"The Art of Deception"

By Brian R. Owens

From "Black Swan", Essays on the Civil Rights Movement in
St. Augustine in 1963 and 1964

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It was the spring of 1963, two years before the City's 400th year birthday celebration. Somewhere in Washington, a bureaucrat processed the City's $350,000 federal grant application to fund the party. Somewhere in St. Augustine, City officials eagerly formulated their plans to spend it. The guest list included Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson (affectionately known as "LBJ") who was expected to make an appearance. But people with brown skin, who numbered about one person out of every four, probably curbed their enthusiasm. Blacks had helped protect and build the City over a 400-year span of wars and peacetime reinvention. They deserved a place at the table, so to speak. Also, black people like to wear party hats, eat bar-b-q and throw horseshoes like anyone else. Of course, the laws of segregation made this impossible without some manner of legal choreography. Seeking to have their views heard, black leaders once again attempted to work within the system that existed. They reached out to City officials whose response or lack of it, led those leaders to conclude that the only blacks likely to witness this party would be those sweeping the streets or serving refreshments.

Knowledgeable as they were of their unique history, I can only assume that City officials somehow forgot how St. Augustine had survived its infancy: In a symbiotic relationship with the City under the flag of Spain, a legion of armed ex-slaves had protected the City's northern approach from the many unsuccessful British attempts to conquer it prior to the Revolutionary War. These were not "skirmishes" but real wars involving thousands of infantry and hundreds of sailors. Black soldiers were runaway slaves delivered largely by the underground railroad, to a city that was essentially a military outpost with no plantation economy. I suspect that the soldiers - who would certainly have been sold as slaves had they lost or surrendered - were highly motivated. There is a common and unfortunate tendency in those who have never experienced war to think that they understand war; to think that they can imagine the evil manifested in the mind-crushing fog of war that turns men into dogs. To speak lightly of war is the act of an imbecile, so I make this assertion carefully: I am certain that the horrors of war were less than the horrors of slavery, especially when you have made it your habit to win. I have heard it said that 18th century British soldiers were supplied red uniforms in order to camouflage their blood. This is probably a myth. My understanding is that the blood of the injured and dead quickly darkened to black on their bright "redcoats"; coats likely designed to bolster the morale of the souls that wore them. This and other myths involving color were smashed to bits as black soldiers repelled the final British siege in 1740. The victory is credited to the soldiers of Fort Mose, under the command of Captain Francisco Menendez; an escaped slave of mixed race who sported a Spanish name.

In 1963 the national civil rights movement was in its ninth year. Nowadays, many of us think of the Movement as driven by one religious leader operating in a theater of spontaneous peaceful

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protests in a few southern cities, when in fact it was very highly organized, national in scope and dependent on a number of cooperating groups and leaders, both faith-based and secular. The entire effort had been consistent and impressive. In March of 1963, the logistical planning of King's triumphant march on Washington – slated for later in the year - was almost certainly underway. But in St. Augustine it was "business as usual". The racist policies of the State, happily imposed by City government remained largely unchallenged, until they met the opposing force of one Fanny Fullerwood (a maid by day and NAACP Chapter President by night) and her colleagues. It would have been easy for them to break out the iced tea and file this latest in a long series of insults in a folder marked "unwinnable", but they had more cards to play.

Fanny Fullerwood wrote a letter to the President JFK requesting that the federal grant be withheld, since 1. His rhetorical opposition to segregation was a feature of his campaign, and 2. It was clear that this was a party funded at least in part by her tax dollars to which she, as a black, could expect no invitation. It was a simple request on its surface: All that she asked was that the White House enrage a key southern political ally by choosing to do the right thing with the 1964 presidential election already in play.

The details of Fanny Fullerwood's life are unknown to this author. However, I am confident that as a maid, her capacity for free inquiry and critical thought would likely have been invisible to her boss and city officials. Apparently, she presided over a group of knowledgeable, highly disciplined people. Other leaders that are known to me, some of whom would suffer the rest of their lives from injuries they would receive during peaceful protests, are credited elsewhere in these essays. I don't believe it's a stretch to assume they were fully aware of how their world operated. To presume as a writer, to know the thoughts of historic figures you've never met is a serious error in judgment. Still, I can't help but believe that she knew what a "long shot" that letter was. So I imagine that she was more than pleasantly surprised to receive a gracious and encouraging response from the desk of LBJ himself; a letter flatly renouncing segregation, suggesting that he had a personal interest in the matter and would look into it, directly.

Later in the spring of 1963, LBJ visited St. Augustine and reached an agreement with City officials that allowed Washington and the City to achieve their immediate political objectives with minimal negative spin: The City would receive the grant in full. The politicians agreed that the injunction of segregation would be somewhat relaxed for a single day during the City's 400-th year birthday celebration with appropriate limitations as to where blacks would be allowed to congregate, after which segregation would carry on as usual. Seeking to present an argument for what I assume was better terms, black leaders requested another meeting with City officials. They were graciously led into a room reserved for official government use on the assumption that there would be City officials in that room with whom to speak. They must have been disappointed to discover that the room was populated only by a tape recorder. Practiced as he was in the art of deception and political choreography, I suspect that LBJ was back in D.C. listening with enthusiasm to illegal wire-taps of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s telephone before Mrs. Fullerwood and her colleagues realized that they had been outwitted.
Temporarily outwitted, that is.

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