

INTERVIEW OF AL LOWENSTEIN - *Part I*  
BY ANNE ROMAINE  
CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA  
MARCH 4, 1967

(Anne) Would you talk about your participation in events that led up to the '63 freedom vote, and how you got into Mississippi.

(Al) Well you'll remember (cough) that Medger got shot and the marches had been held and nothing had happened and the NAA, I think with fifty it was formed in '63 had \$50,000 in bond money tied up in Mississippi and nothing had come of that. Voter Education Project had sent a lot of money in and ~~the~~ voters had been registered in the state to speak of, Negro registration had remained around 20,000 and the general sense was that Mississippi was changeable, there was something you could do about it. The whole national leadership was saying we'll come back and try Mississippi in 10 or 15 years, we'll do the surrounding area first, then we'll come in later and uh, in fact when I first arrived in Jackson which was ~~July~~ July 4th, 1963, there was a court order to integrate the parks in Jackson, but we couldn't even get, but we couldn't even get two car loads to do that. It was, in a sense, a terrible defeat. The police arrested everybody when they did anything, you couldn't picket. The enemy was the police, it was a police state that's all. The only police state that I've ever seen function with such efficiency that in this country that there was no way of even getting to notice it---it was just that way. And I remember one day, we were sitting around the freedom house in Jackson and the Democratic primary was coming up in Mississippi. This must have been in August and it struck me that it was impossible for a Democratic Party to be held without expressing some kind of dissent because that would be taken to mean that Negroes in Mississippi were



satisfied with the situation. But the problem was how do you protest, how could you make a uh even token showing when there was no uh break in the solid wall? And then it occurred to me that South Africa, which of course is uh much worse than Mississippi, whenever there was an election the Africans would hold a national day of mourning/ to protest being excluded and I began to think about having a day of mourning in Mississippi and then it struck me that in South Africa the law was that Africans couldn't vote but in this country in Mississippi the law was that Negroes could vote so why should you have a day of mourning, you should have a day of voting. Well that gets you back to the same circle which is that you can't vote, so how do you have a day of voting? Well if you can't vote and you're supposed to be able to vote suppose you try to have your own election. Why is it any less legitimate than the illegitimate election that's being held with you illegally excluded from participating in that? So, it seemed to me that the Democratic Primary couldn't be allowed to be held without having a day of protest in the form of a vote. I talked to people about that---I talked to Charlie Evers, and Ed King and Aaron and Bob and some others I think Tim Jenkins was down there, I'm not sure.

(Anne) Who is he? I, we know that he's around here participating in the Highlander workshop.

(Al) He was at the time

(Anne) Where could I get hold of him?

(Al) Well, I think he is practicing law in Washington, he was then in law school at Yale.



(Anne) Is he Negro?

(Al) Yeah, he used to be senior(?) president at Howard, he was NSA vice-president and there was a big movie made called the Streets of Greenwood in which he was the central figure. He was

(Anne) Yeah, I . . .

(Al) Well that's him, the one that preaches the endless sermon

(Anne) oh yeah

(Al) in Greenwood. I can't be sure whether Tim was, I don't think he was, in the first discussions, but sometime along in there, he was involved very much with what was going on/ Well there were some questions over the idea, but basically people were enthusiastic. Charlie Evers asked me to do a written memorandum and then try to find some money for it. I think he ~~if~~ saw it as an NAA project. Uh, my own view was that it had to be a COFO project. It had to be done ~~jointly~~ jointly in order to have any ~~validity~~ validity. Now I'll skim cause the details could go on and on. The idea of doing it in the Democratic primary uh, eventually gave way to the idea of doing it in the general election on the ground of why should we be limited to the Democratic Primary. But there were ~~token~~ token freedom votes ca---held in both the Democratic Primaries ~~which~~ which are little footnotes which have been forgotten. In the first Democratic Primary which was, I think, in August, the protest vote was pretty well confined to Greenwood and Jackson and I think the estimate was probably a thousand or two thousand people took part. And it was held under ~~circumstances~~ circumstances that made it almost impossible for



it to be emulated<sup>(7)</sup> widely because the "a Harvard law student was doing research in Mississippi law <sup>and</sup> done there that summer found a law which said that if you were illegally excluded from registering you could vote anyway <sup>when</sup> and then your vote would not be counted it would be set aside and you could appeal it in your county. And under this old law, which was designed to protect a certain number of people whites really, uh, mostly in Greenwood, Negroes, who had been denied registration rights went to vote, but it took as you can imagine great courage because you still had to go down and try to vote and it was not going to be counted so ~~it was~~ its impact was not going to be very great and therefore the number of people who could be induced to do it was small and mostly where SNCC was particularly well organized which was really then in Greenwood. SNCC had pretty well reduced well, there was still a freedom house in Jackson, but Greenwood was one community where they still had a, their kind of workers and some strong support. And un, the second primary it was expanded, <sup>this time</sup> the NAA got into the act, I think probably, you might say the first <sup>one</sup> was primarily a SNCC gesture, the second one was more an NAA one with all those implications, one side wasn't particularly cooperative. The NAA one, they distributed ballots and announced a tally of votes which was for the runoff, which was the Democratic runoff between Paul Johnson and Coleman. And they announced that Coleman had won the vote by 22,000 to 900 or something. Well there were several problems with that not ~~the~~ ~~least~~ not the least of which was that there wasn't ~~anybody~~ anybody on the ~~ballot~~ ballot that stood for what anyone would have wanted him to stand for, Coleman was just the lesser of two evils and was running a rather racist campaign and you could make



a strong case out given a free election, Negroes wouldn't have voted for either one so that that second ballot uh was also in a form of a rather weak gesture more than anything else. But as I say the decision to run in the election instead of in the primaries gave the virtue of time to organize and being able to run your own candidate so you didn't have to vote for the two unacceptable candidates and ~~XX~~ of making clear you weren't just Democrats, you weren't the Negroes in the party's pockets you were a voice of certain principles---you expressed them ..... so, that's how it went from the primary into the election.

(Anne) Thank you. Now what about after the election, and the reaction of the leaders to ... who had worked on the mock election? And, what were your after thoughts and your , what was sort of your vision to come out of this?

(Al) Well one thing was clear in the election, that was that ah, police had the state sufficiently controlled the election would have been pretty well suppressed if it had been left just in the state. There wasn't any attention being paid, everybody was being arrested all the time, the atmosphere was totally ..... there wasn't any way of sort of appealing to people and you couldn't get much interest, I tried to arouse people to the oppression by calling the newspaper people but the generally attitude was well those girls all got killed in Birmingham nothing as bad as that has happened in Mississippi so it's really not news and everybody knows that Mississippi doesn't let Negroes vote so what are you making a big fuss about. We ran into this kind of, not ~~XXXX~~ indifference, but of ~~X~~ judgement of what was news and it was very difficult to over rule . So the original inspiration of thought to get outside people in came in the process of



trying to figure out how do you let people know about what's going on., --- if you can't get the papers to record it. And the way you do it, is you get people down to see it and in the process of that you let them tell what they 've seen and ~~XXXX~~ that would interest outside people. So uh, confronted with this total oppression of ~~the people~~ in Mississippi, it is just an absolute police state no break in the barrier, only silence about it I called Stanford and Yale because they were the two schools I was tied to, I would eventually, in fact I went to Yale and I'm going(?) to Stanford, but uh first I called and said that we'd want them.....to come down to help and uh, the rest of it is the story of their coming and the beginning of attention and the beginning of awareness around the country of what was going on. Decision that that led to was having a massive number of people come in to demonstrate the thing on a larger scale because <sup>you could</sup> in that brief time prevent some more..... and so one lesson the ~~XXXX~~ election taught, was that if you wanted to change Mississippi you had to do it with outside help. And then another lesson was that the vote was the ~~XXXX~~ most effective, vulnerable point in the established power because we never kidded ourselves that getting Mississippi Negroes the vote was going to change the economic power in the community or that it would end the injustice in the courts or any of that. If you had to pick the one place where they would the white supremacy people were the most vulnerable was the vote, cause nobody in the United States could defend not letting Negroes vote. And they knew they were vulnerable so they were illustrating all, the worst aspect of their uh whole apparatus to protect this exclusion of the vote. They saw



it as the most exposed one. So by concentrating on the vote and uh the issue of the right to vote we had something which we touch the vulnerable spot and open doors that could be followed through to try to touch other things like economics and legal problems and so on%. Clearly not that we ..... really the changes. Well then the question was what about, what will be the purpose of this massive program in the summer in specifics incidental <sup>what</sup> as to ~~what~~ Mississippi Negroes ..... and make the Negro in Mississippi aware that he could now struggle for change without being alone, without being punished for no purpose which was the most frustrating thing before, was to suffer and see no results. Well, there were a lot of ideas about that what the summer should be aimed at doing, endless discussions about how to use a thousand people. Since it was clear we had to have them there in order to achieve the basic goal but to have them t here not doing anything was obviously impossible. I remember once, I think it was Tim.... <sup>only</sup> but somebody suggested that <sup>1</sup>half jokingly that the best thing a thousand people could do was to go to Mississippi and start running around the state asking questions, find out for themselves what ~~Mississippi~~<sup>T</sup> was all about, just a..... structures. But that was never a major possibl ity. Once you were going to bring a thousand people, it was clear they should not all be students you needed lawyers, you needed doctors, you needed ministers and it was very easy to see all the roles that everybody could fill and the National ~~CHURCH~~ Churches got interested very early, they were very eager to help with various things like money which they had and none of us did. Then you had the whole civil rights groups together and over a period of time if sifted down to a voter project and a kind of ~~rx~~ community project



in those days they were community action ~~had~~ taken ~~its~~ place yet. Anyhow, the idea was to have a voters' project and a project of education uh we became eventually the freedom schools and at first there were all these <sup>ideas</sup> ideas about cultural programs, some which came off, some which didn't like the Freedom Theater <sup>Summer</sup> did come and helped and other kind of ancillary things but on the vote, then the question was what was this over all vote being aimed at within this general overall context of wanting to get the people there and then wanting them to have something to do constructively and then wanting the vote to be one of the things that they were doing because it was the most vulnerable illustration of Mississippi repression for everybody to see. What exactly to do about the vote, well in '63 you had the governorship election, it was easy, in '64 there wasn't one .... the congressional and the presidential, so at that point the logical thing to do was to try to figure out where the most interest could be aroused in a political way for voting. The trouble with the congressional was that it wasn't until November and so if you had kids in Mississippi this summer or anybody in Mississippi this summer they couldn't work on anything more immediate than November would kind of weaken their impetus so and after all presidential elections coming up and that was the major item in the country, so why not aim at the presidency? Of course in 1963, Kennedy was alive and and their freedom..... and the assumption was that we would be attempting to keep Mississippi for Kennedy. One of the big issues in the election of '63 was whether Paul Johnson was vigorously opposed to Kennedy, which one was Kennedy's candidate. In fact, we said in our campaign that we were the only candidates that were for Kennedy. It was one of the things that the Freedom campaign said in the fall of '63. There was no thought of a third party,



we were the Kennedy Democratic Party. So that the idea that there would be any kind of support for a national third party was not present, it was always clear even though we were running<sup>in</sup> the general election that we were the only Democratic Party in Mississippi. We were running in the general election cause we couldn't get in the Democratic Primary but everyone was a Democrat in the sense that we were for the national Democratic Party. They were not satisfied with it, but they were for it, for Kennedy for re-election. Uh, now then the second, the following summer when this all was to go on, Mississippi was to be selecting delegates to represent them at the National Convention, clearly the white Mississippi delegation would be opposed to Kennedy and subsequently Lyndon Johnson so therefore there was to be a carry over, there was to be a fight made over the selection of delegates. And that's how we evolved into the idea of challenging the delegation at the National Convention. There would get the most publicity of showing, most publicizing what was going on, what voting was all about in Mississippi. It would be the most relevant to the issues of civil rights and to the question of getting people to feel that their work in the summer would be aimed at some process that would have a culmination to it and they would be there to participate in it. So that's why it was decided to contest delegates to the Democratic Convention. But it did mean that we were at least, <sup>SINCE</sup> one of the reasons that we would be contesting delegates was that they weren't Democrats, Paul Johnson's people. It means that we had to say that we were functioning as Democrats, if we were to challenge a Democratic delegation. No one ever suggested we should, well I don't mean no one ever suggested but it was never seriously thought that we would contest simultaneously the Republican delegation although technically. I don't see any reason why not to



they were equally racist, but nobody had the intention of not supporting Kennedy, I mean there wasn't even an issue uh, whether Republicans even if Goldwater hadn't been the candidate and it wasn't clear he would be the candidate there was no serious effort to challenge the Republican the racists Republicans in Mississippi which is an indication of how strong and committed everybody was subconsciously to the Democratic Party. So that started the Freedom Democratic Party put of the freedom ballot came the idea of challenging the delegation at the Convention and then the Congressional people the following fall, the nature of the Convention well,

(Anne) Before we start on the..... The big thing that's missing is the logistics and the actual idea for the Freedom Democratic Party and the idea of challenging the Democratic Convention, how the, this was decided upon, how the situation with COFO and the whole idea of Mississippi ~~being~~ Freedom Democratic Party, the April meeting, how this came about who was responsible for it?

(Al) Well, COFO was never really strong on procedure, so there wasn't any clear basis for deciding how things were to be decided, there was a nebulous notion that all the participating organizations had to agree to something. But, in terms of voting strength, it was very difficult to know who had votes in COFO, uh, SNCC workers tended to vote all of the time to vote at COFO meetings, uh, but did that mean that all NAACP members could vote if they showed up, well sometimes people would come as delegates, sometime they would come as an individual even though there were delegates assigned. As long as there was no issue, you see it didn't matter very much, and it was the only convention at which there was



specific votes had taken place that I can remember and the Aaron Henry nomination which was by convention and everybody wanted Aaron to run, it wasn't as if somebody opposed his nomination and you'd have a question of who could vote. Aaron was then head of COFO as well as head of NAA in Mississippi so he was the

(Anne) & this was in '63 when you ran him for governor, I'd been wondering.....

(Al) oh yeah, there was a convention to nominate a candidate for governor and Aaron was nominated.

(Anne) when was this in September?

(AL) Maybe October first. It was in the early fall.

(Anne) Right

(Al) That convention nominated Aaron, now Ed was added to the ticket after the convention adjourned. Uh, but everybody was very excited that Ed would run because it made it an integrated ticket and of course, because of his own ~~was~~ qualities, so that there was no issue about that. If one of the cooperating organizations had opposed the nomination of Ed there wouldn't have offered it because there was no convention to nominate. The convention had authorized the nomination of Aaron and authorized the campaign and Ed was the obvious candidate to add to the ticket for lieutenant governor. Uh, but sometimes COFO staff meeting, see there was an effort for a while to distinguish between membership meetings and staff meetings, in that case the COFO staff would have been usually interpreted being SNCC staff was, there were three people from CORE who were there full time, plus Charlie Evers from NAA and maybe



one or two from SCLC , but the general idea of staff was that they were full time , paid in a sense, SNCC wasn't paid much, but full time staff member , of course they would be at staff meetings, whereas a larger audience would include representatives of the NAA chapters around the state~~ry~~ or CORE chapters where there were---very few of those you know , but they would then participate in a convention which was not just staff, but was also membership. But the ~~borderline~~ <sup>borderline</sup> of who could do what was quite fuzzy and SNCC had begun to become ~~d~~ imbedded in this idea of participatory democracy . Within SNCC it had ~~begun~~ <sup>begun</sup> to, to uh evolve before this in a sense it had roots earlier . But SNCC now began to perceive this as the only sort of acceptable way of dealing with the problems of organization . Participatory democracy was sort of , quite a different approach than the other organizations were used to and it confused them a great deal, they weren't quite sure , ~~what~~ <sup>what</sup> it was all about and SNCC also began saying it ~~was~~ , ~~tendency~~ <sup>tendency</sup> they spoke for the people became very strong even though, as Charlie Evers would point out, was increasing their resentment, ~~they~~ <sup>they</sup> say they speak for the people but they have 3 Mississippi or 8 Mississippi natives working with SNCC, where as we have whatever it is---10, 15 thousand people who are members of NAA. We speak for Mississippi and SNCC would say that that was only the middle class, and ~~was~~ <sup>they were</sup> ~~manipulative~~ <sup>manipulative</sup> of the Democratic structure. So you had all this tension of who was speaking for who. The inclination being to seize upon the image of speaking for the Mississippi Negro very strong on the part of SNCC and one of the things that was resented by the other groups, at least by some of the other groups. Now NAA, also



felt since it financed the thing pretty well, the NAA had a lot of money tied up in bonds, so usually, or felt it was left with bills for other activities cause other groups couldn't pay them. The National NAA could get into the act which further complicated things, because everything was not peaches and cream between Charlie Evers and Aaron in Mississippi and the national office of NAA, there were tensions there, which uh found occasional expression in this general vortex of confusion. ~~Anyways~~ anyway, SNCC because there was this vagueness about decision making process, was inclined to think that it should make decisions increasingly, uh, that is to say they would see themselves as understanding Mississippi Negroes better, being closer to the grass roots, being more Democratic in its participatory Democracy sense and being workers they would always think of themselves as being workers doing the organizing, everybody else was sort of sitting off in the grand stand so, it seemed to them increasingly natural they should make decisions. Uh. Other groups resented that. And those of us who were in sort of this middle position of trying to hold COFO together because it seemed so essential that it be held together really had to be pragmatic, I mean we tried to take each situation and figure out some way so that whatever was possible would be acceptable to everybody without really trying any general principles which could guide each new situation. General principles were just not available or applicable to everybody's different constituencies and ideas and contributions, sort of internal. So there was really no procedure for decisions and many decisions were made by SNCC by default, sometimes, now the question of how SNCC made its decisions is a further complication, cause as you know, SNCC Atlanta was not always in agreement with SNCC in Mississippi.



(Anne) I don't know too much about that

(Al) Well, that's another area that had a great deal of friction on and off, not always, but Forman and Moses didn't think the same way, where as later it became very clear there were strong strains within SNCC of different attitudes about working with whites and working with the structure or ~~X~~ trying to pull the whole structure down or .....

(Anne) And this came mostly from Atlanta?

(Al) Well no, it's not that clean cut a decision, but there were , SNCC Atlanta had a strcutre, there was an executive committee and that executive committee would meet and uh, I once almost, it's funny looking back at it, I almost once was in Atlanta, when they were having an executive committee meeting and I was the mediator in some ways, and uh Bob had asked me to come to the ~~NSCC~~ SNCC executive committee meeting to explain the project and try to held him to persuade them to accept it because there was great resistance to it . And th, I was at the Atlanta airport for hours waiting for Bob to ~~XXXXX~~ return a phone call to know where to come. I had to be sure I wasn't intruding. And uh, he said that I'd come to Atlanta he had na de the great point that I should come to the meeting and then ~~heX~~ as happened with Bob a great deal other things came up and the phone call that I , I never got a phone call back from him, I ~~IX~~ just sat in the airport till finally I uh, wondering whether I should come just anyway feeling so silly being there, I called the meeting and got Marion Wright who was then on the SNCC executive committee and she told me the meeting was just about over. ~~she~~ she was very ~~X~~ upset about the meeting . She came to the airport and we talked at the airport then about what had happened, but that was one of those



potential turning points in a sense, where possibly the uh, events might have flowed differently if something earlier had happened about getting an understanding of what the role of the SNCC executive committee was going to be, clarifying what people's relationships would be to each other. But Bob's forte was never organizing structuring, he never was a great believer in .... lost a ~~XXXX~~ fight in SNCC about SNCC which he thought never should be structured at all, very bitter ~~XXXX~~ fight about that with Forman when the split came very deep and uh, all the forerunners of this were present, though not in simplistic ways.. In other words, Bob would later uh, Bob was very much opposed to structure, but Bob at this point was very much in favor of the summer project which was in a sense structure. And was also very much in favor of white people coming in working, cause he thought that would help to blow open the whole situation in Mississippi quite correctly, though later he became as you know, unwilling to even talk to white people. So lots of things changed. But, the individuals may have changed views and positions but the basic lines of difficulties and tensions of the kinds of questions that were raised and the kinds of things which later emerged were always latent and present in that period of turning around in Mississippi. And, uh, at one point when SNCC, SNCC staff, I don't know whether this was Mississippi SNCC or Atlanta SNCC, I could check and find out, But at one point SNCC decided that it was against the summer project and letting whites in unless they were in a ratio of nine Negroes to one white. In other words, if you could only get 50 Negroes in you could only take whatever it would be---6---whites. Uh, and this ratio was proposed by SNCC. Now I remember Charlie Evers and some of the NAA people Aaron very upset about this, because



they, in principle were opposed to it, <sup>later</sup> it was said that Charlie Evers had tried to scuttle the summer project, but he never cooperated, there was a lot of bitterness about that. Now <sup>this</sup> ~~this~~ is not the subject of your papers, I'm not trying to get into the question of all that bad feeling and hatred between SNCC and NAA and Charlie, but it is a very complicated and ~~XXXXX~~ <sup>a</sup> difficult thing. I'm an admirer of most ~~off~~ these people on both sides which is why being a mediator was like being a hypocrite. But the dissent, the different view of ~~what~~ what the summer project should be, ~~how~~ how to recruit for it, who should be recruiting, what rules they should function under, where should they live, who should give them instructions

(Anne) What were some of the reasons the NAA was opposed to it?

Or were they ever given a chance to be opposed to it?

(Al) Well they were, officially they were for it, but they were left in a position, that is through COFO, they were left in a position where decisions were made ~~without~~ <sup>in</sup> them all the time, you see they found themselves in the position where not only were decisions made, made in a procedure they were opposed to, that is made by SNCC really, but they also, they were also decisions they opposed as decisions, so it was not only the wrong decisions but also arriving at them the wrong way. And if you're opposed to a decision but you had a crack at it you may accept it, or if you're in favor of a decision and you don't like the way it was arrived at you may accept that as, as an ultimate end, but when you're opposed both to the decision and to the way it's reached you know and that was going on, now some of the SNCC people were quite eager to exclude NAA people, felt that it would be a reactionary influence so that any kind of participatory Democracy or voice of the people being heard in a way the NAA was the enemy or at least the



obstacle. And uh, so that feeling manifested itself in different ways also, Charlie uh, well I can't ~~remember~~ remember now what the occasion was, the one convention which the SNCC people sitting in one part of the auditorium had uh made their disaffection for him very clear by well booing and carrying on when he was introduced. It was a pretty messy business. *I* It was supposed to be a unity rally, someone like Roy Wilkins had come down, *W* I forget who. *I* was designed to embarrass

(Anne) Spring of '64

(Al) So you had that kind of increasing hostility back and fourth.

Charlie in his place was inclined to denounce in public uh what he regarded as irresponsible, uncouth, sexually loose uh, all kinds of things that the freedom house came to symbolize to him. So they ~~IK~~ felt that he was uh, almost sort of worse and not an ally and he should be ..... *A* *N* *A* *A* also had problems because it had these feelings that its money was used and its name was used and it never had a right to make decisions and was trying to carry its own program. One point, Charlie, more than once, *said* what are we screwing around waiting for this business to happen, why don't we just do our own summer project. Use the NAA chapters as the base and recruit the people through us and we'll have them, there full time director and he was quite excited about it. Uh, and it's never been true or fair to say that he was opposed to a summer project. It was just not true. He was perturbed over some of the ways the summer project was proceeding and but not to the idea of a summer project.

Well we've got about five or ten minutes more, so if there is something special you want to focus on



(Anne) Because we'll have a chance to talk about the convention . . . . town. Let's go into SNCC being opposed to the summer project and that whole thing. I think that's very important.

(Al) Well, SNCC , it is unfair to say they were opposed to the summer project as such, just as unfair to say that Charlie evers was, but the question of what the summer project should be became very complicated when they were opposed to some of the ideas of what the summer project should be was sufficient, and this was Mississippi SNCC staff not Atlanta, but they were opposed sufficiently, sufficiently opposed so that they uh held meeting after meeting about it, they uh and Bob was very much for it and tried very hard to persuade them to go along, and used his enormous personal prestige and <sup>CHARISMA</sup> ~~carisma~~ to try and get them to accept the summer project. Their opposition had grown in part out of a fall project uh, part of it was the simple human fact that here were kids who had been risking their lives in Miss. for a long time and nobody even noticed it. I mean the white people who came down and t ~~XXXX~~ there was publicity. It would have taken an angel not to have resented that, this was unfair and the whites were realizing glamour for a one week trip to Mississippi and they had been there for years and nobody cared. There was a lot of whelling up of deep feelings that the whole ~~XXXX~~ injustice in American society aimed at these people who'd come down very briefly training & and because of their ~~family~~ connections and stuff had been able to take positions of considerable import very quickly and some of the SNCC people worried that they & would n't be the town or project coordinator



or something because some white person with more skills would appear on the scenes, so there was that. There were tensions over white people leaving when they were arrested, not bearing the brunt of the punishment, that local Negroes would bear, although these very often were very unfair complaints, that was in fact not really the way it was, and many places, it was the Negro community uh, deeply trusted and wanted the white people to be there felt reinforced and strengthened by the presence, even when they knew they would be there briefly. The SNCC interpretation of this very often suited their own personal resentments as co-workers. So that you had because of SNCC's tendencies to think it spoke for Mississippi Negroes and their own personal resentment at having the white person there appear and seem to try to take over they would attribute tension to the community Negroes which I think was very untrue. If the white people who came down in the fall and even the next summer when there were ~~even~~ many more of them & generalizations were difficult they by and large related very well to the Negro community and by and large left a very deep, emotional tie with Negroes that helped the white people to grow and also as well as to make Negro people feel less isolated. Now there were then strains within SNCC that were Black Nationalist, people didn't like the fact that there was a growing bond ~~between~~ between black and white in some of these areas, for that very reason resented the tie that was developing in the community. They didn't articulate it quite that way in public. But all these factors, there were a lot of factors that led to their uh resentments, personal, policy, theoretical, practical, certainly true but uh, SNCC as well as white students had a tendency as the NAA used to say of not staying in a community uh



which bothered even Bob, Bob was very trougled about getting people to expose themselves to retribution by voting in the freedom vote and then there not being any workers in the town to help them to stand what retribution would come. So the question of how, see that's another thing that the freedom election in the fall, is that it really wasn't run in an awful lot of counties. That was a result of another very difficult division within COFO as to what kind of a thing it could do, and the compromise arrived at, after a great deal of discussion and argument was that we sent letters out to all the Negroes we could get on all the lists of things like professional groups, church groups, NAA chapters and so fourth all over the state, asking them to mail in the freedom votes by mail. We sent out may 25, 50 thousand letters asking them to mail back answers back to Jackson, and they didn't have to sign the ballot, they just had to mail it in, uh, so that theoretically we did cover parts of the state that weren't covered by the campaign. But the campaign itself was limited in terms of the counties we even went to, partly as a result of Bob's decision that he didn't want to go into places where he couldn't leave workers to help the local community. So that was another factor you see, in some of the communities that were omitted from the campaign, were communities where NAA had or thought it had very strong chapters, and never could understand why it was that they weren't permitted and encouraged to ask to be part of the freedom vote you see. Then, the NAA scheduled its state convention for Biloxi right before the freedom vote, I mean it had scheduled it months before, but it held it, well of course the notion that NAA could have a state convention with several hundred Negroes, a thousand present right on the eve of this, pulling them away from the communities where they should have been



working, would in any normal campaign been unthinkable, but in this campaign uh, NAA had no reason not to do it in a ~~sense~~ because nobody had included these people . And, so when EOFO.

(Anne) Even though they were all a part of COFO, I don't understand that.

(Al) Cause SNCC was really sort of running the operation and their attitude about it was

(Anne) Do you have a cigarette I can borrow from you

(Al) Aaron was in this very tightrope position of not being able to alienate SNCC which he had the bulk of his full time workers were SNCC and so he and I both spoke at that convention at Biloxi and we both spoke ~~for~~ <sup>censor</sup> ~~for~~ the freedom vote, ~~was~~ and nobody tried to ~~cancel~~ it, we made impassioned appeals for everybody to work for the freedom ticket and everybody cheered, I mean the convention was clearly for the freedom ticket. So that it wasn't that the freedom ticket was rejected by the NAA convention it was simply that the timing of it produced resentment. A lot of COFO type people , SNCC people would say you can see how interested they are in the election, they're going pulling all their people away from the communities down to Biloxi right when we need them, but of course, they hadn't tried to integrate them in the campaign structure partly out of fear that they would conservative forces would take over the party and would make it an image of sort of the establishment kind of Negro, the Uncle Tom kind of Negro and so on. So that , you see, even in Mississippi, even the Uncle Toms were for the freedom party. <sup>It's</sup> It's important to understand, I mean that anyone you call an uncle tom and therefore the fight within that structure to control the freedom party was something of great importance to SNCC. And they didn't want great number of the middle class so called conservative



Negroes involved very deeply for those reasons. So it was, what I'm trying to say in balance it fed it both ways, you had the convention in Biloxi. Certainly if it was going to be held right before the freedom vote and in a normal campaign it should have been a rally for the freedom vote, should have been a place where organizations was done, people were set up to take care of certain precincts, ballot boxes, extend the campaign in the community, well that kind of thing depended on SNCC, on COFO through SNCC using this relationship of NAA to COFO to try to develop that. And they weren't prepared for that and many of them would have been opposed to that. So on the other hand the COFO emotional fervor for Aaron and Ed at the Biloxi convention was very strong and everybody there who had any connection to it supported the freedom ticket. But that held down the votes. It held down the total number of Negroes who were involved.

And uh, produced deep resentments both ways for the reasons you can see.

(Anne) When was the big, uh, big discussion you had about whether or not to have the summer project. (with SNCC people)

(Al) It was held for months. I remember

(Anne) I understand there were a series of meetings in Jan. and Feb. small meetings. Who took part in them?

(Al) There were meetings everywhere. I mean there were meetings in Jackson, Atlanta, you know. The big decision to have the summer project officially was made, I can check notes to get the date, but Feb. in Jackson, It was called the COFO meeting which everybody but you see before then, the SNCC staff had agreed to it, so at the COFO meeting which agreed on the summer project there wasn't any floor fight about it, the problem that



would have brought about who votes, it was all agreed to before that, and that rally, meeting was more or less of a rally. Trying to get people primed for it. Uh, who spoke at that meeting? Well, Aaron presided, Bob spoke, Dave Dennis, I think, for CORE, I made a speech about warning people that they were going to have retribution. Cause that seemed to be an important thing that people should be reminded, that is to say not the staff workers but the community that was present at the..... meeting. There were several hundred Negroes from around the state there you see, through their ties to the Negro organizations which were participating in COFO and since they were going to have to house people, cooperate with them, they really had to be warned of the price they were going to pay. Also give them the feeling that this would have results, it wouldn't be a repetition of paying price for nothing happening. This could open things up. All of that, but that was really what the meeting was all about was decided on the summer project, it wasn't a debated close decision, it was a situation where the decision had been made by everybody separately in their own meetings and then COFO ratified it and had the strategy rally, discussing everybody's, you know getting people to volunteer, <sup>who would</sup> ~~to~~ organize homes ~~and~~ in Bolivar County or where ever it was you see in each county area volunteer people. Then after that meeting we had a smaller meeting in a cafe in which we discussed who would be in charge of which specific projects or area of projects for the summer. And uh, the business of my doing recruiting, someone ~~W~~ else trying to get money, although these all overlap, but basic areas sort of to start from.



were sketched in and worked out that day after the COFO meeting. HAX

I've got to go.