

SNCC 28TH Anniversary Conference: The Beginnings of the Voter Registration Movement (1961 - 1963)

The *SNCC 28th Anniversary Conference: The Beginnings of the Voter Registration Movement 1961-1963*, held at Trinity College in 1988, featured reflections from key figures such as James Forman, Bernard Lafayette, Charles Sherrod, and Danny Lyon, moderated by Julian Bond. The conference detailed the origins, strategies, and challenges of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) early voter registration efforts across the South, highlighting the shift from direct action to voter registration, the oppression faced from local and federal authorities, and the profound risks organizers undertook. Panelists emphasized the importance of grassroots leadership, nonviolence, and the long-term consequences of their work, including the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the broader transformation of American democracy. Personal anecdotes revealed the deep emotional and physical toll on activists and the enduring legacy of community empowerment forged during these pivotal years.

Date: April 15, 1988

Location: Trinity College - Hartford, CT

Host:

Jack Chatfield, Professor of American History, Trinity College

Moderator:

Julian Bond, Director of Communications, SNCC, 1962-1966

Panelists:

James Forman, Executive Secretary, SNCC, 1960-1966

Bernard Lafayette, Nashville Student Christian Movement, 1959-1960;
Field Director, SNCC, Selma project, 1962-1963

Charles Sherrod, Field Director, SNCC Southwest Georgia project, 1961-1967;
City Commissioner, Albany, Georgia, 1976-1987

Danny Lyon, SNCC staff photographer

Jack Chatfield: I'm running just a bit late, but I believe all of our panelists are here. For those of you who are at Trinity for the first time for this conference, including a group from Bloomfield High School—I believe—are there any other contingents from high schools in the area, except those from Bloomfield? We welcome you to the third event in our retrospective conference on the history of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

This morning's panel is devoted to the beginnings of the voter registration movement, 1961 to 1963. This afternoon, of course, we'll have a panel on Mississippi at three o'clock, an illustrated musical lecture by Bernice [Johnson] Reagon this evening, followed by a panel on women and the stirrings of feminism in the movement.

I have a number of nuts-and-bolts announcements, which we are forced to make periodically because of the logistical complexity of this operation. First of all, be aware that the schedule of events has been slightly revised. If you wish to pick up a copy of the revised schedule with certain names added who were not on the original schedule, there are hundreds of copies out in the lobby.

Secondly, for SNCC people, friends of SNCC, visiting scholars, and journalists—and also for a small but significant number of students who have driven day and night, as I understand it, from places like the University of Michigan or the University of Minnesota or DePaul—we would like to invite you to lunch. We hope that the 120-figure will allow everyone, including the undergraduates and graduate students, to be able to have lunch with the SNCC people.

Before this afternoon's session, at the recommendation of Bernard Lafayette, we are going to do a kind of partial introduction of former SNCC people who have come to this conference but who may not be appearing on one of the panels. But we'll wait until the afternoon to do that because we're running a bit late this morning.

I see the stage is still empty, so I have a few moments to proceed. Has anybody come up yet? Julian? Bernard? Charlie?

Now, if the announcement that I'm about to make is incorrect, would someone please inform me of that? I understand that there is to be a meeting this afternoon in this room at 1:30—a meeting primarily or exclusively for Black and minority students here at Trinity and elsewhere. Is that correct? 1:30 in this room? Unless that's changed, that will hold.

Secondly, I've been told that those who are parking on the street—on Summit Street—may be towed away. Not yourselves, you understand, but your cars. So long as you're out of your car, you'll be allowed to stay at the conference. So please try to avoid parking on Summit Street. That doesn't refer to the parking lots along the street but rather to the curbside parking. If anybody is parked there, it might be a good idea to try to move your car.

There is a very large and perhaps very muddy parking lot—though I haven't seen it, as a matter of fact, despite the fact that I work here—on that end of the campus, down at the conjunction of Vernon Street and Broad Street. It's a long walk, or at least a longer walk than from these parking lots up here, but it may well be that we'll have to call upon that lot.

For those in the audience who wish to ask questions—both for the sake of others in the audience who may not be able to hear you, but especially for those who are recording this session for posterity—would you please use the audience mic, which I am using right here? Turn it around, face the panel, and use it as you may.

There is one addition in the revised schedule to the panel that you're about to see this morning—*The Beginnings of the Voter Registration Movement, 1961 to 1963*. He will be introduced, but I simply want to point this out briefly. This is Danny Lyon, who probably is as responsible as anyone in the early [19]60s—comparable only to Doug Harris and perhaps one or two others of whom I remain unaware—for creating the photographic imagery of SNCC, which is still very much a part of portions of the national consciousness.

Danny has been good enough to bring a small number of photographs—not an elaborate exhibit, which we could not mount—but a small number of photographs, which are outside in the lobby.

Now, I turn it over to Julian Bond, formerly of the Atlanta Committee on Appeal for Human Rights, the Director of Communications in SNCC, and I see that I've been interrupted for the first time.

Yes? Months, right? I recognize that man's voice despite the fact that I've never seen him before. This is Mike [Ekwueme] Thelwell, who's going to be on our panel tomorrow—in fact, on two panels. Mr. Thelwell tells me—this is a matter of great philosophical import—that a Jeep Cherokee is parked outside with his lights on. So, would you please—first things first—then we can talk about history.

Julian Bond: Thank you, Jack. At the last panel yesterday, both Charles McDew and Bob Zellner touched on the split in early SNCC between advocates of direct action and advocates of voter registration. This panel, titled “The Beginning of the Voter Registration Movement,” hopefully will further illuminate these divisions and trace the development of the voter registration efforts engaged in, in Mississippi, Southwest Georgia, and other parts of the South.

The panelists will proceed in order as listed in your program. First, James Forman, Executive Secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1960–1966. Dr. Forman.

James Forman: Thank you. Thank you, Julian.

Julian and I had the opportunity to share a lot of experiences in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He was the Director of Communications and later on became a state senator from Georgia. I'm certainly happy to have been one of the people who participated in his first election and other elections.

I think it's appropriate that we should try to acknowledge Trinity College—the president, the faculty, students, and sponsors for this conference—and to constantly thank Jack Chatfield for being the initial organizer, as well as the history department.

And there's a person here named Ralph Allen, who's very dear to a lot of us. He was from Trinity College and participated in the sit-in movement. He was in Southwest Georgia. [Charles] Sherrod knows much more about him, but I do think that we should acknowledge his particular role, because he helped to

inspire Jack Chatfield to get involved. And that's how the liberals are organized—one person takes on one responsibility, and he gets another person involved.

Sherrod used to say, "We could only find one person." The key is to find one more person other than yourself, and things will begin to roll.

I also want to thank the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—all of them. I wish I could call everyone's names, and their associates, and their families, but I do think we should point out that—I don't know if Ed King is in the audience—but he came through Washington en route to the conference. He was the former administrative secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in its early stages. If he is here, we should certainly give him a big hand.

Another person, of course, is Diane Nash Bevel, who was very responsible for the organization of a lot of us, including myself. And she was directly responsible for all of the rich fortunes in SNCC because she recruited me. So you just remember that.

And then—is Mary King here? She was almost to the right of Jimmy Carter, and that came about because of the registration work Bernard [Lafayette] and other people performed in Alabama, and Sherrod in Georgia. And then Mary King, as the assistant to Julian Bond in the communications department, went on to help organize—was very, very instrumental in the election of James Carter as the President of the United States.

I don't know if Mary is here, but certainly, she deserves a lot of credit. She was here last night. And there are a couple of other people who are still trying to carry on, such as Joanne Grant and Dorothy Zellner.

Now, having said that, I will try to confine my remarks within the brief period of time that we have. It's not sufficient. And maybe before the meetings and after the meetings, those people that are interested can try to discuss other implications of things that people, I'm sure, are going to say—such as Danny, Bernard, and Sherrod, and perhaps a few comments of mine.

But basically, as you know, in 1619—some of you may not know—the first slaves came into the United States. Okay, so they were slaves. The Civil War was fought—it ended slavery. White people from all over the United States helped to fight in the Civil War, as did Black people.

During Reconstruction, we had—the period after the Civil War—we had the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. The Ku Klux Klan was a terror organization then, and it still is. They began to terrorize Black elected officials and drove a lot of them from office.

In 1891, the Mississippi Legislature decided, "We are going to take the vote from the poor white people," and I stress this, "as well as the Black people." And we're going to do this by passing literacy laws, by passing poll tax measures—primarily, those were the two main ways that the vote was taken away.

This meant that people didn't have a right to run for office. They didn't have a right to vote for elected officials. And it was not until 1954 that extra-legal channels began to be used—and in 1956, when Rosa Parks sat down. But it was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee that developed extra-legal tactics to their greatest degree.

What we were saying was, "We don't agree with these things, if these laws are unjust, then we should take direct action." And people like Sherrod were some of those individuals, as well as Lafayette—tremendous amounts of nonviolence training, as well as Julian. And people decided that the legal approach was not working—that our people are oppressed, they can't vote, they can't sit down in public accommodation facilities. So we must do something extra.

We have to begin this question of nonviolent protest. And then that was carried on into voter registration. Some of the early participants spoke last night about voter registration and so forth.

My own contribution started when we began to—or some of the early forms of my contribution were in Fayette County [TN], when we were registering people to vote who were denied the right to vote.

At Fayette, we met John Doar, who was a central figure—too involved to discuss right now—but he was in charge of the Justice Department's investigation of civil rights. We also met [David] Robert Owen, another Justice Department official, in Fayette County. That relationship carried over, certainly with Doar, into the activities of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Now, people, I'm only getting to the strategy and tactics because Sherrod will discuss what happened in Southwest Georgia, as well as his overall view and whatever else he may say. The same thing was true with Bernard Lafayette in terms of Selma, Alabama.

But I think perhaps some of the things that I could best contribute within the limited amount of time that we have is to talk about some of the effects of voter registration and some of the consequences—because the consequences, the effects, have been enormous.

Julian Bond was an elected official. He was a SNCC field secretary working on communications with the Atlanta community on appeal. Charles Sherrod is an elected official. Robert Mants, who worked in Southwest Georgia, Americus, is an elected official.

I understand Johnny Jackson, the mayor of White Hall, Alabama, is here. There is one other elected official, and please—if I omitted your name, it's because I don't have my reference right here. But these people are elected officials who were involved with the initial organization of voter registration.

So, just from that point of view, it's important. But what does that mean? It meant that we crushed—if you want to use that term—the 1890 decision of the Mississippi Legislature. We were able to successfully sustain organizational work to overturn something that had been a barbarism in the history of American society—that is, the denial of the right to vote.

That was codified in the 1964 Voter Registration Act, and it was further codified in 1965. And a lot of that is directly related to the work of Bernard Lafayette. It's so related that John Doar of the Justice Department came up to me at the time of the Selma to Montgomery march and said he was very, very sad.

I said, "What's the matter?"

He said, "I see all this publicity that Dr. [Martin Luther] King is getting behind the Selma to Montgomery march, and I know that it was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee that came into Dallas

County, that came into Selma, Alabama, and began to register voters and began to challenge this whole process. And the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals is going to hand down a decision within a week which will practically"—he didn't use the word "revolutionize"—"but will shatter this whole literacy test that the South wanted to impose."

Now, the 1964 Civil Rights Act had a severe weakness—it did not completely eliminate the literacy law requirement. But in 1965, the Voting Rights Act did eliminate the literacy requirements, and therefore, a lot of people began to register to vote.

That's directly related to the work of all of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, as well as allied groups. And we're not trying to take anything away from other organizations. But the role of the heroic people in this organization and on this platform is usually not talked about. So, I want to take an opportunity to say that.

Now, I want to talk about some of the consequences. The consequences have been enormous. I mean, in a negative sense, that the repression on people who are associated with voter registration has intensified. We tried to pass out some documents, and I hope everyone will get a copy of that, where we have concrete proof of the introduction of the FBI and the Central Intelligence Agency into the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, from the point of view of destroying the organization.

Why? Because of the work that it had done, because of its efforts to register voters, primarily. Because when you register voters in the United States of America, you're talking about changing power relationships. You're talking about taking the ability to control the tax dollar away from some people and giving it to other people. And that's an enormous reality in the lives of many people.

And that's why the organization and all of its contributors and so forth have been undergoing severe repression since 1964—because the organization was successful. And it has to understand that, and its members have to appreciate that.

Certainly, we're not confused about why all of us are going through this kind of turmoil, and why some people, as Cordell [Reagon] would like to say, get recognition and other people don't. But that was never our concern, because we were not just interested in registering voters. We were talking about a new world, changing values, changing the values of people in the country, and we have to try to get back to that as much as we can.

Now, another consequence was that the government organized a lot of people. I have a book here by Elijah Muhammad called *Message to the Blackman [In America]*. In this book—and we didn't know this at the time—Elijah Muhammad says to the world that they're opposed to civil rights—the Nation of Islam.

And this organization is being carried on today by Louis Farrakhan, not by Wallace Muhammad, and I'll try to make the difference.¹ He [Elijah] says, "We will take care of the civil rights people." That doesn't

¹ *Elijah Muhammad's Message to the Blackman in America* (1965) outlined the Nation of Islam's ideological opposition to the civil rights movement, a stance later continued by Louis Farrakhan but rejected by Wallace Muhammad, who moved the community toward mainstream Islamic teachings.

mean just the workers—myself, Bernard Lafayette, or Charles Sherrod—but it meant contributors, anybody for civil rights, as far as the way we interpret it. [Elijah continues] “And because we’re opposed to civil rights, and we’re going to handle civil rights.”

Now, we didn’t know that at the time, because we were interacting with the Nation of Islam, and we would tell them that we know that you’re a religious group, but these laws are going to affect you. You’re Black, and you’re suffering from segregated laws, so don’t worry.

Had we known that this was the position of Elijah Muhammad, we probably would have contacted—now, this book didn’t come out until 1965. But since that time, there have been a lot of other things happening in the United States in terms of the consequences of our particular actions and those of other people.

Now, people are going to talk about the Revolutionary Action Movement and race war as a consequence, because race war got introduced as a consequence of a broad interracial Civil Rights Movement, which overturned hundreds of years of deprivation in the United States—certainly from 1891 up until 1964. And those are things that have to be talked about also.

This is a book by Don Lee, or Haki Madhubuti, where he was in Dar es Salaam in 1967 and 1968. He came back from the Sixth Pan-African Congress and said he was going to organize a race war. Well, we were opposed to race war.

You can see by the composition of people here that within its ranks, that was not the reality of the organization. Now, a lot of the white people who were in SNCC are still confused about a lot of things, and we’re not trying to—I’m not trying to cast aspersions. But all of this is not the problem of Black people in the organization.

Because I talked to some organizers who were in the People’s Republic of China, and they told me they came back to split the movement. They came back to organize the white people out of SNCC. I explained to them that what they, in fact, did was to split the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And that’s an objective fact. There’s no way that you can look at this other than that.

Now, I also went to China. We went to China. We discussed, in the People’s Republic of China, that we are here to discuss the race war theory—that some of us in the United States are opposed to race war.

You know, we’ve dedicated our lives to racial harmony, to a new world, and we want the People’s Republic of China to know that we’re opposed to race war. And that we would consider any support for the race war ideology given by the People’s Republic of China to any group in the United States to be something which is not in the best interest of all the people in the world.

And we discussed that. The main answer that was given was that Mao Zedong was saying Robert [F.] Williams was the head of the Black American nation in the United States of America. That has to be further discussed.

Now, in terms of some of the future projections, it seems to me that some of us—one of the things that we discussed in SNCC was how to handle Washington, D.C. And the general strategy was: Get the right to

vote for Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, all the other Southern states, and then begin to concentrate our energies on Washington, D.C.

Why? Because Washington, D.C., was controlled completely by the federal government. And it's still controlled by the federal government.

The budget of Washington, D.C.—even though the first mayor was the first chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—still has to be sent to Capitol Hill. And that regulation by the federal government has enormous consequences for people all over the world.

I mean, Washington, D.C., is the capital of the nation—630,000 people are controlled. So we're trying to change that.

Now, I think that people in this room could be very, very helpful in trying to carry through some of the original plans. Because if we're able to get statehood for the District of Columbia, the basic objectives of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee will have been completed.

And then the only thing left, basically, is this question of full equality in terms of employment for people of color and for women, which was also talked about. And I'm sure that in the panel on women and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a lot of these things will come up.

Now, basically, within my allotted time, I've tried to give you a very—sort of a summary—of what's been happening since 1619, how that related to the Civil War, and how the crucial decision in 1891, when the Mississippi State Legislature decided to break the backs of what they called the Populist Movement by saying to Black people, "We're going to take away your right to vote," as well as from poor white people. And I've discussed some of the effects and some of the consequences.

Now, the consequences are enormous, but we have to fight against that—that is, against the repression against everybody in the United States. Because the FBI does not just hammer on some of us. And there are even fissures in the FBI—I mean, it's not a monolithic organization. There are a lot of problems, and there are a lot of people trying to change things.

Otherwise, we would not know directly from statements of the FBI that they entered the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to destroy it. The same is true for the Central Intelligence Agency.

And I am, you know, trying to urge people to get involved with statehood. And I would hope that out of this meeting, there could come some sort of emergency committee for statehood in 1988. We have the votes—we just have to get the people to pass it. And that would be a culmination of the work.

Now, remember, SNCC was destroyed—very, very unilaterally closed the office. I've discussed this time and again, as to why that occurred. I've never gotten any response. And the office was closed at a critical time in history, when we had a program—we were still trying to carry on. So we have to try to regroup.

I want to close this by saying that I was at the United Nations. I talked to a very, very high official—whose name I won't mention for various reasons. But he said—this was back in 1980—I told him I was going to Washington, D.C.

He said: "Please try to reorganize the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Those of us in the United Nations are very concerned about the military advance of the South African government. We had hoped that various African governments would be able to stop the military thrust that the South African government is making throughout Africa. And if the South African government is successful in making this military advance, then all of the gains in the last 40 and 50 years in Africa, and the repercussions throughout the world, are going to be lost. But if you would try to reorganize the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, our assessment is that we would be able to stop this military advance."

Now, I'm telling this story because I think the people individually in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee should be very, very proud, happy, and honored about their activities, and in no way discouraged. And that new people, new students, the organizers of the conference, and Trinity College itself should begin to volunteer and to give us some additional cadre, staff, people, and resources so that we can carry forth and try to regroup as many people as possible. Because the work of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee has affected everybody in the world. Health for Africa was one of its original programs, and the story from the United Nations is just another living testimony of the importance of those people who formed the band of brothers and sisters of trust. Thank you very much.

Julian Bond: Thank you, Jim. Next will be Bernard Lafayette, member of the Nashville Student Christian Movement, 1959 to 1960, Field Director, SNCC Selma Project, 1962 to 1963. Bernard is the man who made it possible for other less bold and bodacious organizations to come to Selma, Alabama. Bernard Lafayette.

Bernard Lafayette: Thank you very much, Julian. I want to say that I want to share the appreciation that Jim Forman gave to Trinity College and applaud the efforts to bring together this kind of group of people. There are a number of people in this audience who have made tremendous contributions.

I just want to say that I want to share my appreciation, along with Jim Forman, for the efforts here at Trinity College, and for Jack Chatfield and others who are working with him to make it possible for this kind of group to come together.

I just want to quickly say that there are many people here in this audience who have made tremendous contributions. I mean, they really put their lives on the line, and they've been involved in a very significant way to make things happen. And I was glad that Jack made room this afternoon to introduce some of these people and some of the campaigns in which they were involved.

And I hope a lot of you are here so you can meet a lot of these people. I think it's been a tremendous effort to get people here. I see [Dorie Ladner](#) from Mississippi, one of the college students at that time who dropped out of college, who had the [Freedom Rides](#) and that kind of thing, and other people who left their jobs and really made a difference.

Jim mentioned some of the people, and because we want to make sure that all the people get mentioned—there are a lot of people here who were friends of SNCC groups in various parts of the United States, and we want to recognize all those people. Recognize all those people who made it possible.

Now, one of our problems, of course, is that we have so much history to share that it's impossible to do so in such a short period of time. So I'm going to try, if possible, to stick to the early beginnings of the voter registration movement.

Julian had mentioned that there was a split in SNCC. It was an ongoing debate, and I think that Charles Sherrod probably epitomized that debate because he was one of the people who was part of the direct action wing and who believed that nonviolence was a way of life, that kind of thing.

But when we had the opportunity to get some financial support to do voter registration, we jumped right at it. And Charles will tell you his experience in the initial project. I'll just go back to mine.

In the summer of—well, the spring of 1962—I was off raising funds in Detroit [MI], Chicago [IL], and St. Louis, Missouri, because [Chuck McDew](#), [Bob Zellner](#), and Dion Diamond were in jail in Louisiana on conspiracy charges—conspiracy to overthrow the state of Louisiana—when they were trying to get people registered to vote.

And I think the bail was about \$10,000 each. They were only accepting cash bail, and so we didn't have that kind of cash—\$30,000. So Jim, who was the executive director—I had come down to work on a project—he said, "Well, no, we need you to go raise funds. So, you know, go out and organize Detroit."

Detroit. I—I didn't even have a pair of shoes. I ran into a cousin I didn't know I had in Detroit. He bought me a pair of shoes—massive. I don't know his name. But anyway, Elizabeth Hirschfeld and some other people—we had some people who had been on the Freedom Rides, who had been supporting everything in the South.

So here I was, up there raising funds. And so Jim said—Jim always had great ideas about things. So he said, "I have a great idea. What we'll do is get Diane Nash out of jail and have her come up there and speak." See, because she was in jail, and she was pregnant—about eight months pregnant. So he sent me this eight-month-pregnant woman to help raise funds in Detroit.

It was a close call. I got on a plane that afternoon. The next day, she was in Albany, Georgia, and she had the baby. And we had a big overcoat to be put on her so, you know—otherwise, they wouldn't let women fly if they were very pregnant. And she was very pregnant. But we did manage to get her on. But that was a close call.

I don't know how much money we raised, Jim. I never did find out. Anyway, Chuck and those got out of jail. That was the important thing. Well, I'm only saying this because I was late getting down to Atlanta to take on a project.

And so when I arrived, Jim Forman said, "Well, we could send you to some places in Mississippi with [Bob Moses](#). We could send you over to Arkansas, with [Bill Hansen](#), or someplace."

I said, "No, I'd like to have my own project."

You know, I was a young guy—you know, about, I guess, maybe 20 or 21 years old—and I wanted to do my own thing.

So he said, "Well, there's only one other place, you know, and that's Selma, Alabama. But we scratched that off the map."

See, we had sent in a SNCC staff person, and the only people they could meet who were organized in Selma were a group called the "12 High." And that's because they stayed high all the time. This is true. They were organized and very serious. I mean, he never caught them sober. It was their policy—you know what I mean? You [could] get kicked out of the group if they ever caught you sober.

Well, another problem was that he felt that there was so much intimidation in Selma, and the Black people were just afraid. And the last organized effort they had was one where they had organized an effort to desegregate the schools. They had about ten people who had signed the petition, and that was a method for desegregating the schools in the South—ten people from the community would sign the petition, and they would send it to the school board, demanding that the schools be desegregated.

They would be systematically rejected by the school board—all-white school board—and then that would precipitate a suit from the NAACP. And then they would file a suit and go through the courts. In fact, it's still in court—been in court for the last 35 years. That was a slow approach to desegregation, but some great efforts, of course, I assume, came out of this kind of effort.

But what happened in Selma is that the White Citizens' Council and the Ku Klux Klan, all those people, systematically forced all the people to withdraw their names from the petition. And they did some very unscrupulous things. I mean, besides shooting into their homes, you know, and discouraging them in that way, and intimidating the children—one fella, his mother-in-law, was fired from her job. And, you know, he had to leave town. His mother-in-law got fired. It was over.

So they used various forms of intimidation, and all the people withdrew their names, except one person. That was a postal worker, a fellow who worked as a mail carrier in Selma. So his name was the only one left. So they could go very far with their desegregation suit.

Well, the only point I'm making is that Selma had some very serious experiences. So there was a reason why people were very much afraid, intimidated, and slow about getting involved in the movement.

Well, this staff person had decided that we needed to go some other place because Selma was a little too rough. And so I said, "Well, that's great. I'd like to take that place."

Jim said, "Well, if you want to go down there, you can, you know, check it out and see what you think."

So, this was back in the fall of [19]62. I said, "Well, this is just great because—"

James Forman: Is that the first trip [indistinct].

Bernard Lafayette: That was later, Jim.

So Jim said, "You can go down there, see what you think about it and we'll go from there."

And, you know, there was always a lot of pressure on the staff people because Jim Forman would call people on the phone. "What's going on down there? I don't see anything in the newspaper. You know, y'all sleeping, or what?"

See, in Selma, he didn't expect anything, because everybody assumed that place was so bad. So I thought that would be a great place for me to do some serious social science work. So I said, "I'll take Selma."

There was a fellow named Jack Minnis who had done some research on the hidden power structure and economics of the South—that kind of thing. So I took my time, and I went down to the library at Tuskegee [University] before even going into southern Alabama. I did research.

And, see, when you can take your time and really do something—a thorough job—it pays off. I found this over and over again. There's no sense in rushing. And the older I get, the slower I get in making decisions and talking and walking. It's great. I mean, wait till you get old and try it.

So I stopped at the library in Tuskegee and read all of the newspapers of the White Citizens' Councils. They had them right there. Now, if I told you this, Jim, you had that book that came out—*100 Years of Lynchings*. Yeah, I'm looking for that book, by the way, if you find it.

The fellow who put that book together was at the library at the same time I was there, and we were looking at some of the same material.

What he did—he took a huge camera, and he went around and photographed all these newspaper clippings. They gave accounts of lynchings in the South. And he took the material back to New York, put it together, and had a book. That was an instant book.

But it has newspaper accounts, and these are Southern newspapers. We happened to bump into each other because we were looking at the same stuff. I wanted to see what happened in Selma in terms of lynchings and stuff like that. And so I got a chance to read, study, and learn all about the banking and finances.

I even learned that the first—well, the battleship *Buchanan* was built on the banks of the Alabama River during the Civil War, that kind of thing. It was fun. I enjoyed it. Very exciting.

Well, armed with all of this information, I decided to go and start talking to people in Montgomery who had experiences in South Alabama and in Dallas County.

So Mr. Rufus Lewis, who had been an NAACP organizer—and since I mentioned that, I should tell you this—that one of the reasons why there were so many movements in Alabama, that's no coincidence. Like the Montgomery movement, the Birmingham movement, the Selma movement—you see, during the period when SNCC went in, the NAACP was outlawed. They had banned NAACP operations in the whole state.

So they had—you talk about extra-legal—that was the only route they could take in terms of any kind of expression for social change. So teachers had been fired from their jobs simply because they had membership in the NAACP. So the NAACP could not operate. So that created a gap and a void. And as a result of that, we were able to do some things.

Now, the other reason is because, you see, when SNCC moved out, we mainly moved out in rural areas for voter registration. There was no competition. The SNCC people were in places where angels dared to tread. You're talking about the bodacious kind of thing.

Audience Member: There's a feedback coming from somebody's tape recorder out there. So I don't know if you can hear it. It's driving me crazy. It also means all your tape recorders are probably picking up him saying it twice. Am I the only person who hears that? Really?

Julian Bond: We'll work on it. Go ahead. Now to get to Selma.

Bernard Lafayette: Okay, all right. So—getting to Selma. Going into Selma meant that we were going into a big void that was created by a lot of things that had happened earlier. My first work in Selma was to focus on the leadership. What SNCC people really did was become volunteer, full-time volunteers for community groups. They became the staff of community groups—that's basically what we did. And I volunteered to work with the—

Audience Member: I'm sorry. I'm a documentary filmmaker. This is driving me crazy. I'm a professional, yeah, it's another mic. That's some other mics picking him up, so he's getting a feedback. That was it. Thank you.

[INTERRUPTION]

Bernard Lafayette: That's why I went into Selma by myself—so that I wouldn't have all these interruptions.

So I'm used to it, you see? I mean, there's no problem. Yeah. So I began to work with the local organization—about 30 people. But when I got there, only about 300 Black people were registered to vote in the whole county. So, it was a literacy test [that] was a problem.

What we did—we tackled the problem exactly where we found it. That was Ms. Marie Foster and Ms. Amelia Boynton, and that was Attorney [J.L.] Chestnut and some people around who were not afraid, and they were willing to stand up. So we worked with those few people. As Sherrod said, you find one other person interested in doing it. I found about four who were interested in doing this thing. We set up an office and began to start the movement.

Well, a couple of things happened, and I'll just end with this because there's so much that we can talk about. The first mass meeting we had in Southern Alabama was at the occasion of Mr. [Sam] Boynton's passing. He died, and he was the head of the Dallas County Voters League.

I stayed with him in the hospital to relieve his wife at night while he was dying, and I realized this was a great man who had made a tremendous contribution. His son [Bruce Boynton] was the one who filed the suit—*Boynton v. Virginia*—that desegregated the buses, an ICC ruling.² And there was a lot of strength there.

² In *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960), Bruce Boynton successfully challenged racial segregation in bus terminal facilities, leading to a Supreme Court decision that strengthened interstate desegregation under the Interstate Commerce Act.

The other thing in Selma, Alabama, which I learned, was that [T.J] Jemison—who they mentioned yesterday—his son now is the head of the National Baptist Convention.

Tabernacle Baptist Church was the church where he pastored. He was the president of the National Baptist Convention before James Jackson—the folks going to Louisiana, where they desegregated the buses and that sort of thing. Early on, they were talking about that.

So there's tremendous history there, and I think it had to be resurrected. And that's what happened. When you look at history, you begin to see that there are sediments of things that are already there, and it's an opportunity for us to bring those back together.

But the seeds of resistance were there before—it was just a matter of rearranging those and replanting them in a way that would cause new life to grow. And I always stayed open to learning from the local people. And I learned a lot.

If you want to organize people, what you do is ask them to teach you, and they will teach you how to organize them and to educate them. The same thing with children—children who have difficulty learning, it means that teachers don't know how to teach them because they have not asked them how they wish to learn.

So I learned these things just from experience. I asked the people to teach me how to organize them, and they did. One of the things I did was—well, there were some tactics involved. They were concerned about outside people coming in and taking on the leadership. So what we did was help them to organize a movement against me. So we got all the people who wanted to be leaders, and I got somebody else to organize them, okay, so they could be the leaders.

I didn't want to be the leader. I had already had my head cracked. And coming from a mass meeting one night, one of the local white gentlemen waited for me. And I'll just share this and stop. Julian's aware of this. I was unloading some leaflets in the back of my car, getting ready to go into my apartment.

And this huge tree on the side of the little apartment where I lived shaded the streetlight, so it was kind of dark. And I had already observed a car parked across the street when I drove up. So I was bent over in the back of my seat, reaching for the leaflets.

I heard some footprints—some footsteps—coming behind me and the crackling of the leaves. And in different periods in the movement, when we thought it was going to be all over, that was one of those periods when I thought that was it. We knew the day would come at some point, and I thought that was it.

Then I heard this voice say, "Buddy, how much would you charge me to give me a push?"

I was so excited. He only wanted a push. I volunteered, by the way. I said, "I won't charge anything. Glad to give you a push." Well, he had other plans that I learned later. And we backed up.

I had this [19]48 Chevrolet. Julian had got me this car. Boom—everybody else has new cars. Jim, you never gave me a new car. All those other people—they wrecked their cars and everything. I took care of

mine. So Julian looked out for me. I just want the record to show. Julian's contribution to the Selma movement was to get the staff person a good car to last. And it made it. Now, so much for that.

Julian Bond: I don't know if I should respond, but go ahead.

Bernard Lafayette: No. You don't need to respond.

So I had these high bumper guards, so there was no problem pushing the car—that was supposed to have been stalled. And what happened was, the fellow said, "Well, maybe you ought to come out and take a look at this to see if the bumpers match so the bumpers wouldn't get, you know, stuck."

I was wondering what the problem was. I hopped out of the car and bent over, and then he clubbed me with the butt of a gun. I fell to the pavement, and I stood up again.

Well, the significant thing here is, in terms of nonviolence, the most important thing is to be able to face death. And when that moment comes, the question is whether you have the courage. But one of the things you have to do is, first of all, give up life. It's only when you really give up life that you can fully embrace life and really appreciate it.

And at that moment, I had no thought of what would happen to me. I stood up and I watched this man, and he clubbed me again. In fact, he hit me three times in the head. Each time, I would stand up again, and there was blood dripping down on my shirt as I stood there and watched him.

Well, what happened was—that was unexpected behavior. And unexpected behavior sometimes can have the impact of arresting the conscience of your assailant, because they don't know how to respond to you. They expect you to run. They expect you to plead for your life. They expect you to fight back. I did neither of those things.

And I had trained in the movement. I simply confronted him and looked at him. Well, that upset him and unnerved him, so he began to back away. And I was afraid that he would shoot me as he got into his car. So I yelled out to my neighbor. And my neighbor came across the banister—they called him Red—with a shotgun. And then I really got terrified. Because if he shot that white man down there in Alabama, there was nothing I could do for him.

So I said, "Red! You know, don't shoot! Don't shoot!" I started screaming. Part of the account is in the book. He never talked to me about it so you can get the full story. It's okay.

That was the same night that Medgar Evers was killed. The reason I didn't know Medgar Evers was killed that night was because I was in the hospital. I found out the next morning. I learned later from the FBI in Mobile that there was a three-state conspiracy. They were going to get Eldridge Cox over in Louisiana, Medgar Evers, and myself. This was just one of the Klan groups.

As a result of that experience, the people in Selma really began to rally. When we had the first mass meeting—we had a memorial service for Mr. Boynton. And on the leaflets, it said: Memorial Service for Mr. Boynton and Voter Registration. And that was the thing that caused them to come out.

Jim Forman was our first mass meeting speaker in Selma, Alabama, and he gave one hell of a speech that night. I mean, a mob came in front of the church with baseball bats and big table legs to break up the march. The only thing that saved us was that the high school coach had some influence, because the sheriff, you know, was just out of it.

Well, that's too long, but that's a bit about what happened in the beginning. And the main thing that happened in Selma, Alabama, was that we took the time to develop local leadership and to bring them together in a way that they were able to sustain themselves through the struggle.

One of the key things you look for in any movement is whether or not people are able to develop their own songs—songs about their local conditions. When you see people develop songs about their local conditions and make up verses about what's happening to them and their experiences, then it simply means that they have internalized the movement. And once a people internalize the movement, then the movement continues to move—because they are not just simply part of the movement, but the movement is a part of them.

Like in Montgomery, Alabama, it was no longer a tactic. The boycott was no tactic. People had gained such a sense of dignity that they could never go back on those buses and sit in the back of the buses anymore. Because they would rather walk in dignity than ride in disgrace.

There was no turning back once people internalized the movement in Southern Alabama, as in other places. And I think that's—that's the key thing to them. And that's the difference between a protest march, a demonstration, and a movement. Protest marches are temporary. Demonstrations are simply dramatizing a problem. A movement is designed to change the conditions. And there are no timetables on movements.

Julian Bond: Thank you, Bernard. Our next presenter is [Charles Sherrod](#). Sherrod was Field Director for SNCC's Southwest Georgia Project from 1961 to 1967. He has been a city commissioner in Albany, Georgia, from 1976 to the present day. Charles Sherrod.

Charles Sherrod: [singing “A Charge to Keep I Have”]

Y'all clapped for two or three minutes, so I'm gonna add on my time—a few minutes. I'm gonna share my time—staff meeting time. I speak very softly and sweetly. I'm going to share my time this morning with [Prathia Hall](#), [Faith Holsaert](#), [Penny Patch](#) and [Ralph Allen](#).

[Jack Chatfield](#) already had some time and Martha Prescott Norman had some time. They all worked with me in South Georgia. So I'm gonna get some staff reports. Here are some staff reports from those people. You can come in the order that you're nearest to the mic. Come on, Ralph. Ralph Allen, Trinity College.

Ralph Allen: Typical, typical Sherrod—get somebody else to do the work. It's also a typical Southwest Georgia mass meeting—to get the people who were out in the field, or the people who had gone up to register to vote, or the people who were thinking of going up to register to vote, or the person who lost a job—get them up at the meeting. We called them mass meetings, but out in Terrell County [GA], they were about 35 strong. Get them up to talk about the problems that they'd had, so that we could all know what was going on.

Last night, Chuck McDew said that when SNCC decided to go into Mississippi to do voter registration, they decided that because, in Mississippi, voter registration was direct action. Well, Southwest Georgia was not the heart of the beast—it was one of the other vital organs. And when Sherrod decided to do voter registration in Southwest Georgia, he decided that he was going to do it integrated, which meant that was direct action.

When Don Harris—who was actually my sidekick out in Sumter County, Georgia, Americus—when we walked down the street, we cut across the white section. Everybody moved over to the other side of the street and closed up all the stores. That was direct action.

If we walked down the street—when we got into the Black section, the kids would come out because it was a strange sight to see a Black guy and a white guy walking down the street together. We didn't have to hunt people out of their houses to organize them. They came out because they were curious. Made the job a lot easier—probably—than it was in Alabama or Mississippi. The cumulative effect of all this was that the white people began to organize. And the more they organized, the worse it was.

To give you an example—one night when things were kind of dead in Albany [GA], Sherrod talked to a couple of reporters that were there. He said, "Why don't you come out to one of our mass meetings in Terrell County and see what we're doing out there with voter registration?"

So he got this *New York Times* guy and the *Atlanta Constitution* guy to come out to the meeting. Well, that was the night—I was real proud that night because I had got two women who were going to go up to register to vote. So we picked them up, and [Lucius Holloway](#)—who I was staying with, he was the head of the movement—and I picked them up, and we were coming into this meeting.

And I said, "Wow, a lot of people here tonight. Something must have happened. A lot of people here."

And Lucius let me and the two women out because he was going to go park the car—it was hard to find a place to park. We walked up, and I realized then why there were so many cars. There was a group of about 20 local white citizens standing on the steps. I didn't think much—I just kept on going. I walked into the church.

I didn't know what [was going on]—they said a few things to us as we were going in, uncomplimentary. We got inside, and then they came into the church. And the sheriff—just at the time that they came in—Lucius Holloway, who was head of the movement, had started on the report of the week's activities.

When he finished, Sherrod was up. He said, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

It was at that point in the meeting. We had a prayer. He's standing there in the prayer saying, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

And Z.T. Mathews and 20 deputized white citizens walked in. And the sheriff just took over this meeting. And meanwhile, these reporters were sitting right where this fella is here, writing down stuff.

And he said, "Hey there, boy."

He says, "Put that pencil and paper away."

He says, "Who are you anyway?"

One of them said, "Well, I'm Claude Sitton from *The New York Times*, and I'm a native Georgian, just like yourself." And the other guy was from the [*Atlanta Journal*] *Constitution*.

They just got the whole story. It was like—he couldn't have hung himself—Sheriff Matthews couldn't have hung himself any higher if we had asked him to perform and written the script for him. So that was Sherrod.

Penny Patch: When I go now to speak in my local high schools, or on Martin Luther King Day in a small community, I take with me a whole stack of old *Student Voices*.³ The other thing that I take with me is a sign—about this long and this wide. It's made out of wood, painted shiny brown with red, red words. And what it says is *COLORED*.

This sign was taken from over the water fountain in the Albany City Courthouse. It was taken by three young women who were leaders of the student movement in Albany, Georgia. And I'm not talking about college students. I'm talking about high school students. And I just want to say their names: Margaret Sanders, 16; Patricia Ann Gaines, 15; and Joann Christian, 15.

Faith Holsaert: I'm Faith Holsaert and in Southwest Georgia, we believed—and I still believe—that organizing is very slow work and very respectful work. And it has to start from the ground up. And maybe that's why I had planned to end my words much as Penny did.

I thought I would pick at random, as they occur to me, the names of 15 people from the Southwest Georgia movement—local, ground-up people—and commemorate them and just say a little bit about each one. And this really isn't random. You have to realize there were thousands, tens of thousands of people like this.

The first that I think of is Ms. Corrine Watkins, who sold Avon in Albany, Georgia. And when I was in jail, she brought the movement women makeup—just kind of to sweeten the Laurie Pritchett jail for us.

Another one who occurs to me—because she was perhaps my closest friend there—is Joann Christian, who Penny also mentioned. Joanne was a junior high school student and a great song leader of Albany, Georgia, of the movement, and led hundreds of people on marches at the age of 13 or 14.

Another person is Reverend [Samuel B. Wells](#), who worked as a welder at the local base, and then—he called himself a "toiler in the vineyard of the Lord," and that's really what he was.

[Annette Jones](#), who was homecoming queen at Albany State and was thrown out of school for her participation in the movement—and then became an organizer.

³ *Student Voice* was the official newspaper of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), published from 1962 to 1966 to report on civil rights campaigns, grassroots organizing, and movement news.

Deacon and Mrs. Bruner, who lived in Sasser, Georgia, and lived way out in the cotton fields, and were undoubtedly at the church the night that Ralph spoke of.

I didn't count, so I'll stop there. There were tens of thousands, if not more, of people like this. And this is what organizing is all about.

Charles Sherrod: Prathia can take all the time she wants. She can take my time.

Prathia Hall: One of the things I want to say is that, I have several memories from Southwest Georgia and from my time in Selma, and I want to say that I learned some of the most important lessons I will ever learn in my life.

I'd been to school, I'd been to college before I went South, and I've been to school a lot of years since. But the most important lessons that I have ever learned, I learned in those rural counties from people who could not read or write their names.

The song that Sherrod began his time by singing was an extremely powerful song, and in every sense, every mass meeting was a prayer meeting, and every statement and every report was a testimony. So whether you called yourself religious or not, it was about the struggle of the powers of life against the powers of death. And that's religion.

And when we would walk up to the churches, coming to the meetings, the people would already be there, and the church would be rocking with "A Charge to Keep I Have." The last verse of that old, old, old, old hymn is:

*"To serve this present age,
My calling to fulfill.
Oh, may it all my powers engage,
To do my Master's will."*

There are a couple of experiences that I will never forget. Of course, the night that we were all in the house and Jack Chatfield was shot—I will never forget that. And then, there was another time...we talk a lot in this meeting about coming face to face with death. And I think sometimes, for young people, that's just very hard to imagine. But we did it. We had to do it every day.

That meant that if you were driving down the road and a car came up behind you—if the car stayed behind you, you were terrified that you were going to be shot from behind. And if the car passed you, you hit the floor—which put you in a pretty difficult position if you were the driver.

So fear was something that was real. Nobody here has ever said they were not afraid. I mean, it would have been—in fact, anybody who came into that situation who wasn't afraid, we didn't want anything to do with them.

And one day, four of us—and for all these years, I thought it was Faith, and it must have been somebody else. So if you're here, correct my memory—and Jack, and [Carolyn Daniels](#)' son. Carolyn Daniels was an

extraordinary woman. She was the local beautician with whom we lived, and it was her house that was shot into.

And it did not move her. It did not unnerve her. She was a single mother, struggling to make it. But she was still—she was strength for all of us. And she took all of us—all of our Technicolor selves and our strange ways, some Northern and some Southern and all of that.⁴ And she wasn't that many years older than many of us. But she mothered us.

And her son was in this group. We were in Sasser, Georgia, and we were confronted by a guy with a tin badge on. He said he was the marshal. He came up to us, and he wanted to know, "What are you doing?"

And I said—like Chuck and Bernard—I would do that. I said, "We're registering people to vote, and you have no right to stop us."

And he went mad. I mean, really mad. And he began cursing and calling us all these names and literally foaming at the mouth. Pulled out a pistol and began firing bullets in a circle around my feet. And the only thing that I can be thankful for is that I didn't move.

But that was another one of those moments—when you look death in the face, and you also look, as Bernard said, at the enemy, which is that evil, and the victim, who is the bearer of that evil, in the face. And it takes care of the fear problem.

When his gun was empty, then they dragged us off to this scroungy little place that they called the jail. It was—I don't know—not as big as from here to that table. About half—maybe half that big. They had two cells filled with all kinds of crud and vermin and whatnot.

And rather than put the two women in the same cell and the two men in the same cell—because we were a white and a Black woman, and a white and a Black man—we were put in two cells. The two Blacks were put in one cell, and the two whites were put in the other. Just another illustration of the insanity.

Charles Sherrod: My time is out, so I'll just say that the Southwest Georgia Project still lives in South Georgia. We still work. We're still on the case. If you ask me questions about it, I'll be glad to say a few things.

Julian Bond: Thank you, Charles. Next and last is Danny Lyon, who was a major photographer in the book *The Movement*, the official SNCC photographer from 1963 to 1964. Part of that small and very, very dedicated and extremely talented group of people who reported, in a very real way, the faces and the feelings and the emotions of this period of time. Danny Lyon.

Danny Lyon: Thanks. I want to thank Jack for having me here, for putting us up in a nice hotel with free beer. I put it on your room, Jack. Isn't that part of it?

Many different kinds of people made up SNCC. I—hearing this talk of death—I recall that I also had a revelation of death at that point in my life. I guess I was 20 or—I probably was 21 years old at that time.

⁴ "Technicolor" metaphorically refers to the vivid diversity among the activists — in background, culture, personality, and appearance — evoking the rich, bright imagery associated with Technicolor film.

It was really completely different than what Prathia and some other people have talked about. And this incredibly courageous man—by the way, I'm flattered to sit here with these people.

I've run around after them, driven cars for them, taken their pictures, tried to make them more famous and more mythological. I was in love with all of them. They're great, great people—really, absolutely remarkable. And I'm honored to be seated.

So, I'm 21 years old, and I had a nice—I don't know what it was — my father gave it to me. He bought it off his secretary. It was a 19—it was an Oldsmobile. It must have been—I should have just kept that car, you know? I could have put one of my kids—my kids—through school with it. It was a black 1957 Oldsmobile with all that beautiful chrome on the grille.

And I was probably going 100 miles an hour through the Delta, which is really flat. And the police were so busy beating these people up, you didn't really worry about speeding tickets. And I was flying, and I was so happy, you know? Because I had fallen into the midst of this thing. I was 21 years old. I had a Black Oldsmobile. It was incredible. I'm completely serious.

I was happy—like Mozart's happy when he writes *Così fan tutte*. And suddenly, death appeared before me. And I said, "You mean, I'm mortal? This is going to end?" And I was stunned. I couldn't believe it, because, in a way, to understand death and what it meant, I had to understand life and what that meant.

And in a way, I think—just for myself—I decided I was going to do something with that life. Then, in the future, forever. Because it would end. SNCC totally changed me as a person. And that's probably true of everybody who was on the staff.

I think part of the feeling of SNCC as a radical organization was that part of the struggle was won just by the existence of the movement. That was one of the things that was discussed there. SNCC workers mostly were out doing things. When I first got to the office in Albany—Zellner told a great story about the office—I, too, crossed America, hitchhiked down, took buses and reached the SNCC office. And it was closed. Because everybody—nobody was there. They were all in jail.

It was 1962. It was the summer of [19]62. And someone—a neighbor, somebody—said, "They're down in Albany, Georgia. Go down there." You know? So, there was nobody in that office then. And SNCC changed in the time that I was there, and it continued to change. And I think, historically, that has to be clear. This was an organization that was growing like a person, and changing, and growing in size.

And things that might have been accurate six months or 18 months later weren't accurate before. I made a lot of notes. I've been doing nothing—I've been making so many speeches since Jack said I could be up here that I've been sleeping good, because I've been making these speeches. I may just fall over and not be able to say anything.

So, the office was closed, and I went down to Albany. And I had a picture made of myself in front of the SNCC office. It was a barbershop. Is that right? It was a barbershop. It had a barber pole in front of it. It said Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And I'm so proud of myself standing there with my Nikons. And I was proud of myself. I hitchhiked down all the way from Chicago [IL].

There's endless stories. And while I love to hear them, in a way, I think there are other more serious things to talk about. But anyway, I ended up back up North. And I took my pictures. And I printed them. I hung them up at the University of Chicago as an exhibit. It was the first exhibit I ever had. And it was 26 years ago. And that was the beginning for me.

Forman got to know about the pictures. I was doing something useful. And later, I was sent down to Mississippi to find Bob Moses and the [Mississippi] Delta. Harry Belafonte, I think, gave somebody \$300 to buy the ticket, and they sent me down. Now, I was still a student at the time. And I found him. And I guess I'll tell you a funny story.

So I'm flying down to Jackson [MS]. Now, you are scared to death. You come out, and you see these *Colored Only* signs. And you're supposed to take a picture of that. And, you know—again, white guy in a Black neighborhood. And people, they tell you, "No, you can't take a white cab. He's not going to take you to that address. You got to take a Black cab." You go to a Black guy, he doesn't want you in the cab.

So I get to the Freedom House in Jackson. Knock on the door. People peep out. They say, "You're at the wrong house. It's next door." Knock on that door. They didn't let me in there either. They said, "They're up in the Delta. Bob Moses. Greenwood [MS]." "Okay, give me an address."

I took the bus up there. And I took the address—somewhere on Magnolia Street. And I get off the bus. I'm walking down the street. You walk through these towns—people notice, you know? And I go to the address on Magnolia Street. Knock on the door. White woman opens the door and says, "That's in the colored part. That's in a nigger part. That's a nigger town. What are you doing here anyway? You're in the wrong part of town. That's North Magnolia Street. This is South Magnolia Street."

I had to go all the way back to town again. I'd gotten the wrong way. There are railroad tracks. And the SNCC constituency was always across the railroad tracks. And there I was walking back through this town, convinced everybody was looking at me. And I got halfway through. Well, actually, I guess I got through. And I reached the office. And I did take pictures of Bob Moses. And they're sitting around in their pajamas. I said, "I came down here to take pictures."

And the next day, a squad car pulled up. Said, "Come on." Put me in a squad car. Took me down to City Hall. This guy says, "Go on in." This police—some officer. Sheriff—sitting there. He pulls out the book of the law. He shows me a paragraph that says that the practice of photography—and I guess it was Greenwood—requires a photographer to post a \$2,000 bond.

So I said, "You want a check for this?"

He says, "Well, it's the practice of photography. It's right here."

Showed it to me. It was a very civil exchange. I said, "That's all right. I'll be back in the morning to post this bond."

I said, "Listen, you know, I'm not really setting up a studio. I mean, it was for liability insurance. I don't do that kind of stuff."

But anyway, we left. The guy walked outside, and the cop was waiting for me. Now, I've always told the story with the guy having his gun out. It's hard to believe that a man would actually stand there with his gun out. So maybe I imagined that part. I didn't imagine the rest. He said to me, straight out—he came up to me, and he's shaking. In fact, one of the lies they told me in Albany, Georgia—because they arrested me there, too.

One day in Albany, Georgia, I was surrounded by a good group of policemen. A policeman said to me, "You're shaking now, boy. Wait till we're done with you." And I was shaking. That was in Albany. Here I am, Mississippi. This guy's coming up, and he's just really agitated. I mean, he's shaking.

[He said] "I'm gonna blow your fucking brains out." I said "Now?" The sun is shining. You know, we're standing in the parking lot in front of the police station at 10 a.m. "I'm gonna blow your fucking brains out. What the hell you going in the nigger part of town for? We don't do it that way down here."

And then—SNCC training, right? You know how they train you. This is what someone says if this situation comes up. [I said] "You know, I am Jewish.

Say you're colored, they say. Great. See, because that's the problem. You see, the problem is the mixing of races. So if you just say you're colored, well—problem solved.

[I said] "Well, as a matter of fact"—and here I really blew it. Because the key thing is to say that your mother or your grandmother was Black. That's crucial. See, I said, "Excuse me, but my grandfather was Black." I left town on the next bus.

There were SNCC workers. The courage was a little lower than the others who wanted to live to fight another day. I'm still alive. I was in a similar situation with the Tonton Macoutes two years ago in Haiti.⁵ They took this camera away from me. It was my only camera left. I wanted it back. I was screaming and shouting.

There were 11 of these idiots, all of which had uzi machine guns, which are made in Israel, all screaming at each other—amazing—screaming at me when I take my film away, and they did something that never, never happened. And when I was in SNCC, they did take my film away, and I just about peed in my pants, man. But like I said, at least I did it. At least I went there. I believe in what I'm doing.

I think I got a lot of this out of SNCC. I think SNCC taught us all that it's possible to have power way beyond your numbers, that being pure does pay off, that you cannot compromise on certain things that you believe in. And part of the power that came from SNCC was what is an extreme, radical, and uncompromising position, although I'm sure that in reality, the people who had more power did make compromises. But it was a very uncompromising group, and in a way, I've applied that to my whole life and to my work.

Years have now passed. For the record, it should be clear that SNCC had its own media. I was the media of SNCC. I was what would become a professional photojournalist, a filmmaker, an author, but I was

⁵ The *Tonton Macoutes* were the brutal paramilitary force established by Haitian dictator François "Papa Doc" Duvalier in 1959, infamous for widespread human rights abuses, violence, and political repression.

SNCC staff. In other words, they were telling me what to do. I was fighting them off, trying to do it the best I could, but the result was SNCC was turning out its own propaganda, and SNCC was trying to control the media and create its own mythology. And it did it.

SNCC published a book that the royalties went to SNCC, called *The Movement*. SNCC published its own posters, some of which are out there. They're very well done. SNCC published pamphlets for fundraising and to bring people down. [Dottie \[Dorothy\] Miller](#) wrote them. Julian did something. You witnessed it, and he must have been doing something. We told a lot of jokes. It was an incredible, exciting time.

I think, in a way, what's happened now is the media now uses us, and I think this conference is a way to fight back. There are cameras going everywhere. Doug [Harris] is, I think, a part of this conference. You see this man? You notice him? He's standing there with that machine bent over, working hard. He's been on every panel, he's part of it. And these records and how they're edited and how they're used is a way of saying we're part of the media too. Or he is part of the media. I'm part of the media.

I think, myself, right now, having gone through the experience of 25 years of doing books and films and trying to get them out and not getting them out... I have to publish this book myself. The movement is a popular subject. It's fashionable. You can go to Simon and Schuster, you can go to publishing, get an advance and publish a book on the movement. No one wanted to publish this book. I'm not trying to advertise this book, but it's a fact. It's about Haitians. They look at these pictures, they say that maybe you got AIDS disease. They said, nobody's going to be interested in a book on Haiti.

These people are dying and fighting right now, largely, partly because of our government, without any question. Using our own tax money, we are cutting down these people and butchering them to our silence and the media's silence, as much as the Jews were murdered with the complicity of the world, including our own complicity in a bizarre way. That's how the world works.

There is a real world out there. What I'm saying is, see, no one would publish this book because they want to make money. When we talk about trying to keep things moving in a way, I think a key thing you could figure out is how to have a movement going that, in effect, was making money. Then you could work within the American system, because that is—many things are done here for that crude and simple, simple reason.

At the beginning, television was not that important, and the media didn't know about SNCC. And that's just the truth. It came and went. *Life* magazine was important, much more important than television. There were very few cameras there at the beginning. The movement would appear, and then it would vanish. There were freedom rides, and then it was just gone. It didn't exist. The turning point was the photography and—does that mean I should stop, Jack? Yeah, okay, well, I'll wind it down.

Jack Chatfield: No more free beer.

Danny Lyon: No more free beer. If I had a quarter of a beer, I would have fallen over by now. Well, someone said to me—she turned to me, I sat down next to someone who was at least within 20 years of my age, a nice-looking woman, and she turned to me and she says, "Is that all you did for SNCC—was take pictures?" And I said, "Yes, that's all I did."

Julian Bond: Thank you, Danny. Before we go to questions from the audience, let me—

[INTERRUPTION]

James Forman: ...September meeting of 1961, SNCC reorganized itself, and I presume that there's been discussions. There was a staff of 16 people. Charles Rob was in the voter registration. [Bernard Lafayette](#), myself, we were in direct action. The direct action people insisted that I should be the executive director of the organization [indistinct]. We're not going to go back into the field. That's not the case.

My position was one of unity, because I knew that registering voters was direct action. I mean, Fayette County was a horrendous experience. But they felt—the Justice Department under Robert Kennedy, or certainly Robert Kennedy felt—that students should go into voter registration and that that would be a safe method of protest. It's my understanding. I wasn't at the meeting in Highlander, but some people were objecting to that. I know in the direct action wing, the concern was being expressed that we not be co-opted by going into voter registration.

If the movement, through sit-ins and direct action, had achieved a tremendous amount of objectives in voter registration, people were saying, "Well, we have to register voters." And I certainly agree with both positions, but those are the main considerations.

There's some other aspects about this which—I don't know if Diane is here, but maybe at a later meeting, we should try to talk about [it]. My concern—I might say this—Julian because I'm not sure when we'll have another chance to do this, was that the student movement not be co-opted by the Justice Department. And I certainly felt that everything that we could do to try to keep the student movement moving, we should attempt to do that.

But those are the basic considerations. And of course, they made foundation grants possible. Now, this is one of the tragedies. The government can do a lot of things. The Justice Department can do a lot of things. A lot of voter registration money was made available through various foundations primarily because the administration wanted to register voters. There's no question about that. That's just a fact.

And they got it right, and we attempted to get some of that money, but SNCC got very, very little money. A little money went to Southwest Georgia—\$5,000 [\$53,180 in 2025] went to Mississippi—but most of that money went to the federal organization. But we were still registering voters, and we should not forget that.

Now, the approach was—the foundations and the voter registration project did not want us in the rural counties. They objected to our method of registering voters. They tried to get us into the cities, get into the cities where we could register larger numbers of people. And so we tried to explain to them the rationale for registering in the counties, and we presented that proposal, and we didn't compromise on that. We negotiated, but we attempted to get some funds, but it was very, very little money that came as a result of the voter registration activities for SNCC.

Julian Bond: Thanks Jim, are there questions? If you could, and if there are other people who want to ask questions, for the sake of the recording devices, the ones that we can see, if you'll come up and line up at

the microphone. If there are other questions, we're almost out of time, but we need to do this as quickly as we can. Thank you.

Audience Question: My questions are in the form of statements. I always do that. It is unbearably sad and of tremendous significance that on the occasion of this SNCC conference in 1988, there are five men on this particular panel, on the stage, and not one woman. And also, when the photographer, towards the end...

Danny Lyon: I'm really a woman.

Audience Question: I'm really a man. When the photographer finished his talk, he referred to SNCC publishing its own mythology. Was he aware that he used that word? Mythology?

Charles Sherrod: She reminded me of something. Somebody lost this book, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* by Mary Daly. Any of y'all want to pick it up? Somebody lost it.

Danny Lyon: Well, I'll respond. I'll keep it brief. As I said, SNCC was made up of many different people. I studied history at the University of Chicago. Yes, the word was completely intentional. The word history comes up repeatedly. There's history, and there's history, and there's the truth, and there's good and bad history.

There was a legend of SNCC. These are legendary people. I'm a very romantic person. I'm an artist, and I'm somewhat detached from the struggle because I can always go to Katz's and eat pastrami sandwiches. And in a way, I think that's why my photographs were good because I could step back a little, and better work is done that way. But the word was intentional. Thank you.

Audience Question: Yes, what I feel about the word mythology—to me, it is not something that is positive. To me, the word mythology has a pessimist[ic] connotation.

Julian Bond: Yes ma'am.

Audience Question: Yes, good afternoon. I have been trying to do a term paper on the role of the CIA and FBI in the Civil Rights Movement for about two years now. My mother had told me about you Mr. Bond, and I really had no way to get as much inside information as I wanted to. And I was wondering if I could get an address and name from each of you so that I can reach you.

Julian Bond: Is there another— Is there another question? Yeah. Jim?

James Forman: Yeah. I wanted— A couple of things that I'd like to say. One is that when I made the statement about the ideology of the Nation of Islam has been carried on by Louis Farrakhan. I mentioned not by Wallace. Wallace Muhammad has broken with the ideology and his father. He has said that Black supremacy is the worst thing in which they could have been trained, and so that he is not in accord with this information expressed by Elijah Muhammad.

The other thing I wanted to point out was just something—then I want to talk about racist government, about sanctions. A lot of people in this room participated in the passing of sanctions against South Africa,

which has slowed down the military thrust of the South African government. In fact, we even have sanctions passed—sanctions by the United States government—which means under international law, that the United States government is prepared to go to war with the South African government if it does not solve the problems that sanctions are supposed to solve.

And just one other last [thing]. You raised the question of relations with the federal government. Now, Julian, everybody has to understand it clearly. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee knew what it was doing. We were cooperating at various phases with the federal government, and in Fayette County, John Doar and Robert Owens, who were two of the organizers working on the 1957 law, which says that the federal government must protect the civil rights worker—not so much Doar, but certainly Owens.⁶

And the discussion was that in Mississippi—and this was before we went into voter registration—that the United States government couldn't do in Mississippi what it was doing in Fayette County because there were no organizers. There was no field staff.

In order for the Justice Department to file these suits, it was necessary to have field people, that is, people who were willing to take down people to register to vote. Because it was only in that way that you could invoke the 1957 Civil Rights Law, which simply said—it wasn't much, but it was an opening—it said that the federal government had to protect people who were willing to register to vote and those people who were trying to help them register to vote. And it was that law which we used all throughout the [19]60s in order to try to pressure the federal government to do what it was supposed to do, and that is to protect people in the exercise of the right to vote.

Last night, we had a discussion about this whole question. My criticism was not of John Doar, and I point out that you should pinpoint the criticism that sees me in the federal government. And it was primarily the Federal Bureau of Investigation that was refusing to carry out a federal law. Now, this should be discussed in further detail.

Remember, everything we were doing in terms of voter registration was basically legal activity, and the federal government was supposed to protect us. It was not supposed to let anyone interfere in our lives. But as I said, in order to do that, you had to have staff people. And that's one of the reasons why I think that people tried to get—well, that's one of the consequences of trying to get people to register to vote, so that that may help.

But the federal government also did not agree with Mississippi. Bob says that the Justice Department is insisting that we drop our opposition to the literacy laws that they made there for the Civil Rights Act, but not for the clause that says drop the literacy laws. And this is how the demonstration started in [Greenwood, Mississippi](#). And our position was we can't compromise on this question. That if people can register to vote in Illinois just by signing their names, or in New York we have to have the same right in Mississippi.

⁶ Under the Civil Rights Act of 1957, federal officials like John Doar and Robert Owens worked to enforce protections for civil rights workers, particularly the right to assist and register Black voters without intimidation or obstruction.

And we had to be able to carry forth this. And so the thing to do was to start demonstrating and that's how we started the demonstrations in Greenwood, Mississippi around this question of completely eliminating these literacy test laws.

Julian Bond: Okay. Another question. Lawrence Guyot.

Lawrence Guyot: As a member of the next panel, I have been struck by the frivolity in the last two panels. The First Amendment provides them that right, but don't expect any of it in the next panel. We're gonna be serious.

Julian Bond: Is there another question? If not—I'm sorry. He has one last question and then Jack Chatfield will send us our line.

Audience Question: Pretty quick. I just know that there was a lot of involvement from people from [Students for a Democratic Society](#) [SDS], and their later economic research and action projects in cities in the North was pretty much based on stuff that they'd seen with SNCC in the South. A lot of it came from that.

And it happened, I think, in the beginnings movement. They must have been there at the times that this panel's on, because by [19]64, in the Freedom Summer, they were already having their own project in the North. And was there any—maybe you could tell me about the interaction with SDS people and what might have made them feel, already within two years later, that the way for them to go was the northern ghettos, as opposed to working in the rural South.

Julian Bond: Danny?

Danny Lyon: I'll speak to something related. I left SNCC, and I also got my head split open at the Pentagon and taken into Occoquan in 1967 with a camera and five rolls of Tri-X in my pocket, which was intentional. And they made jokes in that prison too. You know, they even made jokes in Auschwitz. That's true. The joke was, one woman said to another, "The one thing I can't stand in here, Rosa, is when you sing. I can't stand your voice."

But my own feeling was that the anti-war movement eclipsed—took the wind out of the sails of the Civil Rights Movement. Or to put it another way, Vietnam—one of the victims of Vietnam was the Civil Rights Movement, one of the many victims in this country, if nothing else, because the country's attention was turned away from the South and the movement to a war.

I also think a fundamental difference between the movement and the anti-war movement was something that Tom Paine calls sunshine soldiers and summer patriots.⁷ Had the involvement of those tremendous numbers of people, students, many white students, in the anti-war movement—had their involvement been as total as I think many of the people in the movement had been, I think you would have seen a much greater revolution in this country.

⁷ The phrase "sunshine soldiers and summer patriots" comes from Thomas Paine's *The American Crisis* (1776), describing those who only support a cause when it is easy, contrasting them with those who remain committed through hardship.

There were many people in the anti-war movement who were as committed and who were changed forever as anybody in SNCC, but I don't think that was true of these tremendous masses of people who came out for rallies and then went home. And I'm not putting down going out for rallies, but someone talked about apathy yesterday, and I say, look to yourself. You must change yourself. We are the problem. I am the problem.

I have never stopped believing that. I come from a middle-class background. I can eat anywhere. I can eat anything I want. I change myself. I keep trying to change myself. I change my children. I think if you change yourself, everybody changes themselves, there's going to be no more problems. But the world doesn't work that simply. I try to do it through the media. I think there has to be a revolution in the media.

James said at one point that when D.C. becomes a state, we'll have completed our objective goals. But he also talked about changing the values of the people of this country. I think in one sense, that was a goal of SNCC that will—I shouldn't say should never be realized, but it is something that you can struggle towards for two more generations, and you should.

Julian Bond: Jack Chatfield.

Jack Chatfield: Hollis Watkins reminds me that we really have to stop it here because we've got the meeting at 1:30, so lunch is going to be rushed for some of the SNCC people. Lunch for the group that I defined—I helped carefully define—SNCC people, friends of SNCC, scholars, journalists, and the handful of students who came from a tremendous distance. That has to be the limit set. We will be in Rittenberg Lounge. Enter from the entrance on this side.