the very model of law and order: Blacks obey the law and whites give the orders. In 1965 Klanners there gunned down Mrs. Viola Gregg Liuzzi, a civil rights worker from Detroit. The sheriff said it was a most mystifying crime.

Two years ago a white man killed a Negro hunting on the white man's property. "Shot him down like a rabbit," a black neighbor recalls. Sheriff John B. Julian, the man Hulett ran against, pressed no charges and made no arrests.

Crimes against blacks in Lowndes County are generally ignored. Last spring, during a scuffle at an all-black dance, two men shot into the crowd and killed an elderly man. Sheriff Julian did not even bother to investigate. (The notion that crimes committed against blacks are too trivial to bother about is neither new nor strictly Southern. Years ago, as a cub police reporter in Chicago, I

telephoned my city editor and gave him the details of a sensational rape story. He was impressed, until I told him the victim's address. "That's a colored section," he growled. "Don't waste my time with cheap stories.")

It was against this backdrop of despair and gore that John Hulett announced his candidacy. Hulett is a 42-year-old civil rights worker and construction man, a quiet, professional militant who has few political illusions. In 1966, while Stokeley Carmichael was shouting Black Power throughout the South, Hulett organized the original Black Panther party. The idea quickly traveled north, and lost its ideology en route. But in Lowndes the Black Panthers remained nonviolent, pragmatic and essentially political.

Two years ago Hulett merged his Black Panthers with the New Democratic Party of Alabama (NDPA). It was under the NDPA banner that he ran for sheriff. "My biggest problem," he now says, "was to convince my friends that I wouldn't be killed if they elected me. They figured they were doing me a favor by staying away from the polls."

His second biggest problem was to convince blacks that the ballot was *secret*. "They were afraid the white folks would know how they voted," he says. "They didn't want to take that chance." Hulett traveled thousands of miles up and down the county—knocking on shack doors, hiking through the fields to chat with farmworkers—trying to drum up support. "We got the votes," he kept saying. "We've got to stop letting the white folks be our crutch." By election eve Hulett was convinced he would win.

MEANWHILE, back in Connecticut, Harvey Goslee was fighting billboards. He campaigned everywhere—at the Danbury Fair, at horse shows in Darien and Greenwich, at shopping centers and garden clubs, even at town hall weddings. In one town, Goslee found himself passing out

literature to startled women at a reducing salon. "I saw them being pummeled," he says in disbelief.

Goslee also managed to develop some issues. Since the sheriff is empowered to clear away abandoned automobiles and dead cows, Goslee pledged to lead a countywide anti-litter campaign. He also called for teenage drug education, better-trained sheriff's deputies and bail reform.

Alas, his efforts proved fruitless. Goslee lost the election by 55,000 votes. Instead of a Democratic tide, there was a Republican tidal wave. Duffey lost, too, and he had no coattails. In Fairfield County, Goslee ran 13,000 votes ahead of Duffey.

A few days after the election, I called Hulett to find out what had happened. "We won," he said. "I'll be the new sheriff in January." A friend chimed in, "It's a new day in Lowndes County. The cagebird has been released." The vote was close—2,078 for Hulett, 1,868 for Julian—but it was large enough to sweep in the black candidates for coroner and circuit court clerk who were running with Hulett on the NDPA ticket.

Hulett says he will appoint two deputies—one black, one white—and that he will uphold the law with fine impartiality. Julian, however, continues to "do his thing." He is alleged to have muttered that before he departs, "they'll know who their sheriff is." Indeed, the day after the election there were roadblocks all over the county and State Police were arresting dozens of blacks for fictitious driving violations.

One can hardly blame Sheriff Julian. It was the same with the Sheriff of Nottingham after King Richard upset the established social arrangements by befriending Robin Hood: "As for the Sheriff, he knew not what to say nor where to look when he saw Robin Hood in such high favor with the King, while all his heart was filled with gall because of the vexation that lay upon him."