

Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
926 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE
Washington, DC
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For Immediate Release
July 31, 1965

MFDP and Viet Nam

The following statement on the question of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's alleged position on Negroes serving in the Armed Forces was made today by Lawrence Guyot, Chairman of the Executive Committee, and Rev. Ed King, a member of the Executive Committee in Jackson, Mississippi, today:

Today's (July 31, 1965) newspapers and national TV and radio carried extensive stories about the MFDP circulating fliers, newsletters, and petitions urging Negroes to refuse to register for the draft or, if already in the Army, to stage a hunger strike.

First of all, the news media are totally inaccurate in saying that this is an MFDP position or policy. At no time has the State Convention, the State Executive Committee, or any county MFDP Executive Board voted on such a position.

Recently, John D. Shaw, a 23 year old native of McComb, Mississippi, who had been active in the civil rights movement, was killed in Viet Nam. A group of McComb citizens, many of whom are active in the MFDP, circulated a petition as a result of this untimely death. This activity was reported as a news story in the MFDP Newsletter--a report on current activity within the state--not as an editorial or official policy of the MFDP. The story was introduced as follows:

"McComb Soldier's Death in Viet Nam Sparks Protest

"A Negro soldier was killed in Vietnam recently. His home was in McComb, Mississippi. His name was John D. Shaw, 23, who was involved in the demonstrations in McComb in 1961. At that time, students walked out of the schools in protest against the expulsion of Brenda Travis, who had been arrested during the sit-ins.

Shaw was drafted into the Army and had served only eight months when he was killed. He is survived by three sisters and two brothers.

Last week hundreds of copies of a leaflet were passed out to people all over the town. Joe Martin, of McComb, and Clint Hopson, a law student from New Jersey, helped draft the leaflet. It is reprinted below:"

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It is very easy to understand why Negro citizens of McComb, themselves the victims of bombings, Klan-inspired terrorism, and harassment arrests, should resent the death of a citizen of McComb while fighting in Viet Nam for "freedom" not enjoyed by the Negro community of McComb. However, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party does not have such a position.

As the Negroes of Mississippi continue our struggle for the freedom to participate totally in the decisions which govern our lives, it is inevitable and desirable that a growing interest and awareness in local and national issues such as war and peace must follow. The MFDP encourages and welcomes discussion and debate of these issues among its members. We reaffirm the right of our members to take public positions and actions on any issue. As we understand democracy, this is what it means. It is distressing to us that the many activities that the MFDP has initiated and participated in as an organization have been largely ignored by the national press. Yet they have chosen this, not an official MFDP action, to highlight; and to do so in such a manner as to misrepresent the facts.

If the intensive voter-registration drive being conducted by the MFDP across the state, the many activities surrounding the Congressional Challenge, the various local election campaigns in which the MFDP has run candidates, the documentation of police brutality during the Jackson demonstrations in June

had been given such publicity, the goals and objectives of the MFDP would be so well known as to render the press's distortion impossible. Again, we wish to emphasize that we uphold the right of our members to discuss and act upon all issues and are proud to have been a part of the movement in Mississippi which has liberated people to the point where they feel free to express their feelings on issues which affect them.

The MFDP has been accused of irresponsibility, and our patriotism has been called into question by implication. We answer those critics simply by pointing to the great sacrifices made by our members toward bringing true freedom and democracy to Mississippi. It is our members who have displayed greatest faith in the American Constitutional system as witnessed by the present effort in the Congressional Challenge to the delegation from Mississippi.

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