

I. Howard Zinn - 11/11/65

JM: What do you feel were the reasons for the origins of the freedom vote?

HZ: Well, I'm only guessing now, because I assume that, like most of the decisions that have been made in the civil rights movement since it began, there's a good deal of growth without design, and a great deal of spontaneity. The growth of feelings that crystallize at meetings where decisions are made, where people very often didn't come to the meetings with these decisions in mind beforehand. And, I don't know, exactly, historically, where the idea of the freedom vote began, but there's been a good deal of activity, as you know, in Mississippi, growing, starting in 1961 after the freedom rides, growing in 1962, and '63, beginning to get support from outside, getting funds from the voter education project, SNCC sending more and more people into Mississippi, to build up the staff; and it seems to me that a whole number of factors began to come together - that is, enough of a corps of people to carry on for the first time some state-wide political activity, which hadn't been true before. Plus, more contacts with the outside world, financial contacts with Atlanta and the VEP office in Atlanta, contacts with the north, and I think all this combined to create a setting in which people could begin to think of state-wide political activity. So that what had been, up to this point, a kind of desperate, almost futile attempt to get people to register to vote, accompanied by violence, and it seemed to run into a kind of cyclical pattern - that is, people would - SNCC people would go into towns, they would take people down to the county courthouse, they would encounter violence, they would get people - a few people in to take the exam, of these people they got in to take the exam very few would be added to the rolls. And I guess there's only a certain amount of this frustration you can take before moving on to something else. And this something else I feel was the freedom ballot, which probably as soon as it was talked about excited the imagination of everybody.

JM: Now, you mentioned that participatory democracy was very much the case in making decisions - was it a sort of latent act, or was it done knowingly at this point?

HZ: Well, a lot rests on the shoulders of Bob Moses - that is, he was, from 1961 on, the most important figure in organizing civil rights activity in Mississippi. And his personality, and his ideology, were the kind that tend to encourage wide participation and the idea of consensus and letting people talk and listening to them and not cramming ideas and programs down people's throats. And so that - I think that without having participatory democracy crystallized as an ideology, Bob and the other people in Mississippi practiced it almost from the beginning. I think also that the mass.

meeting as a basis - as a focal point for organizing the movement had a good deal to do with it. Because from the beginning the mass meeting was not just a way of people speaking from the pulpit out, but always created opportunities for people to come back, to get up on the floor, to speak, and I think this had a lot to do with it. Maybe also it was the fact that these - a lot of the activities taking place out in rural areas, and there's something about getting people together out in rural circumstances which makes it easier to have participatory democracy where there's more - people are more bureaucratized, more organized from the top, more accustomed to taking decisions from some central direction - people gather in little towns - something, I suppose, like people getting together in living rooms, in people's homes, and when they're in small groups, and then in churches, where they're in large groups, which lends itself to the idea of participatory democracy. This as well as Bob's own disposition to this. And I think a kind of humility - that all of the civil rights workers felt, moving into Mississippi, and feeling themselves as outsiders. I mean this is true of the Negroes; this is true of southern Negroes who didn't come from Mississippi, it is true of northern Negroes, and it's certainly true of the few whites who began to come into Mississippi in 1963. And this kind of feeling of humility, and therefore wanting to listen to other people I think helped along the idea of participatory democracy.

JM: Do you feel that this period, from 1961 up to the freedom vote, was then key in forming participatory democracy as rudimentary thought in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party?

HZ. Well, I suppose, from what I've just said, that the basis was laid from 1961 to 1963 - one of the things that's happened in this period was that the civil rights workers who came into Mississippi between August of '61 and the spring of '63 - the slow addition of workers - they didn't gather in one place. They moved out into little towns, and you had two workers in this town, and three workers in the other town, and one worker in another town, in Mississippi, and so at no point was there really such a concentration of professionals as to dominate the situation. It seems to me that this had something to do with it. So I think it's fair to say that the basis was laid for this kind of organization before the freedom vote began - there was already a certain atmosphere in operation.

JM: Also, what you brought out, is the methods of developing a rural town which is untouched before - can you comment on some of the methods that were used?

HZ: Well, the - I'm going now from what I've heard from the SNCC people who went into these towns, from reading the reports of the

field secretaries, reports that they sent back to the Atlanta office, Frank Smith reporting back from Holly Springs, John O'Neill reporting back from Hattiesburg, and so on. And I think of Sam Block and Lee Peacock working in Greenwood and moving out into

- now, it seems - one thing I think marks their operation as different from what we conceive of as normal organizing operation, is the kind that is most familiar to America, business operation, or an organization under normal circumstances moving into a city where an office is set up - everything is done in as open and as flamboyant and as public a way as possible, and as quickly as possible, open, lit up, available and accessible center is created to which people can come and from which you can move out. But of course here was a different kind of situation. I guess the closest you could get to this is what the - the work of labor organizers in the early days of the labor movement. And up to the 1930's, moving into towns and moving into industrial areas where they were in grave danger, and where they knew they were, and required very painstaking operation over a long period of time, so that these SNCC workers, they would go into a town, they would find a place to live, they would usually have a name, a contact which they got from somewhere else, and they'd find somebody, and find a place to live, and they'd just be talking to that person, that person's family, they'd be introduced to other people, they'd go to church on Sunday and meet other people, then they'd go around and begin knocking on doors. Sometimes just the beginnings of that process brought trouble in two ways, that is, the minute they were seen on the street, after a while a policeman might begin following them, the deputy sheriff might approach them, the sheriff might approach them, if they were really out in a rural area knocking on somebody's door who was on a white man's land the white man might approach them and tell them to get off the land, this is one kind of thing that began to happen as soon as they moved out of the house where they were living and began contacting other people. The other thing that began to happen is that some of the people they'd first gotten to know began to get afraid, and therefore they would have to leave the house that they were living in and go find someplace else to live, and sometimes they had to move around every few days from one house to another finding different places to stay because of this problem. I remember Sam Block lived for a while in a used car lot, sleeping in a car, because he couldn't find anyone at that point in Greenwood who was not afraid to let him stay, with them. And so with this kind of situation they began going around, they would try to gather six, seven, eight people to meet in someone's homes, try to talk to them about voting, talk to them about changing their lives, talk to them about the kind of things that had begun to happen in other parts of the south that were a little ahead of Mississippi - tell them a little about the

movement. And it would work up to a point where they could have a public meeting - a church meeting - where they could advertise. And sometimes ten people would come to the first church meeting, or twenty, or thirty, or forty. But the meetings would build up. The point is this process would take place over a number of months. And it might be several months before they would decide to take the first person down to the polls, down to the county courthouse, which of course was a risky thing for them, for the person they were taking down. As you know, in 1961, violence broke out immediately as soon as Bob Moses and John Hardy began taking people down to the county courthouse in that county, in Liberty county. And this was to be repeated in - later in 1961 and 1962.

JM: Apparently, to my mind, when SNCC has moved into the rural communities there seems to be a pattern of violence when their presence is fully known, and then a cooling-off period where work starts to get done - would you care to comment on that?

HZ: Well, I think this is part of the process of - well, acculturation, maybe, that the south has been going through these past few years. SNCC has had more of this experience, simply because it has been doing more of this than anybody else. What I mean is, when I talk about this process, I mean that the south, and I guess this is true of any community which has been frozen in its ways for a long time, which has been set off from the rest of the country, which guards its identity in a very special way, and which is sitting on a lid, and subconsciously knows this and has been doing this for a long time, and in this kind of a closed community somebody comes along, a stranger appears, this idea appears a lot in literature, a stranger appears in a fairly fixed situation and sets off lots of disturbances. And I think this is what happens in the south; and of course where the stranger is somebody who appears to be upsetting the racial situation which has been frozen over all these years, then it's particularly alarming, and this sets off violence. And what happens is that after a while the SNCC people become part of the community. What seemed strange, unusual, and a tremendous dislocation of a fixed way of life, that is, the SNCC people walking around door to door with the holding of church meetings from time to time; this actually becomes a part of the pattern of the community. And while the violence certainly does not stop, it doesn't take on the same consistent, frenzied character that it had at the beginning, when there is a first appearance of this phenomenon in the town. So that there is this quieting down, as the SNCC people become - and their activity becomes part of the life of and there's an adjustment to it. Of course then what happens is that violence still takes place when there's an attempt to change even that pattern, that is, when something new happens, when a

Freedom Day is called. And now instead of taking two people down to the county courthouse, which by this time they've got accustomed to, you take a hundred people down to the county courthouse. And so you move on to new levels, and I think this is what social change is about - you move on to a new level and the minute you appear, the forces that defend the old situation see you coming over the horizon, they react violently. When you've established yourself there, they adapt to this, there's a period of relative peace, and then you move an inch beyond that and again there's violence and attack. And I think this has been the pattern in the south these past few years.

Aug 27 [JM: Do you think that the combination of the violence incurred on the SNCC workers and the local Negroes, and also the lack of significant increase in voter registration statistics, led to the position in the middle of 1963 where they were willing to change?

HZ: By willing to change, do you mean willing to work on the freedom ballot? Yeah, I think there's no doubt about that. That is, if they had been successful in getting substantial numbers of Negroes to be registered, then they would have continued along that line. Then what you might have had was an influx of people, more and more workers coming in to do more of the same - that is, to bring people down to the county courthouse to get them registered, to add to the rolls. But they clearly had reached an impasse in this. The amount of effort expended, the amount of pain resulting, was simply not justified by the kind of results that were being obtained in getting Negroes to register to vote. So the Freedom ballot was an imaginative new device in which you could utilize the energies of people in a very constructive way, in a way that would not be frustrating, where everybody could register, and everybody could vote. And it didn't - well, it mattered, but it wouldn't be counted in the final ballot - it was a demonstration. In fact this to me is one of the significant things about the way the Freedom Democratic Party has operated since its beginning. And that is, it's been more of a demonstration than an orthodox political party. And I suppose what has happened recently is a lot of confusion about the function of the FDP and whether it should become another orthodox political party or whether it should continue acting as demonstrators would act. But in the early stages, at the point where the freedom ballot began, there's no doubt that this was a new form of demonstration, and a very inspiring one.

JM: From what I understand, the decision - or not the decision but the idea of the primaries, and then the mock election, were thought of by a number of leaders in COFO, and that they were concurred with by the members - or should I say the indigenous people - at a convention in, I believe, Jackson. Does this pattern of - at least

ideas from above hold a significant part in the movement at this point?

HZ: Well, what's interesting to me is that the above-and-below way of looking at this doesn't do an exact kind of justice to the situation; and here's what I mean. There are two "aboves" - maybe there are more than that, but at least two "aboves" - one is the "above" in Atlanta, for SNCC, or in New York, for the NAACP, that is the leadership, the national leadership of civil rights organizations. And then there is the "above" which is represented by the local leadership - in COFO, that is, Bob Moses, in SNCC, Dave Dennis, CORE, Al Ponder, in SCLC, Aaron Henry in the NAACP. And then of course there are below, the local people with whom they deal. And in between them, that is in between Aaron Henry and Bob Moses on one hand and local people on the other, are the SNCC people who are working in the towns very close to these people, living with them, holding meetings with them, and very close to the rank and file. What I'm trying to get at is this, that even where the decisions, in this case, come from, quote, above, it's not the "above" in the sense that many organizations have worked out - strategies in the past where some national organization decides on a plan, they send somebody into an area and the plan is carried out. In other words, the decision here is made on a local level - by the people on the spot - people like Aaron Henry and Dave Dennis and Bob Moses; and made by them in conjunction with the people in the organizations who are working in towns, that is, the people who are working in the field. So that the fairest way to describe the process is that the process really started at an intermediate level, not very high, not very low; it started at an intermediate level and then almost immediately, they soon moved close to the local people - they were brought in on the decisions and the acting out of the decisions. And in a sense the last people to be brought in on it and to know what was going on, were the people far off in the central, national headquarters of the organizations. So that, you know, it's a fairly intricate kind of democratic process.

JM: What do you feel were the factors of consequence that resulted from the freedom vote?

HZ: Well, the - part of the most important single factor was the loosening of the political situation in Mississippi - the - making the situation fluid, in the sense of bringing Negroes out of their homes, and out of political passivity, and out of the kind of political limbo that they had been in for a long time, and making them participants in the political process. So that even though their vote didn't count in the final election, they were dislodged from the fixed positions they'd occupied for a long time, and they were

ready to move in all sorts of directions. I suppose it's like a chess game, it's like freeing pieces so that they can move, even though you, they haven't done anything yet. And this is what the freedom vote did; it freed people, and gave - it was a good educational process too. In other words, it created the preconditions for later political activity, it created the preconditions for organizing the Freedom Democratic Party as it was organized in 1964 with - in that very impressive way with all sorts of meetings on the precinct and local and county and district level, with delegates, with all sorts of people coming to the fore. Well, the freedom vote was the beginning, it brought an awful lot of people into the picture, it - and lists were assembled, names were known, contacts were made; right now, I suppose, in Mississippi we're seeing in the work that the FDP is carrying on throughout the state, we're seeing the effects of that beginning in 1963.

JM: Do you - what do you feel about the national consequences of the FDP, as far as the American consciousness came into the picture - not the FDP, excuse me, the freedom vote.

HZ: Well, the freedom vote - I don't think the nation ever really knew about the freedom vote. Oh, I know dispatches came out into the national press at the time, and I suppose aside from the atrocities that have come to light from time to time and brought national attention, the killing of Medgar Evers, the riot at Oxford, Mississippi and so on, this is the first such news of Mississippi that entered the national press - but I wasn't aware at the time that there was any great impact by the freedom ballot on the national political scene. It really wasn't until 1964 that any significant national attention was being paid to the political activity in Mississippi.

JM: In regard to the point - it is apparent that the freedom vote brought in for the first time fairly significant numbers of white college students. What factor do you feel this is - excuse me, of what importance do you feel this is to the movement at this point and in the future?

HZ: What importance was it at that point - the significance of bringing in these students - When I said that it didn't attract national attention I was thinking of the public at large. Now what it did do, clearly, was to involve several hundred people in the north and their families in what was happening in Mississippi. And this is very important thing; and this meant that from that point on, when these people went back, there were hundreds of people who had a kind of personal stake in Mississippi. Now that process has grown since then. And despite all the troubles that this has caused, despite some of the uncertain feelings about Negroes

working in the movement in Mississippi, about the feasibility, the desirability of having a lot of whites come into the state - you know there's been a lot of controversy in the movement about whether this is a good thing or a bad thing, the disadvantages of it, despite all this, I think it's been a very, very useful, very important thing - starting then to bring those students in, and then of course following that - well, this was the direct predecessor of the great summer migration of students in 1964 into Mississippi, which wouldn't have been possible, probably, without that kind of preliminary work which gave an idea of what would happen. And what that did, in turn, and we're seeing the results now, it got thousands of people in the country into very direct personal contact with Mississippi. And there's nothing more important you can do, it seems to me, in bringing a situation to the attention of a nation, than to create this kind of personal stake. more important to bring a thousand people into personal contact with Mississippi than to let a million people know in a television flash or news column about something that has happened in Mississippi. It has permanent, lasting, important effect, and '63 I guess started it.

JM: