



Freedom Summer Legacy Banquet

Statement of the Occasion

By Julian Bond

Jackson Convention Complex

Jackson, Mississippi

June 28, 2014

The state of Mississippi, the site of Freedom Summer '64, has always held a special place in the American imagination.

Mississippi-born author Richard Wright wrote a list of topics southern blacks dared not raise in conversation with whites at mid-century:

“American white women, the Ku Klux Klan, France; how black soldiers fared there, French women, the black boxer Jack Johnson, the entire northern part of the United States, the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, General Sherman, Catholics, the Pope, Jews, the Republican Party, slavery, social equality, Communism, Socialism, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, or any topic calling for positive knowledge or manly self-assertion on the part of the Negro.”

Bob Moses of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, said:

“When you are in Mississippi, the rest of America doesn't seem real; and when you are in the rest of America, Mississippi doesn't seem real.”

And William Faulkner said:

“To understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi.”

And Nina Simone said:

“Mississippi Goddam!”

In the fall of 1963, while what would become the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was being debated in Washington, momentous events were occurring in the Magnolia state.

Then, few additional black people had been registered to vote in Mississippi, despite the best efforts of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO)¹ staff - most of them from SNCC.

Registration drives in Greenwood, Mississippi, had produced little; after some initial publicity, the press had moved elsewhere. The federal government had intervened when violence seemed imminent, but made no move to help get blacks registered to vote.

In Mississippi, Bob Moses had begun discussing the idea of a "Freedom Vote" campaign. Mississippi's unregistered blacks would be asked to cast symbolic "Freedom Votes" in a mock election that would parallel the statewide election in Mississippi that fall. For Moses and other COFO workers, the "Freedom Vote" was both an organizing tool as well as a chance to demonstrate that blacks in Mississippi did want to vote.



¹ The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) was a coalition of national and regional organizations engaged in civil rights activities in Mississippi. Established in 1962 with the goal of maximizing the efforts of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the organization focused on voter registration and education. Under the leadership of SNCC activist Robert Moses, and staffed primarily by SNCC activists, COFO launched the Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964. (The MLK Institute, Stanford University)

Freelance social activist Allard Lowenstein suggested to Moses that he be allowed to recruit white students for the "Freedom Vote" campaign; they would provide needed manpower, and their white skins might provoke interest from the news media that black skins could not produce.

Lowenstein recruited 100 students from Yale - including yet-to-be United States Senator Joseph Lieberman - and from Stanford to come to Mississippi between late October and November 4, 1963, Election Day. The mock election's candidates were Aaron Henry and Tougaloo Chaplain Ed King. Henry was President of the Mississippi State Conference of NAACP Branches, and he and King were running for Governor and Lt. Governor respectively. Their platform was radically different from usual Mississippi candidates - they called for school desegregation, fair employment, and a \$1.25 minimum wage. Over 80,000 blacks cast "Freedom Votes" while journalists flocked to interview the white students, and FBI agents appeared where none had been before.

For most purposes, the presence of the white students from Yale and Stanford was a great success. They brought media and FBI attention to the movement that both had ignored before.

During a SNCC staff meeting in Greenville in mid-November, the idea of more white students coming to Mississippi for a longer time was considered.

At the December COFO meeting, the idea was discussed again. There were suggestions that the number of whites be limited to 100. In late December, SNCC's Executive Committee approved the idea and sent SNCC staff to COFO's January, 1964 meeting to lobby for the idea. The COFO staff gave its agreement.

Moses had argued:

"These students bring the rest of the country with them. They're from good schools and their parents are influential."

Stokely Carmichael said,

"With all these people here (in Mississippi), national attention will be here."

Later James Forman wrote,

"We made a conscious attempt to recruit from Ivy League schools - to recruit a counter power elite."

From the very first, there were political differences SNCC had to overcome. Al Lowenstein had reportedly told Stanford students they would work during the summer under his direction; in Boston, recruiter Barney Frank was saying those he recruited would be under Lowenstein's direction too. Lowenstein further wanted the summer's work directed from New York. SNCC and COFO would not allow Lowenstein to dominate. SNCC moved its national headquarters from Atlanta to Greenwood for the summer.

The fact the volunteers would have to be self-supporting, limiting the number of blacks, also meant that volunteers would be slightly older than typical college students. Most recruitment was done by Friends of SNCC groups around the country, established by SNCC to provide funds and political support for the southern movement. Other civil rights groups with campus chapters - especially CORE - did recruiting too. To avoid control by Lowenstein or other outsiders, applications were sent directly to the COFO office in Jackson.

The applicants were hardly typical Americans. Average median family income in the United States in 1960 was \$5,660; the Freedom Summer's applicants' family income was 50% higher - \$8,417. Median income for a Mississippi black family was only \$1,444. Thus, the poorest people in the United States would play host for the summer to the children of the most privileged.



Living in the poorest state in the United States, most of Mississippi's black population worked in non-mechanized cotton farming. In 1960, 68% of all Mississippi blacks lived in rural areas. In the rest of the United States, only 38% of blacks were rural. The median non-white income of \$1,444 was the lowest in the United States. Eighty-six percent of all non-white families in Mississippi lived below the federal poverty level. In 1960, the sixth grade was the median education level of Mississippi blacks over 25. For whites, it was the 11th grade. Forty-two percent of whites had finished 12 years of school; only 7% of blacks had gone that far. In 1964, Mississippi spent \$21.77 per black child and \$81.86 per white child. In Holly Bluff, Mississippi, education expenditures were \$191.70 for each white child and \$1.26 for each black child.

Infant mortality rates for blacks were twice as high as for whites. Two-thirds of all black housing was "deteriorated" or "dilapidated." Half of all black housing had no piped water; two-thirds of all black housing had no flush toilets.

In 1960, only 7% of voting-age Mississippi blacks had registered to vote. Five counties had black population majorities and not a single registered black voter. In Coahoma County, 95% of the eligible whites were registered to vote.

But it was the black people, Mississippi's finest, women and men, who not only welcomed the volunteers into their homes and to their tables, but who worked side by side with them.

Applications from summer volunteers came from 233 schools. Elite private universities - Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and Princeton - provided 40% or 123 of the 736 who applied. One hundred and forty-five others came from elite public schools - Berkeley, Michigan, Wisconsin. Students from the highest-ranking public and private schools provided more than half of the applicant pool. They included President Clinton's lawyer, David Kendall, and author Susan Brownmiller.

They were the children of the powerful, if not the rich. Some volunteers listed as their references Eugene Rostow, Arthur Goldberg, Bill Moyers, William Sloane Coffin, Herbert Marcuse, and Reps. Phil Burton and Don Edwards, (D. - Ca.).

Of the applicants, 10% were married, usually to another potential volunteer. Very few were parents.

Ninety percent of the applicants were white, a figure reflecting both the need to be self-supporting and the fact that during the 1961 - '62 school year, blacks were only 2.9% of all college students in America.

Forty-nine percent of the applicants were female, a higher number than the percentage of women in college; in 1964, women were only 39% of undergraduate students in the United States.

Most of the students came from the Great Lakes, Mid-Atlantic, and Far West states. Almost half - 46.3% - came from Illinois, New York and California. Only 11% were from the South; most of these were black.

Their average age was 23. Twenty-two percent had full-time jobs; 70% of those were teachers.

Before the project began, the volunteers described themselves as optimistic and idealistic, religiously motivated, patriotic, and, as conventional leftists, generally socialists.

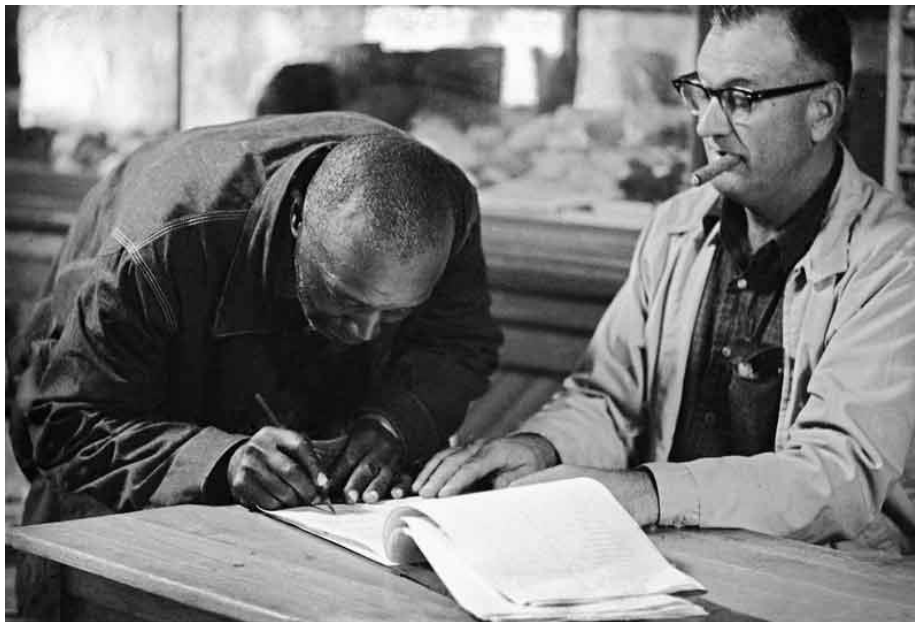
Forty-eight percent belonged to a civil rights group; 21% to a church or religious group; 14% to a socialist or leftist organization; 13% to an affiliate of the Democratic or Republican Party; 13% to an academic organization; and 10% to a teachers' organization.

Half belonged to a CORE chapter or a Friends of SNCC organization. Fully 90% had some kind of civil rights experience, and 25% of the volunteers knew another volunteer.

All those under 21 had to have parental permission. Most were interviewed on campus by someone from a Friends of SNCC organization. Seventy were rejected - most because they were under age or applied too late. Twenty-five percent of the selected applicants were no-shows.

When interviewed later, 25% of the no-shows said their parents had convinced them not to go.

Many of the summer volunteers spent their time preparing for the "Freedom Vote" as well as in regular registration work, and documenting the delays, obstruction, harassment and terror which became evidence for lawsuits, the MFDP's Atlantic City Democratic Convention challenge, and a congressional challenge in the fall.



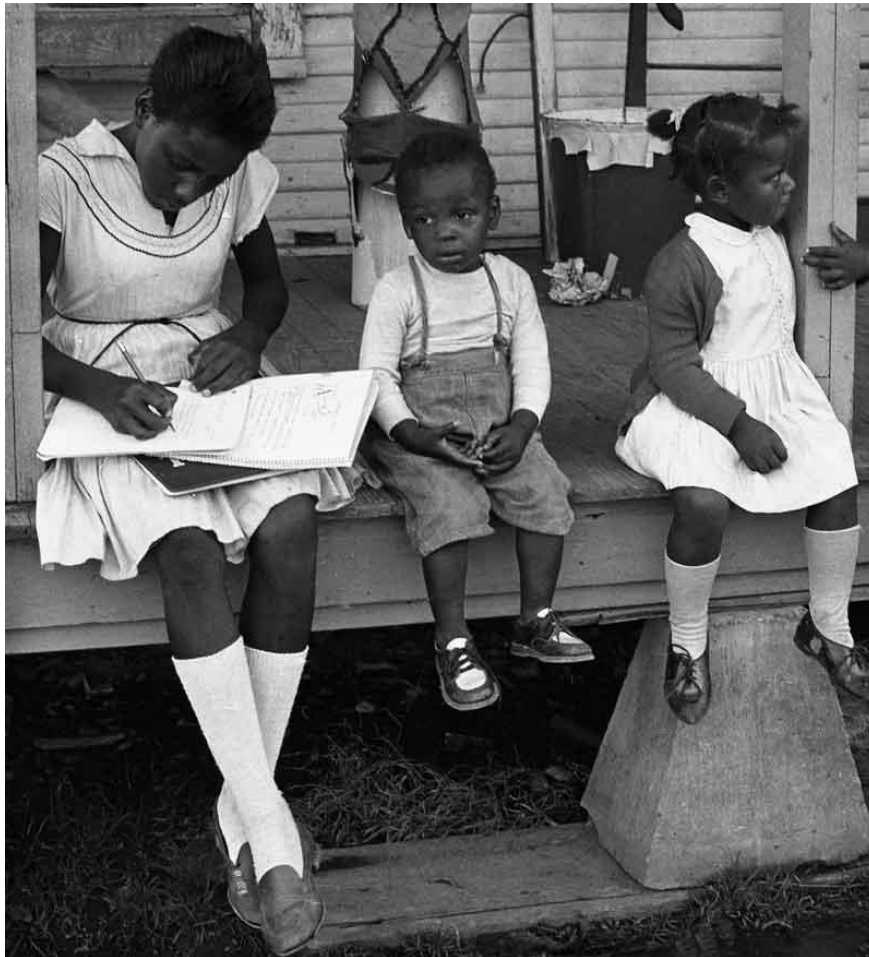
Volunteers also helped to organize the steps required to establish the MFDP as a bona fide political party. On August 6, 1964, 68 delegates, including 4 whites, were elected to represent the party at the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City.

Other volunteers worked in Freedom Schools. Conceived by SNCC worker Charlie Cobb, the schools were intended in his words to:

"provide an educational experience for students to make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities and to find alternatives, and ultimately new directions for action."

The National Council of Churches had sponsored a meeting to develop the Freedom Schools' curriculum: it consisted of remedial education; leadership development; contemporary issues, which related local, national and world affairs to the children's current condition; and nonacademic subjects which included arts and crafts, poetry and play writing, and a student newspaper.

Over 3,500 students attended.



At the summer's end, 3 project workers had been killed; 4 people had been critically wounded; and 80 workers had been beaten. There had been over 1,000 arrests; 35 shooting incidents, 37 churches bombed or burned; and 30 black businesses or homes burned.

The summer's climax was a challenge to the seating of the regular Democratic Party's delegation, a challenge frustrated by President Lyndon Johnson, fearful that his reelection chances would be lost if black Mississippians replaced whites.

Johnson's forces offered to allow two representatives from the Freedom Democrats. Mrs. Hamer said notably, "We didn't come for no two seats, 'cause all of us is tired."

Eighty of the volunteers decided to stay after the summer was over; the majority of those who chose to stay were white women.

In the process of the summer's work, many volunteers learned organizing skills they would take with them into what became the New Left. One, Mario Savio, returned to Berkeley; within months, he and others had begun the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. Its explosions quickly spread anti-establishment and anti-war sentiment to campuses across the country.

The volunteers gathered much of the attention during Freedom Summer, but it was the black people of Mississippi who made it possible. They sheltered us, they fed us, they protected us, and most of all, they welcomed us.

SNCC worker Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons described her welcome to Laurel, Mississippi.

She writes:

“Laurel had no infrastructure set up for the project. Yet three of us were assigned there but living initially in Hattiesburg. The three of us were: Lester McKinney, Jimmy Garrett and me. We were told initially that it was too dangerous to assign any whites until we had opened up the place. We were given a list of names of NAACP members. One of these persons on the list was Mrs. Eberta Spinks. When I knocked on her door and she opened it, I was fumbling trying to figure out how to introduce myself. She looked at me very intently and said: "Are you one of those Freedom Riders?" I said, "Yes Mam." She said: "Come on in; I have been waiting on you all of my life!"²

As it happened, the Freedom Summer registered few voters. But that was not the measure of its success. It did build community centers, it opened the minds and widened the horizons of many Mississippi children, and it invited America into Mississippi through the eyes and experiences of the summer volunteers. It established the MFDP, which would play an important role in Mississippi politics for years to come; the MFDP's lawsuits against the state's continual attempts to block, gerrymander and otherwise interfere with the right to vote established important legal principles that had widespread effects on reapportionment and voting rights throughout the nation.

Freedom Summer demonstrated that no part of the United States was "off limits" to civil rights workers. The Summer's activities helped to pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act, signed into law on July 2, 1964.

However, the successes Freedom Summer achieved resulted from its embrace of a paradox - it tried to fight bigotry by appealing to people more concerned about whites, not blacks. Appealing to the nation's racism accepted white supremacy.

² Simmons email to Bond, June 4, 2014



By acknowledging its dependence on whites to popularize the civil rights struggle in the South, SNCC contradicted its rhetorical belief in the equal worth of all races, and undermined its insistence that indigenous blacks were best prepared to lead the struggle for their deliverance from white dominance.

Some volunteers - unconsciously or not - fed the expectation that white involvement was necessary for black advancement. Some volunteers expressed dismay that blacks were not more grateful for their presence and the sacrifices they made to spend the summer in Mississippi. The enormous media attention volunteers received - one reason they were initially recruited - also helped feed resentment from blacks who had labored in obscurity until white youth came to share the summer. Some volunteers suffered from what one called "a Jesus Christ complex"; Forman described a "local people-itis" or "bourgeois sentimentalism" in which volunteers over-idealized the people with whom they worked, a mirror of the condescension and patronizing relationship between superior and inferior the movement was intended to destroy.

In mid-September, 1964, a meeting was held in New York to discuss COFO and the possibility of a future Summer Project. The NAACP's representative said his organization could not participate in the future because SNCC dominated COFO. Allard Lowenstein wanted to establish - again - a New York based group to run a future Summer Project. Several of those in attendance objected to the presence of the Lawyer's Guild, an organization of leftist lawyers.

Before the 1964 summer project began, Jack Greenberg, who had succeeded Thurgood Marshall as Director of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, told Bob Moses that if SNCC used Guild lawyers, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund would not participate in Mississippi. SNCC had earlier committed itself to open association when challenged to distance itself from Anne and Carl Braden, the leaders of Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF). Moses said he couldn't be forced to choose; the decision not to participate would be the NAACP's; Greenberg eventually decided to take part.

SNCC's policy of freedom of association played a large role in moving the "New Left" away from the non-Communist "Old Left's" preoccupation with Communists and its susceptibility to Red-baiting. Segregationists had always used Red-baiting as a tactic to discredit the civil rights movement; the movement's usual response had been to turn on itself, engage in purges, and split into warring camps. SNCC's principled stand helped to end the factionalism, at least for a while.

While no multi-sponsored second Summer Project did take place, in 1965 the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) sponsored the Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) project, with 180 student volunteers in 30 Georgia and Alabama counties.

Like the 1964 Freedom Summer in Mississippi, they registered very few voters.

The New York meeting was an early signal to SNCC and COFO that "liberals" wanted to control the Mississippi movement. In January, 1965, Dorothy Zellner, then head of Boston Friends of SNCC, reported that graduate student Barney Frank, a Lowenstein protégé and recruiter for the 1964 Freedom Summer, told her that a series of meetings had been held to "change the decision-making base of COFO so it 'won't be dominated by SNCC.'" Frank told Zellner the new governing board would be controlled by people who would put resources into Mississippi in the future; the new groups disagreed with SNCC's view of society, Zellner reported. "What they want is to let the Negro into the existing society, not to change it."³

Liberals like Lowenstein were right to be worried about SNCC's politics and direction in late 1964, and SNCC correct to be worried about 'liberals.' John Lewis' March on Washington speech had been censured after pressure from liberals in the White House. The liberal foundations that supported the Voter Education Project gave SNCC less money than they gave other civil rights groups, although SNCC had more staff doing more work in more places. Liberals had threatened to cut off legal help from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund if SNCC accepted help from the Lawyer's Guild. SNCC wanted to do more than challenge segregation in the deep South. At the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, it intended to challenge the Democratic Party itself. As the Mississippi staff prepared for the Atlantic City challenge and slowed down from Freedom Summer, '64, the SNCC voter registration project in Selma, in central Alabama was heating up.

³ Undated memo from Dorothy Zellner to SNCC staff, probably early 1965, in author's possession.



But that is another story for another day.

Much of this activity grew from the sit-in protests of 1960. Those protests were the first and last times in modern America that size-able numbers of college aged black and white youth engaged in massive and risky civil rights protests in the United States.

There have been other times and in some other places where political activism arose among the young, but the 1960s particularly come to mind.

Why then, and why not since? Why not now?

Why don't college aged young people gather together now to insure that the unregistered are registered and the large population of occasional voters are encouraged to cast their votes?

The people of the movement pioneered in so many ways, and we broke so much new ground – why aren't we breaking new ground now?

What happened to our White Peoples Project, who today is organizing working class whites, who speaks of black and white together now?

We are told in every off-election year that the party out of power will lose votes; the president's party will lose legislative seats; his party will suffer defeats.

Why does that have to be so?

What would it take to get the people in this room, and the people they know, and people elsewhere to dedicate their free time and weekends to civic activity, to registering voters, to helping them become aggressive citizens, to insure the good guys win and the bad guys lose?

Do it in memory of Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andy Goodman.

We know the deaths of Louis Allen and Herbert Lee and countless others can be ascribed to their participation in the fight for the right to vote.⁴

They were part of a largely anonymous army of martyrs sacrificed to this fight – women and men whose deaths went largely unnoticed except for their families and friends.

Young people could show their elders the way – because this is a job for everyone.

The campaign to suppress minority voting continues to this day – in places high and low, in federal, state and local elections. We might call it the continued and continual pursuit of the crime of “voting while black”.

In 2004, the NAACP and People for the American Way (PFAW) documented the long history of present day efforts to keep racial minorities from casting their votes. The deployment of armed guards and real and make-believe police officers posted at the polls to frighten voters of color. Black voters being told they could vote on alternative days, even after the actual election day had passed. Our report described poll officials demanding forms of identification not required by law. It told of black voters being warned that outstanding warrants or an unpaid utility bill would prevent them from voting.

In some cases, voters were told immigration officials would haunt the polls. The suppressors constructed phony purge lists which included names of long-time legitimate voters. They loosed the FBI and state police on elderly voters. They set up so-called “ballot security” and “ballot integrity” programs, in which “security” and “integrity” meant the unfounded presumption that minorities would behave badly by nature, and they harassed and intimidated those voters at will.

That was just ten years ago. In so many ways things are exactly the same or worse now.

Various states, mostly the Civil War’s traitor states, have shortened or eliminated early voting, a practice particularly favored by black voters. Other states have harassed registration drives, threatening to turn civic-minded volunteers into inadvertent criminals, so much so in Florida that the League of Women Voters abandoned 72 years of registration drives. Other states eliminated or reduced absentee voting opportunities, a key voting tool favored by young adults away from home at college hoping to vote in their home states. In North Carolina, they ended a pre-registration program for high school students nearing voting age.

⁴ “Jerry DeMuth papers, 1962–1987; SC3065; WIHVD850-A”. **1964 Freedom Summer Collection at the Wisconsin Historical Society**



Howard Zinn, whom I met when he was a professor at Atlanta's Spellman College, wrote about the risks and rewards of participating in a movement for social justice:

"...even if people lack the customary attributes of power -- money, political authority, physical force -- as did the black people of the Deep South, there is a power that can be created out of spent-up indignation, courage, and the inspiration of a common cause, and if enough people put their minds and bodies into that cause, they can win. It is a phenomenon recorded again and again in the history of popular movements against injustice all over the world..."

"Not to believe in the possibility of dramatic change is to forget that things have changed, not enough, of course, but enough to show what is possible. We have been surprised before in history. We can be surprised again. Indeed, we can do the surprising. ..."

“The reward for participating in a movement for social justice is not the prospect of future victory. It is the exhilaration of standing together with other people, taking risks together, enjoying small triumphs and enduring disenheartening setbacks – together.”⁵

Let us go forward in the struggle.

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(Julian Bond was SNCC’s Communications Director in charge of relations with the media and supervising printed material. From February 1998 until February 2010, Julian was Chairman of the NAACP Board of Directors and is now Chairman Emeritus. He is a Distinguished Scholar in the School of Government at American University in Washington, DC, and a Professor Emeritus in History at the University of Virginia.)

⁵ Howard Zinn, You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train, 1994, Beacon Press.