

SECOND DRAFT

The Democratic Party Convention—60 Years Ago.

Mike Miller. August 26, 2024.

Preface

With the exception of minor floor and outside demonstrations supporting the Palestinians, and demanding the U.S. place a halt on arms to Israel until there was a ceasefire and negotiated settlement, the 2024 Democratic Party Convention worked as smooth as silk for its planners and major Party leaders.

Determined to show unity in the face of the Donald Trump threat, even Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) kept the heart of the Gaza issue out of her speech, complimenting Kamala Harris for her efforts for peace: “she is working tirelessly to secure a ceasefire in Gaza and bringing hostages home.”

The Nation magazine was upset. It headlined its story on the subject: “AOC’s DNC Speech Was a Betrayal of the Gaza Movement. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s decision to lend her credibility to the Biden-Harris administration’s false narrative around Gaza was a stinging slap in the face.”

Both visual impression and polling data indicate that the issue is not central to most American voters who oppose present arming of Israel, but rank the issue low in their priorities. Given the prime importance of defeating Trump, I think her decision was gutsy.

The 1964 Convention Was Far Different!

Two incompatible forces bucked heads at the 1964 Convention: Lyndon Johnson’s and the Democratic Party Establishment’s desire for a peaceful Convention was one. The other was Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP)—the civil rights movement-born rival delegation to the segregationist Mississippi Democratic Party (MDP) “regulars” (the bearers of the worst of Deep South Racism). MFDP called upon the Convention to seat it as the legitimate Democratic Party from Mississippi. Johnson and his allies desperately fought to keep the issue from the Convention floor. He was worried about Republican Barry Goldwater’s challenge to the Democrats, in general, and to him, in particular.

MFDP’s strategy was to win a “minority report” from the Convention’s Credentials Committee which would force the issue to the Convention floor. Once there, MFDP and its supporters believed that in the glare of national TV and international press, the Convention would seat the challengers. (1)

Here’s how that story began and unfolded.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Focuses On The Right to Vote in the Deep South

“Snick” as it was widely known, spearheaded the 1960 Southern sit-ins, and was a major part of the 1961 Freedom Rides. But its leadership was increasingly concerned that “The Movement” was limited in its participation to students. Influenced by unsung elder Movement heroine Ella Baker, and from their own deliberations, the youth in SNCC decided

to shift their emphasis to the right to register to vote. At the time, roughly 5% of Black Mississippians were registered. Intimidation, violence (including murder), beatings, firing, eviction and other sanctions from racist Whites were widespread throughout the South. When SNCC field secretary Bob Moses visited Black leaders in the State they were near-unanimous in wanting a voter registration campaign.

In 1962, SNCC began a voting rights project in McComb, MS. It was soon shut down because of violence and threats of more.

Moving from the southwest part of the State where Blacks were a minority of the population, SNCC's focus shifted to The Delta, a multi-county area in the northwest, including racist Senator James Eastland's large plantation. Cotton was still king, though the impact of chemical fertilizers and machine cotton pickers was already apparent.

Working out of Greenwood, in the heart of the Delta, SNCC began to establish roots in the State. For well over a year, despite thousands of people taking the State's "literacy test" that was required to vote, only a handful of Blacks were added to the rolls. Registrars systematically flunked those taking the test, whether they were college graduates or near-illiterate.

The Parallel "Freedom" Vote

In 1963, to demonstrate that Black people wanted to vote, 80,000 Blacks participated in a "parallel election," held in churches, barber and beauty shops, Black-owned restaurants and other community gathering places. National Council of Churches ministers came as observers. Northern lawyers came to take depositions from people who had earlier been denied the right to vote. While the turnout accomplished its task, nothing changed in State voting policy.

The Freedom Vote was sponsored by the Council of Federated Organizations, an umbrella group that brought together the State NAACP, national Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), led by Martin Luther King, Jr, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). With that unity, it was able to proceed to its next step, an effort to deny representation at the 1964 Democratic Party Convention to Mississippi's "regular" (White-only) Democratic Party, and substitute itself as the state's representatives.

First, delegates sought to attend the official precinct meetings that were the first step in the delegate selection process. They were systematically turned away. In some cases, precinct meetings were moved; in others, an early dropping of the gavel and count left the arriving Blacks with nothing to do: the delegates to the next step had already been voted upon by Whites who were part of the secret shift in meeting time that led to the result.

The 1964 Convention Appeal

MFDP set up its own process, open to both Blacks and Whites, to select 68 Convention Delegates and Alternates. The leadership of that body was National Committeewoman Mrs. Victoria Gray, National Committeeman Rev. Edwin King (a white minister), Chairman of the delegation Mr. Aaron Henry; Vice-chairman of the delegation Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, and; Secretary Mrs. Annie Devine. For reasons to become apparent, the list and titles are important. These 68 asked the Credentials Committee to seat them. An explicit decision was

made by MFDP not to have major demonstrations accompanying the Challenge.

The Credentials Committee

The Credential Committee was large: 110 members. A minority report required 19 of them to sign on. MFDP's strategy was to obtain those votes and bring the question to the Convention floor.

Prior to the Convention, across the country, MFDP supporters sought Challenge support from State Democratic Party Conventions and individual delegates. It thought it had the votes. Congresswoman Edith Green, a powerful Democrat, was among them. But little did MFDP realize the power of the President.

Stories are quite specific about what he did. To a northwest Committee member, he said, "Do you want that dam built in your state?" To a Black member whose husband had been nominated for a Federal District Court judgeship, the message was, "Do you want your husband to be a Federal District Court Judge?" It was old school politics to the core. And it worked.

As the Committee was holding its hearings Lyndon Johnson and his allies were peeling off minority committee report votes until there weren't enough of them. LBJ was determined not to see MFDP's delegation accepted, and more specifically referring to Mrs. Hamer, "I will not let that illiterate woman speak on the floor of the Democratic convention".

Meanwhile, Fannie Lou Hamer and others were testifying in the hearing, with the TV cameras rolling.

Fannie Lou Hamer Testimony at the Democratic National Convention 1964

The background to Hamer's testimony included: State NAACP head Medger Evers was murdered in 1963. Freedom Summer activists tried to register black voters in 1964. Three disappeared and were found murdered. Beatings, evictions, firings, denial of credit were common sanctions. The Mississippi Democratic Party continued to disfranchise the state's African American voters.

Fannie Lou Hamer co-founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and traveled to the Democratic National Convention in 1964 to demand that the MFDP's delegates, rather than the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party delegates, be seated in the convention. Her moving testimony was broadcast on national television and published internationally.

"Mr. Chairman, and the Credentials Committee, my name is Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, and I live at 626 East Lafayette Street, Ruleville, Mississippi, Sunflower County, the home of Senator James O. Eastland, and Senator Stennis."

Talking about being fired for trying to register:

"If you don't go down and withdraw your registration, you will have to leave," her employer told her. "Then if you go down and withdraw," he said, "You will—you might have to go because we are not ready for that in Mississippi."

"And I addressed him and told him and said, 'I didn't try to register for you. I tried to register for myself.' I had to leave that same night."

On the violence she experienced:

"On the 10th of September, 1962, 16 bullets was fired into the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Tucker for me. That same night two girls were shot in Ruleville, Mississippi. Also Mr. Joe McDonald's house was shot in.

...

"I was carried to the county jail and put in the booking room...After I was placed in the cell I began to hear the sound of kicks and horrible screams, and I could hear somebody say, 'Can you say, yes sir, nigger? Can you say yes, sir?'

"And they would say other horrible names. She [Euveste Simpson] would say, 'Yes, I can say yes, sir.'

"So say it. She says, 'I don't know you well enough.'

"They beat her, I don't know how long, and after a while she began to pray, and asked God to have mercy on those people.

"And it wasn't too long before three white men came to my cell. One of these men was a State Highway Patrolman... he used a curse word, and he said, 'We are going to make you wish you was dead.'

"I was carried out of that cell into another cell where they had two Negro prisoners. The State Highway Patrolmen ordered the first Negro to take the blackjack. The first Negro prisoner ordered me, by orders from the State Highway Patrolman for me, to lay down on a bunk bed on my face, and I laid on my face. The first Negro began to beat, and I was beat by the first Negro until he was exhausted, and I was holding my hands behind me at that time on my left side because I suffered from polio when I was six years old. After the first Negro had beat until he was exhausted the State Highway Patrolman ordered the second Negro to take the blackjack.

"The second Negro began to beat and I began to work my feet, and the State Highway Patrolman ordered the first Negro who had beat to set on my feet to keep me from working my feet. I began to scream and one white man got up and began to beat my head and told me to hush. One white man—my dress had worked up high, he walked over and pulled my dress down—and he pulled my dress back, back up."

And the conclusion she drew:

"All of this is on account we want to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America, is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?

"Thank you."

LBJ's "News Conference" and the so-called "compromise."

Correctly alarmed at what might be the response to the MFDP's dramatic Credentials Committee presentations, LBJ hastily called a news conference, implying he would report on some major events, perhaps on the war in Vietnam. Thinking there was a big story breaking, media left the Credentials Committee and hustled over to LBJ's news conference, which

turned out to be about not much. Media people realized they'd been conned. That night network news featured Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony. Upset Democrats across the country rose up in anger at what they heard and learned.

Off camera, discussions and negotiations took place on the two seats at large "compromise" between Administration representatives, Hubert Humphrey, LBJ's vice-presidential candidate, Walter Mondale, newly appointed junior senator from Minneapolis and others, and representing MFDP, Joseph Rauh, a nationally respected labor lawyer and liberal in Americans for Democratic Action, and MFDP's lawyer on loan to the Party from the Auto Workers Union, and MFDP Party leaders. (2)

There was an impasse. Floating somewhere in the Convention, though I have not been able to locate where, was a proposal to split the delegation 50/50, giving each delegate a half-vote instead of a full one. Had it been adopted, the whites would have walked out (as they did anyway), and MFDP would have represented the state.

MFDP Delegates met. They heard the two-seats at large proposal supported by Roy Wilkins (NAACP), James Farmer (CORE) and Martin Luther King, Jr (SCLC). Labor leaders joined. SNCC's Bob Moses said it was for the delegates to decide but he was angered by what he thought was a trick played on them: while the negotiations were going on, the formal process was proceeding without them. Despite all the heavies speaking in favor, the delegates overwhelmingly rejected the two-seats at large. As Fannie Lou Hamer put it, "We didn't come all this way for no two seats when all of us is tired."

With The Benefit of Hindsight, Should The Delegates Have Voted Otherwise?

Herb Mills, my best friend, student movement and Longshoremen's Union leader, with a PhD in political science from UC Irvine, and brilliant political strategist, argued they should have. "It was a foot in the door," he said to me. I wasn't convinced by someone who usually convinced me. I'm not convinced now, though my reason is narrow: LBJ said specifically, "I will not let that illiterate woman speak on the floor of the Democratic convention," No one gets to choose your leaders. That closes the debate. But without that specific exclusion, the debate still goes on in my head 60 years later.

MFDP Convention delegates returned to Mississippi; many of them campaigned for the Johnson-Humphrey ticket. Most SNCC staff left the state.

The response in SNCC was overwhelming: hot anger and outrage. But the anger was no longer aimed at gaining specific policy changes and building a regional Black power presence; it was broad, diffuse and without focus. And it was the beginning of a steep decline in SNCC's impact in the South.

Factions appeared within SNCC. Earlier sharp disagreements in multi-day long staff meetings often reached a boiling point. Then someone would get up and start singing a freedom song. The discussion would stop. We would get in a circle, cross our arms and, while gently swaying back and forth, sing freedom songs. It was a break that reminded us we were on the same side.

Now that unity was broken. An Atlanta-based militant nationalist caucus emerged. Other factions did too. Some staff left the organization. Others turned to alcohol and drugs. By the

January, 1967 Central Committee meeting, SNCC Program Secretary Cleve Sellers noted, “We have to be realistic in understanding that within the organization, there is a minute number of organizers left, if there were any, still around. I don’t know at this point if we have people interested in becoming organizers. I think we’ll have to go out and recruit them...” His was the most pessimistic view, but others echoed what he said.

Bob Moses on “What Should We Have Done?”

Post-Convention, some SNCC staff people went to Africa on the continuing generosity of Harry Belafonte who underwrote the trip. They met African liberation leaders Sekou Toure, Kwame Nkrumah and others less known. They returned inspired, but not ready to dig into the dirty hands work of organizing.

Years later, I asked Bob Moses what he thought we should have done. In his usual careful way he said we should have had a staff retreat that met as long as we needed to hammer out a consensus on what we had done and were going to do.

Sadly, SNCC didn’t do that. By the end of the decade, it no longer existed. I do not think movements and organizations are built on defeat.

Was An Alternative Strategy Possible?

Preface: hindsight is 20/20!

What if MFDP held an alternative convention in Atlanta at the same time as the official Democratic Party one, inviting delegates from across the South, and supporters and media observers from all over the country. The delegates might have created a regional COFO that replicated the unity achieved in Mississippi. The supporters might have broadened the outreach of “Friends of SNCC” to include others who wanted substantial change in the South. The media might have attended because it was already in Atlanta.

The parallel convention could have made clear in its Resolutions Committee Report that its Mississippi and Deep South agenda included economic justice as well as political rights. It could have mobilized a national support group to help it win such victories, in whatever forms those wins took place in the post-Convention period, and through the duration of LBJ’s term as President.

Almost certainly the War on Poverty would have been closer to a war than a skirmish and vehicle to coopt The Movement. The effects of the displacement of tens of thousands of Black rural workers might have been met with demands for a new Farm Security Administration (the FDR New Deal agency) that addressed head-on the poverty of the Delta.

Such a movement would have more likely had its feet on the ground because it was in daily touch with low-to-moderate income people. It would have been less susceptible to the craziness that came to characterize both the Black and White student-led movements in the North, and might have contributed to forestalling the crazy militancy of some of their tactics and unreal content of their programs, which actually would have become more realistic as time passed because of the failure of “the system” to meet the needs of low-to-moderate income people.

(1) The Challenge story is detailed in *The Politics of Change: The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party—A Case Study in the Rise (and Fall) of Insurgency*. Rachel B. Reinhard. Available at [Organize Training Center](#) bookstore.

(2) In a mid-1960s meeting Rauh and I had, he was determined to “clear his name.” While he argued for accepting the compromise, he continued to pursue as effectively as he could his client’s position: that the MFDP delegation be seated. I believed him then and do now.

For additional reading see: [MFDP Challenge at Democratic National Convention](#), SNCC Digital Gateway.

Mike Miller was a SNCC field secretary from the end of 1962 to the end of 1966, and worked in the Mississippi Delta in the Summer and early Fall of 1963. You can learn more about him and his work at [Organize Training Center](#).