



# THE ALGEBRA PROJECT

*"Math literacy is the key to 21<sup>st</sup> century citizenship."*

*Board of Directors: Khari J. Milner, Chair; LaDon James, Vice Chair; Margaret Burnham, Secretary; BJ Walker, Interim-Treasurer; Danny Glover; James Donaldson; Herbert Brown II, Robert Moses, President.*

## **Reflections from Bob Moses On the Mississippi Theater of the Civil Rights Movement On the occasion of the passing of John Doar**

### **1. I meet John on the telephone on August 15, 1961:**

Ella Baker and Jane Stenbridge sent me on a scouting trip for SNCC in the summer of 1960, the same summer John joined the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department. That summer Amzie Moore, head of the Cleveland NAACP laid out for me the concept of a voter registration insurgency in the Mississippi Delta. I "signed up" to work for SNCC on Amzie's concept and returned to teaching math at the Horace Mann School in NY.

Nashville SNCC picked up the Freedom Rides after the bus burning in Anniston, Alabama, and on a Wednesday morning, May 24, 1961, the student driven sit-in movement rode into Mississippi on a Greyhound bus.

Shortly after I returned to Cleveland in July 1961, I boarded the back of a Greyhound bus and headed for McComb. C.C. Bryant, head of the McComb NAACP, had written Amzie asking for voter registration workers and Amzie sent me to C.C. Webb Owens, the McComb NAACP treasurer, met me at the bus station and I settled in as part of C.C.'s family. Webb came early every morning to take us in a local taxi to Burgland. We made the rounds of black people who did business with the black community soliciting \$5 and \$10 contributions to support two SNCC field secretaries to come do voter registration for the summer. Webb, the treasurer of the local NAACP chapter, kept the money in his back pocket "safe deposit."

We began in McComb, but as news of the SNCC voter registration drive spread by local radio, Mrs. Matilda Schoby came with her sister, Mrs. Bertha Lee Hughes, and her brother, Earnest Isaac, and asked if we would accompany them to Liberty, the county seat of Amite. Webb, "Super Cool Daddy," stashed his cane in front of him, leaning on both hands, and stared in stone silence: McComb was one thing, Liberty was another.

The highway patrol that sat all morning at the foot of the sloping lawn in front of courthouse flagged us down as soon as we crossed the county line back into Pike and I was arrested. Chuck McDew, chairperson of SNCC, had told me to call the Justice Department collect and ask for John Doar, so I did as I was told. John answered the phone and accepted a collect call by a SNCC field secretary on a voter registration attempt, from the county court house in Magnolia, Mississippi.

Bob Moses, and SNCC, instantly became, locally, serious interventionists to be reckoned with.

2. I meet John in person at E.W. Steptoe's farmhouse on Sept. 24, 1961:

Two weeks later, a phone call wouldn't do. I was living now as part of the Steptoe family in the rural of Amite County. E.W. and his wife Sing had eight children and the two youngest, Charlie and Shirley Jean were still at home. I accompanied Curtis Dawson and Preacher Knox to register to vote in Liberty on August 29 and was attacked on Main Street as we made our way to the courthouse.

Webb had enough funds in his "back pocket" bank account to support two SNCC field secretaries: Reggie Robinson and John Hardy.

That August, Hardy took Ruby Magee, a student at Jackson State, to register at Tylertown in Walthall County and was attacked by the registrar which prompted an arrest by the sheriff. Burke Marshall, Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, decided to take action to enjoin Mississippi from prosecuting Hardy and sent John down to prepare an unprecedented case: The Department of Justice petitioning the Federal District Court to halt a local criminal prosecution before it began.

I was at Steptoe's on Sunday, September 24 when John stopped by before returning to D.C. I have a vivid memory of Steptoe's overwhelming warm welcome spurred by the realization that we were really not completely isolated, that the federal government was an active ally. John was taken aback by the reality of bandages on my head from the attack a month ago in Liberty, the FBI had "neglected" to follow investigation protocol 101 and take pictures. On Monday, reality took us all back. I left with John who dropped me off in McComb on his way to Hattiesburg to catch a plane for D.C. That Monday afternoon, Dr. Anderson, who had stitched me up, came by to alert me of a body that had lain for hours at the cotton gin in Liberty before being transported to a McComb funeral home. Herbert Lee had been murdered by Eugene Hurst, his neighbor and a member of the state legislature, at the Cotton Gin that morning.

What does the Constitution require? forbid? permit?

Goodwin Liu in his article, Education, Equality, and National Citizenship (Yale Law Journal, 330, 2006-2007) makes the following argument:

“... the Fourteenth Amendment authorizes and obligates Congress to ensure a meaningful floor of educational opportunity throughout the nation. The argument focuses on the Amendment’s opening words, the guarantee of national citizenship. This guarantee does more than designate a legal status. Together with section 5, it obligates the national government to secure the full membership, effective participation, and equal dignity of all citizens in the national community.”

Step toe’s response to John came from the sense that John, in his role as representative of the national government embodied a conviction to secure the full membership, effective participation and equal dignity in the national community of black citizens. But how did that translate at ground zero of Mississippi voter registration work?

3. Burke Marshall, John Doar, and the U.S. Department of Justice permit Mississippi SNCC voter registration workers access to the 1957 Civil Rights Bill’s legal crawl space.

We all operated in a zone of constitutional permissiveness: SNCC, and later the COFO summer project volunteers, were permitted to carry out voter registration work; Mississippi was permitted to lock us up; the Department of Justice was permitted to set us free. Nothing was required and nothing, not even murder, was forbidden. Everything was on the table, including massive civil disobedience through direct action. All that was required was the understanding that everything is on the table, nothing was required, and nothing, including long years of jail, forbidden. When representatives of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) came through with plans for violent offensive action we were still in the same zone and all that was required was an understanding that everything is on the table.

But the Mississippi Theater of SNCC rejected both operation MOM (Move On Mississippi with massive direct action) and operation RAM. We, in fact, agreed in the years before Medgar's assassination, to exploit the legal crawl space put in play by the much maligned 1957 Civil Rights Act. Republican President Dwight Eisenhower and Democrat Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson did not have SNCC in mind when they passed a bill that gave the newly formed Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice permission to halt state action interfering with voter registration applicants or people assisting them:

On August 31, 1962, when SNCC field secretaries accompanied a bus load of applicants from Ruleville to Indianola (the trip that brought Fannie Lou Hamer into SNCC); in March of 1963 when SNCC field secretaries are arrested in Greenwood after the SNCC car carrying Jimmy Travis, Bob Moses and Randolph Blackwell is grease gunned on the highway; in May of 1963 when Hartman Turnbow's home was gunned and I was arrested, Mississippi is permitted to lock us up, but Burke and John are likewise permitted to, and do, set us free.

We operated a low-grade Mississippi guerilla war with a black network of NAACP members and others, who surfaced as part of guerilla action, forming its base into which SNCC field secretaries did "disappear" to be housed, fed and "harbored." But that action took place within a larger constitutional context, and a triangle of three constitutional cultures: The adjudicated Constitution of Supreme Court decisions, dissents and arguments; the legislative Constitution that Liu speaks of, obligating the national government to secure the full membership, effective participation, and equal dignity of all citizens in the national community; but most importantly the "We The People" Constitution, the lived constitution, within which guerilla action took place. In those constitutional spaces we exploited the zone of constitutional permissiveness afforded by the 1957 Civil Rights Act, an implicit partnership with Burke, John and the small team of lawyers they assembled in the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice.

4. Decades later John and I became friends; we spent time together at his apartment just last month. I will miss him.