

Aaron Henry
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JM: Dr. Henry, my first question would be, what was the extent of your involvement in Rev. Hel Lindsay's campaign for the congressional primary of 1962?

AH: Answering your question precisely, I served as Rev. Lindsay's campaign manager; I would like to however go back to the reasons that Lindsay became involved in the campaign, and maybe this will help set the stage for the broad takeoff that we will perhaps be getting to as we go on.

An intimate friend of mine who lived here, Rev. Theodore Tremmel, was the community's first choice to make this particular race for Congress in 1962. It was here that we had the encouragement of most of the groups who were involved in civil rights; SNCC had just begun to come into the area at that time, we had the support of Dave Dennis of CORE, Bob Moses of SNCC, and of course the NAACP group was very solid for Theodore Tremmel. Tremmel had been pretty much the leading minister in Mississippi in the civil rights struggle, and of course all of us were happy to support him.

Well, Merrill - uh, Theodore Tremmel had also been very active in the local scene; he'd had a couple of experiences of heart attacks, he was arrested December 7 in '61, on a restraint of trade violation, of which I was a part of the arrested group, Mr. , and many of the people from here. Well, this kind of arrest, and being in jail, and the harrassment and the wear and tear I guess of - on some of us is greater than it is on the other folks, and Ted's heart gave out, and he died, while he was still a candidate for the campaign. And picking up the mantle of fellow Methodist minister Tremmel, was a Methodist minister, Lindsay is a Methodist minister, and there was somewhat a feeling of picking up the torch from a fallen brother that Lindsay became interested in this particular campaign. Of course we were very fortunate to have a man so capable, as capable as Tremmel, as Lindsay really was to carry on from him. And because of Tremmel's interest in the campaign, I'm pretty sure that Lindsay found it impossible to say no when we went to him, and asked him to become the candidate for the campaign, of course he took a somewhat facetious point of view and said, I'll be the candidate if my brother will be the campaign manager, meanin' me, and we sorta shook hands on it, and - this is pretty much how it got to be.

JM: Do you care to discuss why it was important that - here for the first time since Reconstruction there was a Negro running, in this district, for Congress...

AH: Yes, certainly there was more than one gain, or more than one thing intended by this particular campaign. We knew that the number of Negro votes were - were not sufficient to elect Lindsay, of course Lindsay insisted, and I certainly agreed, that we not run the campaign

to cater only to the Negro community, but to the fair-minded white community as well. Lindsay refused to make a speech directed only at the Negro community, he was determined that everything he did and said, at least publicly, was an attempt to place the welfare of the second Congressional District above any racial connotations that might have come to mind. The involvement of Negroes in the political area, however, served - we felt it would serve as a stimulus to the Negro singularly and certainly stimuli to the Negro plurally, and that we would have many people who, if they were not registered, knowing the kind of an individual that Lindsay was, that they would at least desire to vote for him. And if we came down to a political campaign where a person who actually wanted to vote for Lindsay and couldn't vote because he was not registered, we felt that this would be a great propelling force to actually get registered to be ready the next time.

Of course there was another reason here, and I think perhaps the major reason, because with a candidate in the field with the philosophy that had as its concern the total people, we were able to build a platform and stand from the podium ourselves and expose and express our viewpoints on the real issues that we felt must be resolved before Mississippi could take her rightful place in the state of nations. And back in '62 we were talking about such things as the Negro's destiny and that of the poor white being ultimately tied together, and that the white man of influence and affluence was using both the Negro and the poor white as a pawn against each other, and by so doing he kept the Negro and the poor white apart and was able to use each to the disadvantage of the other. We were talking in 1962 about the median wage income of poor people. We were talking about the educational standards and the situations of academic attainment. We were speaking about the right to vote; in fact, we coined the phrase, "One Man, One Vote" that this particular nation has now adopted as its political axiom in determining how the votes in the various legislatures would be handled; and we were very much concerned, back in '62, and before, but definitely in '62 because here we were able to express our views from the podiums of the area, from the television stations, from the street corners, from the courthouses, the question of injustice in the courts and police brutality. These were issues that the rank-and-file politicians were not even mentioning, much less discussing. And we felt that these particular problems - and we still feel that these are the problems that must be resolved before Mississippi can proudly stand tall and be counted as a true and qualified state in this nation. But here in 1962 with Lindsay as a candidate, these issues were exposed and at least a beginning fight thought was given to the possibility of resolving these problems once they were exposed, and this was the first time that the problems that we are now expressing have had the shield of secrecy pulled away from them, and exposed in their nakedness to the entire community, and I'm sure that whites and Negroes too who had never thought about these issues as such, were beginning to think more closely about them and - begun to work toward resolving them. I think this is the most important single thing about the campaign of '62.

JM: Was it felt at this time that even though Rev. Lindsay didn't have a chance to win, that this was going to be an ongoing program that enough support could be engendered from this effort and efforts similar to this, to elect a Congressman who was a Negro and who did represent in actuality his constituency?

AH: Yes, ^{to} some electing of a Negro might be a total purpose, a commitment without reservation. To some others of us, and I am a member of this group, we are really looking for candidates, be they black or white, who truly and unselfishly represent the views of the constituency and will try honestly to resolve the problems that beset the constituency, whether they are black or white. In the gulf that now exists between politicians of the white community and politicians of the Negro community, is so wide that it is reasonable to assume that only a Negro person who has been exposed to the dialogues about Lindsay, who has been exposed to the poverty with which we are involved, and who have been exposed to the brutality of the white community, who have been exposed to the segregations and discriminations in the racial bias, that () can really and truly empathize with the Negro. It's a good presumption that few if any whites can really empathize with the Negro in actually having - actually feeling with him some of the duress and the stress and the strains that the Negro community has had to go up against.

It might be that there are no white persons that can really feel this role. Of course I'm not of that particular school, who feel that all whites are bad, that no whites are capable of knowing right, because as we are now emerging into slightly a different psychology, being expressed by members of the white community, I think we're going to find more and more that the white man is realizing clearer and clearer that he himself is not free. And those who would want to do right, who have had a desire to do right, find that they themselves are victims of much of the brutality and much of the biased-ness and bigotry that even - and in some instances more so - that is directed toward the Negro community. And it might well be that once this political freedom that we're talking about becomes available to black and white, rich and poor alike, and the - the new politician, shall I say, of the white community realizes that he can still win without expressing the epithets of racial hatred and injustice and its such, on the podium, that we are going to get a new breed of white politician. I think that it's inevitable that the greater number of Negroes that become registered to vote, the more modulated is going to become the expressions of white politicians on this area. I think that we can make a Jacob Javits out of Senator Eastland once enough Negroes get registered to vote. I don't believe that we're really dealing with a situation so much of racial hatred in the white community as we have been dealing with a situation called political expediency. And it might well be that any white politician before now would be committing political suicide if he would take a stand for right and justice spread across the board to all mankind. But I'm not sure that there are not those who have felt that this ought to be the case, you see.

So in that light, I don't take a position of changing the white-supremacy negativisms with a black-supremacy negativism. I think that they both are wrong, and I think that we're going to have to propel our energy and our direction into a main stream of decency, trying to find people who would best represent the cause of the poor people, the little man, or whatever you want to call him, be he black or white. You know, all bigots aren't white, there are some black ones too, there are some Negroes that have let the movement pass them by, who haven't even raised a finger toward trying to help with eradicating the evils that have beset us. And every time there's a breakthrough, this is the Negro that you find, that's usually there ready to ask for in, (?) although what is being presented he's had naothing to do with, opening the door. But you know, freedom is a peculiar commodity, and of course Lindsay used to say this, and I really understand it clearer every day, when he said that freedom is the kind of a commodity that you can only keep by giving it away. It's the kind of a thing that you've got to express and yield to your fellow man; it's the kind of a thing that you've got to be willing to share with those who've done nothing about getting the freedom that you've won, if we are to retain the freedoms that we're seeking. So I think that we've got to look higher than racial identity; I think that we're going to have to look at morality, we're going to have to look at the peculiar attributes of individuals who are now aspiring to political positions. And support those who are good, and be against those who are bad, whether they are black or white, blue, green, or polka-dotted, makes no difference.

JM: Then, you're saying in essence that the future of the state of Mississippi really depends not just on an integrated movement but a totally color-blind attitude on the part of the people in the state.

AH: That would be my impression, perhaps I'm asking and seeking more for Mississippi than perhaps is now prevalent, or available, in hardly any other state. But you know how it is with a particular parent about a particular child. He usually wants his particular child to be better - and so I have the same kind of subjective feeling about Mississippi, it's my own state, if I didn't love it I would leave it, I've had hundreds of offers to come to other communities to do various jobs in various departments of livelihood, but I have chosen to remain here to try to resolve the problems which beset us here, and I would hope that Mississippi would become really the oasis of this great nation of ours, and it would give all of us a little bit of an ego-erection, I guess, to say that we've been a part of it.

JM: Could you discuss what you think were the consequences to the civil rights movement of the campaign in 1962?

AH: I presume you're asking what - the contributions of '62 to the civil rights movement at that time or now? (Then.) Well, then the civil rights movement had, as it does now, one of its main activities the right to register and vote. It also was () with the issues that we spoke of from the podium, radio, television, etcetera,

throughout the state, and I would say that the campaign of '62 created a more awareness in the Negro and in the white community of exactly what the Negro was clamoring for.

You see, one way that the power structure of the white community has manipulated the Negro and the poor white against each other, he will say to the Negro any time there was a crime committed against a Negro by a white man, that's just a redneck - meaning a poor white man did it. He would say to the white man, every time there was a crime committed against a white by a Negro, particularly a crime of sex, that all the Negro wants to do is marry your women, get your women. Now, as ~~the~~ low mentality as a man might have, sex is one thing that rings a bell. And the poor illiterate white could understand that kind of a negativism being preached to him by the power structure of the white community. So consequently you kept both Negro and white separated by this kind of manipulation, which was carefully planned. But the issues of the civil rights struggle were certainly much more - deeper than who slept with whom. Of course Lindsay used to say this too, that it isn't your brother in-law we want to be, it's - we want to be your brother. And saying these kind of things on TV, and on radio and etcetera, we feel actually had that impact on changing, to some degree, the ideas that some of the whites had with what was it that the Negro was really striving for in the movement.

JM: What sort of opposition from - by the part of the Federal Government and the state government and local citizens - was the movement confronting at this time?

AH: In '62, this was pretty much B.K. - before Kennedy. And with President Kennedy came at least an apparent more use of agents of the Justice Department - the attorneys within the Department of Justice, to at least come down, and hear and discuss and hold hands and sometimes cry with the Negro people who were victims of much of the abuse of the white community. Prior to this time, however, we had had little if any really feeling within ourselves that the fellows ever gave a damn about our problems as long as the problems we were crying about were only affecting Negro people. The total government actually becomes - well - the Federal Government was little concerned with the atrocities that beset us if whites were not involved, and of course it's still not completely void of this criticism. We find the Federal Government much more concerned with a situation when whites are involved. You see Negroes have been being pulled out of rivers and hanging from trees, and we had the Emmett Tills and the George Leas and the Federal Government didn't really get concerned until a couple of white boys out of New York, and Goodman was killed with a Negro boy, Cheney. The Federal Government didn't use its muscle to convict violators of civil rights until a white woman had been killed in Alabama. You see, Medgar Evers was killed two years before that, and his killer walks the street, day by day, in Greenwood, Mississippi, and the Federal Government has not filed any suit against anybody for violating Medgar's

civil rights. And it has not done it in any case where Negroes are involved, but the only case that the Federal Government has really used this muscle is in the case in the south where a white person was killed. And I am sorry to have to make this accusation (sic), but it's obvious that the Federal Government is much more concerned with difficulty when the white community is involved.

Now this was very much the case before the Kennedy administration. We wrote letters, many went unanswered, the agency came through during the Eisenhower term of office, would come through and talk with you, many times they would leave their notes on the table. The next guy who came from apparently the same department would have no knowledge of any discussion that one might have had with agents from the same department previously, when they were checking on the same story, the same experience that had been called to the Federal Government's attention. And we really came to the point where we had little faith in agents from the Federal Government who came down to - in an expression of concern about our problems.

JM: Wasn't it true that in the latter part of 1961, the Kennedy administration promised, saying that statutes were their role, that if the civil rights movement in Mississippi went into voter registration work the Federal Government would not only come in and investigate, and take notes, and hold hands, but they would back up under Federal statutes cases where intimidation and violence and murder occurred.

AH: To the best of my recollection of this, I've got this second or third hand, but it's my understanding that this was a commitment made largely to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the attorney general, Mr. Robert Kennedy. And of course this was about the time that SNCC became very active in the south, I'm sure, believing that the promises that had been made them were gonna be kept. But you also know that the violence continued, we were thrown in jail for protesting the right to register and vote, SNCC workers were thrown in jail for protesting the question of people not being allowed to register and vote, and the Federal Government didn't get 'em out - you know? We've often heard Mr. Kennedy and now Mr. Katzenbach say they've got really no legal weapons, no legal rights to become involved in on-the-spot arrests of persons of offices who intimidate or violate people who are involved in the right to vote. And it's not mine to say that they do or do not have the legal right; but I say they ought to have it. I remember personally asking Mr. Kennedy on one occasion when we were before - just after the disappearance of Mickey and Andy and James Cheyney - the NAACP was in convention ~~at that time~~ in Washington at that time, and the call had come through to me that these three gentlemen were missing, and we were able to get a resolution passed on the convention floor at the opening session, that they send a delegation to call upon Mr. Kennedy to seek his assistance in finding these three young men, and we dismissed the convention for the day, and a demonstration, picketing, protest, thing, around the Justice Department, demanding that the Justice Department does something in this case.

Well, Mr. Kennedy began to tell us that of all of the tools that he didn't have to resolve the problems of which we were inquiring. And I asked him, did he want the tools to do it? And he said, specifically, no, that he didn't think any attorney general should have that much power. So, it's to some degree an interpretation of our - what he has, I guess, is some degree of using discretion. But at this point I'm not really sure, that the rights that we are complaining about, that the supports that we're asking for, are not now already available in the great umbrella of law, that's available to the Justice Department, because I've heard so many attorneys who are not in the Justice Department argue the points in our favor, that the laws are there to do what needs to be done.

JM: Well, then you would say, largely in spite of the promises the Federal Government made to back up the civil rights movement in its efforts in voter registration, that they only back it up in spirit - they didn't back it up in acts, in protecting people.

AH: Well, I'll have to answer that in this kind of way. If these promises were made by the Justice Department, they were not made in my presence. I only heard that such a commitment had been made, second or third hand, and only that such a commitment was made to SNCC. Well, if such a commitment was made, then I certainly know first hand that it was not kept. (End of Side One)

SIDE TWO

JM: The next thing I'd like to discuss is the buildup in 1963 to the primaries in, I believe, August; and what you think the significance of this was, how it developed, and how you got involved in running for Governor.

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 AH: Well, '63 was certainly a continuation of '62, particularly in the philosophy of those of us who were involved in the movement. That we had to continue to present images to the Negro community that would encourage them in their quest for the right to vote. At the same time we were getting feedback from Washington, by Senator Stennis and Senator Eastland that the Negroes did not vote because they were lethargic and lackadaisical, or just didn't want to. So what we thought we would try to do with the Freedom Vote was to show to the world, America particularly, that if the Negro in Mississippi had the right to vote, that certainly we would use it (yawn). And to our good fortune, a group of students from Harvard, Yale, and the College of the Pacific came in to work with those students who had some knowhow about political campaigns, who had worked in political campaigns in their home areas, who had some contact with the press, some astuteness in speech-writing, and of course we had with us one of the greatest guys the movement has ever been privileged to have with us in Mississippi, Robert Moses, who was the genius

in getting people together and getting things done. Well, David Dennis from CORE was also here, and I was largely a representative of the point of view of the NAACP. Well, the three of us worked very closely together the whole while the other two were in the state - Both Bob and Dave are no longer in the state.

But anyway, Marv and Dave were most convincing that Ed King from (Tougaloo) College and I should make the race for Governor and Lieutenant Governor in 1963. Of course you probably know that Ed King is a white professor on the campus at Tougaloo, and making it a biracial team had political and depth appeal, not only in Mississippi but throughout the nation. And of course you probably know that we were able to prove our point on the question of Negroes participating, because here, perhaps as much as any real election we have had or will have in the future, the intimidation by whites against Negroes and whites who were interested in getting the Negro to vote - even in the Freedom Vote - was great. People were arrested, people were shot at, people were jailed, people had their person violated in all different kinds of ways. Yet in spite of this more than 90,000 citizens - some whites, mostly Negro, throughout the state of Mississippi - braved the violence of the white community and did participate in the Freedom Vote campaign of 1963. And of course the logic and the philosophy of the Freedom Vote campaign of '63 was pretty much the same as it was in '62. The right to vote, academic attainment, in justice in the courts and in education. Of course these were - these are still the issues that Mississippi must resolve before she can take a strong position in the influence of this nation.

JM: Can you talk about the primary campaign that was run in August?

AH: The primary campaign that was run in August - Ed King and I stomped the state from north to south, we were very well received in some communities, like here, Clarksdale, and in Greenville, frankly, we spoke from the courthouse steps in Greenville. There were other areas where we were not so well received, like Vicksburg, and Hattiesburg, and - well, down in Gulfport and Biloxie, frankly, at a little place called (Back Bay) Mission,

(JM): During the summer of '63, from what I understand, there was a departure from the primaries to the fall election in that instead of protest ballots being cast in the normal primary, there was a Freedom Vote that took place - can you talk about that?

AH: Well, there was really emphasis both ways; the protest vote did not disappear, that has been one of the weapons of those who wanted to make changes within the status quo, and still remains alive. However, the protest vote also found itself again reflected in the Freedom Vote arena, wherein again ballot boxes were set up in churches, and stores, and homes, - the ballots with the affidavits was considered a normal protest movement, and the separate elections that were held, the results of which was reflected by the Freedom Vote, here again on

days other than election days, I think it was the weekend before the election was to be held, just as in '62 when we ran the Governor's campaign on a Freedom Vote (). Here we became involved in other races in the campaign, in the Freedom Vote area, and here again we set up ballot boxes in the schools, churches and homes, and people voted in the Freedom Vote campaign as they had previously. However, it appears, though, that by '64 the Freedom Vote had lost a little bit of its glamour, and although we had massed some 90 thousand votes the year before, I think the Freedom Vote campaign of '64 only massed about 60 thousand. And this was somewhat a dropoff from the '62 movement, I suppose the '62 movement we put more into it, - I know it fell off. So, let's - let's get the year straight, yes, in '63 we had the beginning of the campaign, I was thinking it was '62, but it was '62 that Lindsay ran for Congress, that's right, and in '63 we went into the Freedom Vote campaign with the primary and the final that built up from about 60 to 85 or 90, and then in 1964 we still had a bit of Freedom Vote fever left in us, and we tried it again, and it appeared that it was not as popular in '64 as it was in '63, because it fell off to less than 60 thousand, which would say that the idea of the Freedom Vote type of activity had begun to decline, and I suppose it is declining, perhaps in direct proportion with the number of people who are actually able to cast a real vote in an election. And I would suppose that this would de-emphasize the tactic.

JM: This would be, then, because the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had filled the gap that was not there before, and provided more tangible political activity for the people.

AH: Well, this might be true, but you see, the Freedom Democratic Party was not able to get the people actually registered - the Freedom Democratic Party devoted its activities toward its serious elections in the rural area, trying to get farmers on committees to - who would be in charge of the farm program for areas. But actually getting a man registered on the book, this really didn't happen in any kind of dramatic way until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And still in many counties of the state, it's not a reality yet, because of the absence of Federal registrars, the absence of Federal protections for people who do go down and fear physical reprisal and intimidation if they do. So while I have a lot of kindred feeling, and support and admiration for the job that the Freedom Democratic Party has done, we don't want to give the impression that the right to vote was gained by the Freedom Democratic Party - nor is the right to vote a reality at this point. We still haven't really gained that right.

JM: Can you talk about what you feel is the significance of the Freedom Vote campaign in 1963?

AH: Why, I thought we'd gone over this once, I think you'll find that the tape will give you - we were kinda sleepy last night, but - The Freedom Vote campaign of 1963 served - at least two purposes, maybe more. It served to stimulate interest in politics. It served as a

tangible way of personal identification or personal participation, in a political kind of activity. It served to the Negro who was not registered - that here we've got somebody in the race who we feel will be concerned about the problems that beset us and will try to do something about them. And I don't think that we need to go into a reiteration of what we felt and still feel are the major problems - you have those already.

But - and any person who was not registered certainly could not have participated in this kind of activity. One peculiar thing about the Freedom Vote campaign was that we permitted instantaneous registration. If you'd go down to the polls to vote and you hadn't registered you registered there. And maybe this is unusual, but of course we're dealing with unusual (), we've been dealing with unusual situations. Of course I think that another attribute of the Freedom Vote campaign was that we were able to belie, we were able to identify as a lie, the charges of Senator Eastland and Senator Stennis that Negroes did not want to vote... they were apathetic, lackadaisical, and would not vote if they had the opportunity to. And here in 1963, in the presence of real threats, the presence of intimidation, in the presence of harrassment, more than 90 thousand Negroes took it upon themselves to place themselves in a predicament where they could be harrassed and intimidated - showing to the world that even in a non-legal situation that they would cast a vote if they had the opportunity, which certainly spelled out that in a legal situation we would also certainly cast a vote if we had the opportunity.

JM: Do you feel that it was significant that rather than having to go down to a set polling place, where the police and the power structure would be directly confronted, that during the Freedom Vote the () was used, people were registered not through the state apparatus but through the movement itself, and they were pledging support to the movement which wouldn't attack them?

AH: Yes, I would say that that's a very valid position to take. However I think that we both know that this kind of registration, and this kind of voting made easy for people, is not going to place the real voting structure and apparatus of the community. This was the participation in, as you said, a demonstration kind of civil rights activity, which - every time a person voted in the Freedom Vote campaign he was saying, I'm with the movement, I'm doing something for the movement. Yes, I buy that completely. But it's not going to be this way in the real voting. We're not going to be able to put ballot boxes in churches, we're not going to be able to put ballot boxes in stores, we're not going to have vote-mobiles going around, because this isn't the way that politics is run, as we understand it. So we're not becoming illusionary to say that this is the way it's going to be in the future. We don't think that that's the way it's going to be in the future, we're going to have to devise ways, means and mechanisms of overcoming the fears that Negroes do have in going down to the standard polling places. But we do know that this is where we're going to have to go,

and vote out the people that we want out, and vote in the ones we want in, but we're not going to be able to do it with the carefree, accomodating, making-it-easier method that we were able to do with the Freedom Democratic Party. When we get to really deciding issues, politically - legally politically - we're going to have to follow the methods that have been set up and established by the politics of the country.

JM: But, nonetheless, through the Freedom Vote, you got names and addresses of a far greater number of people that had been formally contacted by the movement.

AH: Yes, and there's another advantage of the Freedom Vote also. With the Freedom Vote campaign we were able to build small nuclei of supporters in almost every county in the state, and this had not been - we had not been able to do this before. And ^{with} these kinds of contacts - the Freedom movement has now spread into almost every nook and corner of Mississippi, because of the fact that these contacts were made during the Freedom Vote campaign, that we had not previous knowledge of people living in those areas who were as willing to support the movement as we found out. That's a very positive contribution of the Freedom Vote campaign, yes.