

# Still It's a Fight for Power

BELL GALE CHEVIGNY

**L**istening to black people in Mississippi as they talked about whether things had changed for the better in the thirty years since Freedom Summer was like hearing every kind of music that's come from this part of America. "Yes and no," they said, and the "No" was as various as the blues.

"No jobs!" was the harsh refrain from a class of students working toward high school equivalency certificates at a community center in Tutwiler. State statistics bear them out: From 1960 to 1990 joblessness among African-Americans went from 7.9 percent to 15.9 percent; over the same period there has been an exodus of blacks from the state, reducing their share of the population from 42 percent to 35.6 percent.

Others lamented the "straying" of children, the loss of family and community strength. They blamed the influx of drugs, a falling away from the church or loss of "spiritual backbone," the persistence of racism and the divisive effects of integration.

Some sang a sweeter "back in the sixties" blues about how the community and the civil rights movement used to be one and the same, how people took care of one another. In McComb, Linda Taylor, a product of the Freedom School and now co-chair of a race relations committee established by the Chamber of Commerce, said it best when describing the influence of her women neighbors as she was coming up: "I could do nothing *but* succeed because these people would not *let* me do anything else." Aurelia Taylor (no relation), who directs a health center in Clarksdale, told me she'd fled the dead-end life of the Delta, swearing she'd never come back, but then she fell in love with the idea of community health. "Besides," she said, "my mother was an activist and always told me to give back to the movement." The movement gave those it touched a sense of obligation and history—but where is it now?

Part of the answer lies with those in Mississippi who said, yes, things had changed for the good in these thirty years. More often than not that "Yes" was like a movement shout: "We got the vote!" I heard people cry in Jackson, in Philadelphia and Kosciusko to the northeast, in McComb to the south and in the towns and hamlets of the Delta northwest—Greenville, Cleveland, Clarksdale, Indianola, Tutwiler and

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Webb. "We have forty-two black state legislators; that's almost a quarter of them, twenty elected just in 1992!" They fumbled for the latest total of black elected officials throughout the state—700? 800? "Eight hundred ninety," said Constance Slaughter-Harvey, Assistant Secretary of State for Elections, updating her count for this story. These include ninety members of county boards of supervisors, eight sheriffs, forty mayors, 405 municipal council members, 101 school board members and forty judges.

Such an outcome was not dreamed of at the grim end of Freedom Summer. It was to register voters that Bob Moses of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) first came to Mississippi from the North in 1961, breaching the wall that had excluded the state's African-Americans from political life. By 1964, when SNCC invited Northern volunteers for the summer, fewer than 4 percent of blacks had been registered. SNCC shifted strategies and began registering people in an integrated Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Excluded from participation by the regular all-white state Democratic Party, the M.F.D.P. argued that they alone had adhered to the rules and demanded their delegation be seated instead of the regulars at the convention in Atlantic City that August. When their delegation was denied seating and given only two at-large places, the civil rights workers walked away in disgust, delegate Fannie Lou Hamer saying memorably, "We didn't come all this way for no two seats!"

How then did the electoral triumphs that people speak of today come to pass? And what kind of social change, if any, have they brought with them? What is the state of community organizing? And to what extent can it bind the community together?

Overtaking the electoral process was painstaking work. The M.F.D.P.'s refusal to compromise taught blacks they could defy powerful whites on a matter of principle and not be destroyed. Leslie McLemore, a historian of the Mississippi Freedom Democrats and a professor of political science at Jackson State, said it also made the Democratic Party integrate its process. But when the 1965 Voting Rights Act eased blacks' ability to vote, the state lashed back with vigorous racial gerrymandering. A series of lawsuits, requiring nine trips to the U.S. Supreme Court, preceded the drawing of "electable black districts."

A dynamo in the redistricting process has been the 84-year-old Henry Kirksey. Kirksey's penchant for life-threatening enterprise was clear in 1964 when he ran the Mississippi Free Press and turned over his rented offices to the Freedom Summer project. For this he had to face down the owner's gun between his eyes. "You damn son of a bitch, I ought to blow your head off" is what Kirksey remembers the white man saying. To which he replied, "Why don't you just go on and pull the trigger instead of putting on a show for these people?" The man put down the gun and a few days later ran after Kirksey apologizing, "You made me feel so damn little."

Experience with maps in the Army field artillery fitted Kirksey to become the mapmaker for new black districts. He has served as a demographic expert and often a plaintiff in redistricting cases. In his house in Tougaloo, he showed me baroque designs representing his latest effort, the carving of a second electable black Congressional district out of the state. Among those working with him is Bennie Thompson,

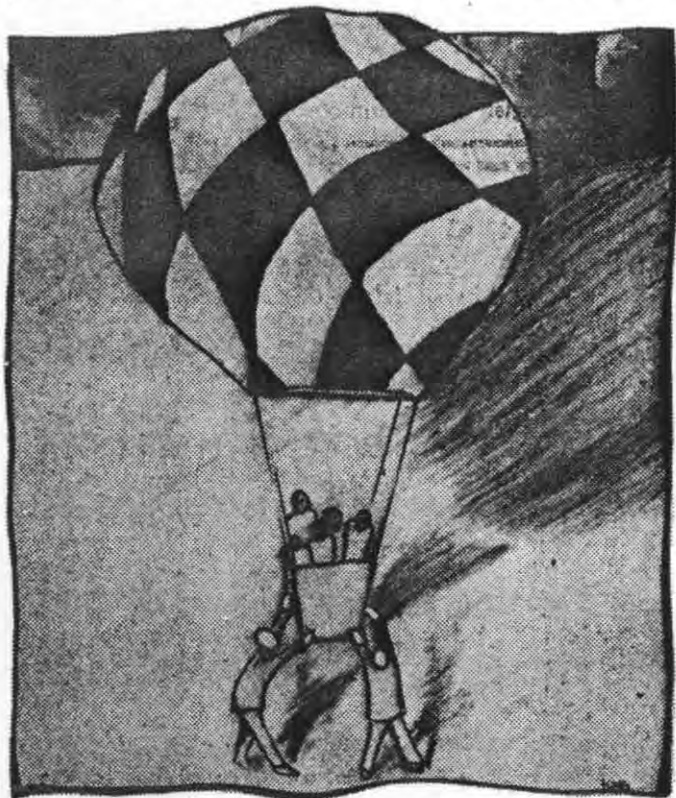
a movement activist elected to Congress last year after Mike Espy, an African-American who supported the interests of the white planters, was made Secretary of Agriculture.

Kirksey knows firsthand the frustrations of being black and alone in the arenas of white politics. From 1980 to 1988 he served as the first black State Senator since Reconstruction. Then he quit. "I couldn't stand it anymore. There was no chance—there were only two blacks out of fifty-two—of impacting on any of the bills that came through. It was a waste of my time." When people said he shouldn't let go of that job, he said, "Job, hell! I thought it was a *responsibility!* Show you how stupid I am!" Yet, always the maverick, he is not above criticizing the fruits of his own labor in drawing up districts meant to redress the skewed black-white ratios. Some current black politicians, he feels, are "coalescing with their fellows" more than fighting tough issues. He told of how some older black legislators resisted the redistricting that resulted in the election of twenty more. "Slave culture is still with us."

### Echoes of the Sixties

In *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, John Dittmer concludes that 1964 marked a move away from community organizing in the state, with the result that "a grass-roots insurgency" was "transformed into a more moderate reform movement, one willing to sacrifice the needs of the poor to obtain rewards for the black middle class." Perhaps, but Dittmer's important study ends before Southern Echo, a nonprofit group established in 1989, was vigorously engaged in grass-roots organizing. And Southern Echo laid the foundation for the 1992 election of those twenty new legislators, who are as a group much more accountable to the entire black community than the older group had been.

Southern Echo evolved when Hollis Watkins, who has been



organizing in the state ever since his 1961 recruitment by SNCC, realized he needed help. He persuaded Mike Sayer, a white attorney and onetime SNCC co-worker, to move from Maine to Greenville, and he brought on Leroy Johnson, a community organizer from Holmes County who was only 5 when Watkins first met him in 1963. Now a staff of seven includes Mamie Cotton; she was in seventh grade when the summer volunteers of '64 stayed in her house. "In the 1980s it seemed there was nobody us little folk had to turn to. Elected black officials were just going about their business," she said. "When I found out what they were doing in Southern Echo, trying to help communities help themselves, I can't explain how I felt—it was like I'd received my first million!"

Watkins seeks to involve young people in every aspect of his work, he told me in his Jackson office. The ages of Southern Echo board members span five decades. "We don't believe in separating the old folks and the young. We look at the thing from a whole community perspective."

"Southern Echo is a leadership development, education and training institute," Watkins said. It involves itself with schools and the environment as well as politics. So, for instance, in Tunica—the second-poorest county in the country, according to the 1990 census—parents who attended an Echo workshop brought pressure on the Board of Supervisors until it agreed to put 20 percent of the county's casino profits into public schools. Elsewhere it has helped small farmers develop organic methods and alternative crop production. In three-day "schools" on environmental racism, people learn about organizing against toxic chemical and hazardous waste landfills and dumps. In two ongoing environmental projects, black groups work in coalition with local white groups.

Accounts of Southern Echo's organizing workshops evoke SNCC meetings of the sixties—Watkins usually opens by leading the singing in his famous tenor—and the goal, as ever, is to cultivate leadership at the grass roots. Leaders beget leaders. Sayer explained the "echo": You replicate yourself, your work, making more and more people capable. The techniques draw on the self-help and consciousness-raising practices of intervening years. Participants strive to confront and overcome fear—"the big F"—through role-playing. This makes a striking contrast to the SNCC approach; back then, as Curtis Hayes puts it in the admirable new oral history film, *Freedom on My Mind*, people ran "to danger as a hungry man runs to food." Those were warlike times, and they spurred extraordinary behavior. Since then, the business interests have found it profitable to eschew routine violence and racist language. "It's taken us a generation to see the skill and flexibility with which whites maintain domination and control," Sayer said. "Fighting racism now means developing ways to dismantle the domination and control by the white community of the black community. It requires empowering the black community so that it owns the knowledge and information it needs to impact policy and hold the political, economic, educational systems accountable. We define accountability as putting community interest over self-interest. Virtually no white candidate feels he can afford to respond to the needs of the black community when those are perceived to conflict with the needs of the white community." Organizing sessions range from "truth-telling" about racism to highly specialized training.

I talked with people in four of the more than twenty-nine counties where Echo has worked. "I'd thought the movement was dead, but it's alive in a different form," the Rev. Marion Myles of Walthall County said. "I'm learning from Hollis Watkins what it means to get down to the nitty-gritty of the community and make it work." The workshops gave her the courage, she told me, "to go talk to the bankers about how no black people were working there, and they immediately did something about it." In the past year she has taken six groups of high school students to Echo's community organizing workshops and hopes that together they can push to get black teachers and administrators in their schools.

In Sunflower County, Echo is preparing twelve women to work for community involvement in the Algebra Project, the innovative educational scheme devised by Bob Moses, Freedom Summer's chief architect. They hope to alter the culture of education, in which teachers, administrators and parents now work at cross-purposes. For Betty Petty, supervisor of a shelter/workshop for developmentally retarded adults, community organizing is new. She told me what she's learning: "Maybe a child has strayed away, but there's still hope. The crimes, they can be stopped, if we would just pull closer together. I should be able to chastise your child as well as you chastise my child and no hard feelings about it. As we say, it takes a whole community to raise and educate a child." She plainly relishes this work. "Like they say, 'Betty can do it.' Just let me open my mouth."

### **The Struggle for Political Power**

The most dramatic form of community empowerment, however, remains electoral. In Tallahatchie County, deep in the Delta, blacks were elected last year to county office for the first time in its 160-year history. I drove to Goose Pond, a largely black community on the border of the largely white town of Webb. I found Jerome Little at the end of a muddy road in a little office behind a big sign: "Tallahatchie Housin'/Tallahatchie County Union for Progress." The place has the improvisatory roughness and high-spirited bustle of the frontier. As I arrived, someone ran after a car yelling, "You forgot the photographs!" Little was sending off grant applications for President Clinton's Empowerment Zones and Enterprise Communities. Both names are apt for his domain. Jerome Little is not trying to overthrow economic structures in Mississippi but he is ingeniously adapting existing ones for his community's good.

Raised on a plantation where his grandfather share-cropped, Little was working for the area's chief employer, Parchman Penitentiary, in 1984, when his neighbors started bugging him to do something about the water in their area. "You couldn't drink it, you couldn't wash with it, almost couldn't bathe in it. I was reluctant to take it on because I knew it would be a long fight, and when I start after something I don't worry about *if* I'm going to get it, but *when*, because I don't give up until I get it. I knew there would be a lot of resentment, because some people were not paying for the old water and didn't want it shut off. My life was threatened. But I did it. I even took the water to the White House, and we got a million and a half dollars to buy and control our own water

system. Then God blessed me with a theory to create a housing organization." Tallahatchie Housin' has secured \$3.5 million to build houses and apartments; it will remodel boarded-up Farmers Home Administration inventory houses and is embarking on Habitat-style self-help building programs.

Since being elected to the County Board of Supervisors last year, Little has applied, with Echo's assistance, for grants for everything from sewage to parks. "We've applied for more grants than any other Board of Supervisors in the history of the county." Little drew on his unrelenting energy to win the post. "We had a majority of blacks in our district, so we didn't worry about district lines. But we run and run and lose and lose, and finally we figure something's wrong." It turned out that the district was drawn in such a way that whites voted as a bloc while the black communities were splintered. Sayer and others helped black activists conduct a two-year redistricting fight based on the standards of the Voting Rights legislation. This led to a federal court-ordered special election, which Little won. "There's no other community I'd rather live in. They'll have to bomb me out of here now!"

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Pasted on Little's office walls were pages of a Southern Echo manual put out in advance of the 1992 regular election. The manual contained maps and census data for each new electable district without a black incumbent. Echo had issued the manual anticipating that the courts would approve a redistricting plan so late that, if unorganized, blacks would be unable to take advantage of it in time for the election. As it happened, the court order was issued on May 2 of that year; from May 9 to 16 Echo held workshops in strategic locations explaining the new districts and the importance of creating a caucus process to get the black vote behind a single candidate in each race. The candidates were registered by early June, and because of the consciousness raised in the process, most of those who had won the informal caucuses also won majorities in the first primary in July. One of them was Willie Simmons, now a State Senator.

Before that election, Simmons was the state's Deputy Director of Corrections, but Republican Governor Kirk Fordice's dismissal of most minority appointed officials in 1992 made Simmons restless for greater political action. (Fordice also advocates prayer in schools, opposes welfare and government subsidies and has fewer blacks in his government than any governor since the 1960s.)

At one of the Southern Echo workshops, Simmons played the role of a political candidate, simulated a campaign, competed successfully with the other "candidates" when the audience put them under fire, and decided to run for real. In Sunflower County many blacks, including the intrepid Fannie Lou Hamer in 1966, had tried but failed to defeat Senator

Robert Crook. But in 1992 his redrawn district took in part of Bolivar County. Then a twenty-nine-year incumbent, Crook sat on influential committees, such as appropriations and corrections. But, as Simmons told me, "I'd worked seventeen years in Parchman Penitentiary, so I knew what Senator Crook had done well and ill in corrections. And I was familiar with Bolivar, where he'd never run in." Coming from a place so rural "we used to go to town to watch the train pass by," Simmons fought a sophisticated campaign. To avoid a split black vote, he made a list of 200 local leaders and community groups and asked that they either support him or remain neutral. "One man told me, 'Crook's a powerful man; if you lose, you know what'll happen.'" Meaning? "If you cross him, he does not rest until he destroys you." Crook wrote the 2,000 employees of Parchman, saying that if elected, he'd give them each a \$10,000 pay raise. Only two elected officials, both women (one Simmons's wife), had the nerve to endorse Simmons openly. "Women and youths were the key players in my campaign," he said; he took 54 percent of the vote. In his first term he worked for educational funding as well as prison and welfare reform.

Simmons and Little know they need to convince their constituencies that black candidates make a real difference, that political power is worth the struggle. And the forces of reaction are keeping pace with such successes. At the federal level, majority-black districts have been under attack since *Shaw v. Reno*, last year's Supreme Court decision questioning a re-districting scheme in North Carolina. In Mississippi, Governor Fordice and Lieutenant Governor Eddie Briggs are proposing a referendum on "downsizing" the legislature, a patent attempt to reduce the numbers of blacks, women and rural representatives. In the best case, Watkins said, downsizing would leave seven black representatives; in the worst case, none. "The political system," Mamie Cotton mused, "every time blacks open it up and get *into*, whites figure out a way to get them *out of*." Secretary of State Dick Molpus doubts that the referendum will either get on the ballot or win. He is hoping to run for governor next year, and his victory would protect black gains. Although Molpus's aggressive work for a more open voting process has won him strong black support, Fordice would give him a tough fight.

Returning after so long, I was more heartened by the advance in politics, education and health than dismayed by the threats to them, substantial though they are. This is probably because I felt the vital pulse of ongoing struggles everywhere I went, and could appreciate far better than in 1964 the slow persistence of its history. One long afternoon in Kosciusko, I kept cool with Mamie Cotton on the shady deck that her husband, MacArthur (a SNCC recruit in 1961), had built for her. "What bothered me most in the movement was people who thought it began and ended with them," said MacArthur. Living just over the hill from the plot where his grandfather, a slave, had lived, it was not hard for him to take the long view. His father, he told me, had been passionate about political rights, always paying his children's poll tax and insisting they register. Looking at his own grandchildren playing nearby, MacArthur said that what the black people of Mississippi need now is to make sure that what they win is institutionalized for the next generations. □