SNCC 28th Anniversary Conference: The 1960s, and the American Democratic Tradition

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We Shall Not Be Moved: The Life and Times of SNCC 1960 - 1966 Conference
Date: April 16, 1988
Location: Trinity College - Hartford, CT

Host:
Jack Chatfield - Professor of American History, Trinity College

Moderator:
Jack Chatfield - Southwest Georgia Project; Professor of American History, Trinity College

Panelists:
Clayborne Carson - Professor of History, Stanford University; Director, King Papers Project; Author, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*

Allen Matusow - Professor of History, Rice University; Author, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*

Michael Thelwell - Professor of Afro-American Studies, University of Massachusetts; Author, *Duties, Pleasures, and Conflicts: Essays in Struggle*

***NOTE:** Recording begins right before the panel starts.

Jack Chatfield: …move to where they would like to be during the panel. This conference on the history of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee is indeed a historical retrospective. It was devised in such a way that it would give preponderant weight to those who were in the movement during the period of time, and in some cases, of course, long after the period of time, which is the focal point of this conference.

If we'd wanted to organize an academic conference, we would have done it. And I, for one, can say that I wouldn't have had the adrenaline to propel myself in the way that I have had in the last three days.

Mr. [Kwame] Ture believes in the dialectic, and so do I, but my dialectic is somewhat different than that of Mr. Ture. Rather than feeling that one force is always in the ascendant and one always in the subordinate position, I see many societies, not least American democracy. I see many cultures. I see many personalities as characterized by an ongoing dialectical tension in which no force is for long in the ascendant, or at least not permanently in the ascendant.

Since there was so much that's been said by Mr. Ture and in some cases by others with which I graciously disagree, it gives me great pleasure to say that we at least agree about the centrality of the dialectic in human affairs. Ironically — and irony is something I believe in as well — ironically, though it may surprise some of my old SNCC friends, I don't know, I still see myself as an early [19]60s liberal, albeit with a profound sense of the limitations of liberalism. I see myself as a capitalist, albeit a pitched capitalist with a profound sense of the limitations of capitalism, a pluralist, albeit with a sense of the limitations of pluralism.

I would be less than candid — indeed, to quote the uncommonly eloquent Mr. Ture, "my body would begin to perspire" — if I did not say that I was unsettled by some of the events of the late 1960s and perhaps I have not yet recovered. Suffice it to say that this conference is partial payment on a debt — only the interest, not the principal.

I'm a former member of SNCC, but I'm a historian as well, and for all the tension this may create, I do feel a devotion to the intellectual life. Larry Guyot — forgive me, Guyot — a man whom I profoundly admire and respect, told me in Jackson, Mississippi in 1969 after a very tense exchange, which made me feel more uneasy than I did when I faced Laurie Pritchett in Albany, Georgia.

Guyot said, "You're just one more typical northern white intellectual floating through the South, disconnected, rootless, a peripatetic intellectual." I have never forgotten those words, and I will not deny now the force of that statement.

Mr. Ture was uncommonly gracious, uncommonly gracious. We hardly knew each other. We saw each other at conferences. I knew him by reputation — who did not? He said, "You missed two reunions, so you organized this one."

This is one case in which the dialectic does not prevail. This is a statement which is simply true and free of any inner dialectical tension. I missed two reunions, and I felt a deep and unbearable need to organize a third. Indeed, I felt the truth of what Mr. Guyot had said.

Historians have come under attack at this conference — a vindication, I hope, of our democracy, a partial vindication of our democracy. As a historian, I should say, and I believe that I'm keenly aware of the limitations of the craft of history. But I would say this: writing history is an extremely difficult task, perhaps only slightly less complex than witnessing it and recording it faithfully.

Indeed, one of the striking things about this conference, not least about the final panel, was the degree of disagreement — some of it, I believe, was smothered — about the latter history of SNCC, and perhaps even to a degree about the early days. When we hear one of the most distinguished members of SNCC say that John McCone was at a meeting held in Greenville [MS], and then we hear the irrepressible Guyot correct Jim [James] Forman and locate the meeting in Washington and with Allen Dulles, we understand the difficulties of reconstructing the past. They are nearly boundless.

Indeed, Mr. Ture spoke eloquently in defense of socialism. Let it be recorded that in the late [19]60s, he said — this is a paraphrase, I don't have the book here, Allen Matusow quotes it — "Socialism is not for black people, period, period. Communism is not for black people, period, period. Marxism is not for black people, period, period."[1] That's a paraphrase, not a quote. Views change. Interpretations of the past change. It is infinitely difficult to reconstruct what went on.

I heard [Charles] Sherrod say in the hall that he's put certain things out of his mind. Didn't explain all of what he meant, but I think I know what he meant. The past is full of pain. It is full of tension. It is, I think, full of ambiguity.

Thus I would not be faithful to my mission as a historian — albeit with an affection for SNCC that practically paralyzes me — if I did not say that I remain a foe of ideological systems, suspicious of rhetoric. And I think this is an indispensable condition to the writing and recording of history.

In Mary King's book — and here is a long and profoundly personal reflection on her career in SNCC, touching so many parts of the South — in Mary King's book, she quotes a seminal staff meeting in the spring of 1964 on the eve of Freedom Summer, and then quotes the remark that could only have been made in 1963 before the assassination of Medgar Evers.[2] For those who think that historians have it easy and that they are traitors to the truth, bear these things in mind.

Our panel will begin with an opening statement by Mr. Allen Matusow, presently Dean of the Faculty at Rice University. I believe when I was a young product of a Methodist Military Academy in Northern Virginia, in a county where the schools had been closed — though I remained unaware of this at the time — pardon me, Warren County, I believe that they were — this was in [19]56 they closed them. I believe they closed the public schools even more, maybe I'm incorrect. Maybe my witness is imperfect here. In any event, I was going to say—the [indistinct] of history indeed.

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[1] In *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*, historian Allen J. Matusow examines the ideological and political shifts of the 1960s, including tensions within the Civil Rights Movement.

[2] *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* is a memoir by Mary King, a former SNCC communications staff member, offering a deeply personal and detailed account of her work in the Southern freedom struggle.

This was a digression which was unnecessary and indeed undesirable, hoisted on my own dialectical petards. Allen Matusow, I was about to say, is the Dean of the Faculty at Rice University in Texas, which was called up until the modern time, Rice Institute. He is a professor. He's also a professor of American history at that university, a scholar of the Truman years, most recently the author of a book called *The Unraveling of America*: *A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*, which contains a withering and rather unpredictable critique of many of the political movements and doctrines of the 1960s, not least liberalism itself. Mr. Matusow.

Allen Matusow: Thank you very much, Jack. I was kind of hoping you wouldn't tell them I was a dean, but it's too late. I would like to thank you very much for inviting me to this conference. It's been a great experience for me to see up close and in this environment all of these people who are, so far as I'm concerned, the authentic moral heroes of the 1960s. And it is an experience I'm not going to forget.

The conference seems to have many purposes, but above all, the purpose is historical. It is a conference conceived by a historian, and it is a conference which has relied on the memory of participants to set the record straight and to tell the story. And from that point of view, I think this has been a very successful conference. We have heard a series of very moving panels, a series of very moving testimonials by people in the movement about how the movement transformed their lives, even as they, as members of SNCC, were transforming America.

And in the speeches we've heard and the songs that we've listened to, we have seen recreated here in Hartford [CT] that community that SNCC created 25 years ago in the Deep South. And so I think we were privileged here to get a glimpse of the interior reality of what SNCC was, and in that sense, to understand something of the historical truth that SNCC was.

And so the question becomes, why this panel, or in particular, why me? Because it's obvious that the veterans of this movement have clearly identified two enemies: sheriffs and historians. I'm guilty. I mean, I'm an outsider. I wasn't there. I'm a historian, and I'm a historian who has presumed to write about these events and to tell something about the history of SNCC.

And I got to tell you, I was very appreciative of the critique of history that has been offered here, especially last night, which was, in fact, a remarkable night. I remember in particular the remarks of Bernice Reagon, who brought that evening to a close. The panel was about women, if you weren't there, and a number of women on the panel and some from the audience each spoke about her experience within SNCC.

And the accounts were all different. In fact, they were contradictory. And Ms. Reagon said that that shouldn't be surprising — that for every woman in SNCC there was a different experience and a different perspective and a different history, and it would be a mistake to try to generalize

about that, to make a comprehensive statement. That the generalizations you would make would be in the nature of distortions. And she was right.

And then I remember this, as you will too if you were there — this remarkable exchange between Mary King and Casey Hayden. Mary King explained how she and Casey had co-authored the paper that raised the issue of women in SNCC. And then Casey Hayden remarked that she doesn't remember writing the paper. And she turned to Mary King and she said, "If you and I, who were there, don't know what happened, pity the poor historian who's going to have to write about it years later, because they'll miss the truth." And Casey Hayden was right.

All that said, it's not all that needs to be said. The other part is that history by participants is no less distorted than history by the absent professionals. Because it will not surprise anybody here that memory fades, that memory is flawed, that memory evades, that memory resists bringing forward the material that was repressed — that what we heard here was an exercise in collective and individual autobiography. And that all autobiography is, to some extent, self-justifying. That's not surprising.

So what we heard ultimately was a kind of history that, in its own way, is just as limited and just as distorting as academic history.

And so, Jack, what I would like to propose is a fourth conference in which the matter that was repressed and the subjects that were evaded would be the real subjects of the conference. That is not at all to criticize what we learned here, because we learned a lot. My point is, there's still a lot to learn.

What I would like to do, very briefly with my time, is to raise some of the questions and some of the issues which I would like to see addressed the next time SNCC has a reunion — I think, so, 1-2-3-4, next April, Rice University. That's a great idea, actually.

The first issue I would really like to see SNCC people talk about as participants is what became known as participatory democracy and democracy within the movement. It's clear when you hear the people who were there that the community that they created changed lives. It was a community without hierarchy, without bureaucracy, without leaders. It was a community in which every individual was entitled to equal respect and the same hearing, and in which decisions were all made collectively.

And it was not an easy community to create. It was hard. And when it was finally done, there was something special there. Casey Hayden said that when she and her Freedom House were busy creating her community, what she envisioned was that this community would move outward until it took over the whole world — only that didn't happen. Never got out of the house.

And what I'd like to hear discussed is the limiting aspects of this beloved community. That is, whether, in fact, it did not impose limits in its attempt to create internal democracy. There are some reports of people who went to Mississippi in [19]64, for instance, who felt that they would never be accepted by those who went through this process — that they would always be excluded. They hadn't gone through what the others had gone through. They had not participated. They didn't belong. And that might be one of the underlying reasons for the failure — fear of the ultimate failure of the organization.

At the end of her wonderful talk yesterday, Casey Hayden said that she didn't know whether what she said made any sense to anybody. She thought that it would make sense to other SNCC people. I wonder if, given the kind of movement SNCC was, whether that's enough.

Another issue that I would like to see explored is the relation of SNCC to liberalism, to the liberal tradition. I mean, it's clear that the people who went to Mississippi in [19]61 and southwest Georgia went to testify for traditional American democracy. They thought they were going there with the encouragement and the promise of protection by the Kennedy administration.

And what they learned when they got there was that they couldn't trust liberals. Liberals in Washington wouldn't protect them. FBI agents stood around taking notes while they got beat up. People in the Albany movement got arrested for allegedly obstructing justice, while the people who shot at them went free.

And in 1964 there was a tremendous disillusionment resulting from the failure of the challenge at the Democratic National Convention on the Mississippi Democratic Party.[3] But at the end of that, there occurred in SNCC a kind of collective nervous breakdown, which in some way relates to the failure of the liberals to redeem their promise — the destruction of the beliefs on which the organization was founded.

What I'd like to hear SNCC people talk about is whether they hadn't given up on liberalism too soon, because at the moment of the breakdown, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was already on the books, and the Civil Rights Act of 1965 was already on the books, and those acts vindicated, however hesitantly, the promise of the liberals to do something about the problems of Black people in the South.

In Lowndes County [AL] in 1966, the Black Panther Party got as far as it did because the Johnson administration sent registrars, or examiners, into the state to register Black voters under the 1965 Civil Rights Act. Mary King says in her book that she wishes she had known then how important the rule of law is and was. And I'd like to hear SNCC people who went through this experience — what they think about it.

[3] The disappointment in 1964 stemmed from the Democratic Party's refusal to seat the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) delegation at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Atlantic City.

There was a note of triumph. When you hear these people sing, they are singing about triumph. And why they feel triumphant is that they did, in fact, change things in the South. They destroyed, and helped destroy, the segregation system, and they did that with the help of liberals.

I'd like to see the issue of interracial sex addressed—

Jack Chatfield: Not here please.

Allen Matusow: It's been addressed, and it's been addressed by participant observers. Been addressed by Alvin Hussein, who treated people in the movement—Yeah, let me finish what I'm saying.

For the benefit of the students in this audience: what Hussein says is that white women who went to the South in 1964 got bombarded by Black men and reacted in neurotic fashion. And that at the heart of SNCC, at the heart of the racial breakdown in SNCC in [19]64 and [19]65, was a problem of interracial sex. I was really interested yesterday —

Michael Thelwell: Which demonstrates the dangers of too much Freudianism.

Allen Matusow: I was very interested yesterday to hear how the women in SNCC absolutely rejected the interpretation that has been accepted about sexism within the organization. I would like to hear from people, if it's not too sensitive, as it appears to be — I'd like to hear what the real truth of that is. I seem to have touched a sensitive nerve. I will go ahead anyway. Can I finish?

Jack Chatfield: But okay — questions will follow the statements of the three panelists; they will not come before this time.

Allen Matusow: I got one last issue I'd like to see raised — couldn't possibly be as controversial as the one I just did — and that is the development within SNCC of revolutionary nationalism.

What happened has already been referred to, I think, well, in the last panel — that there began to develop within SNCC an identification with colonial peoples in Africa. And there began to develop a seductive analogy between Black people in the United States and Black people in Africa — that Africans on both continents were the victims of white, racist colonial oppression.

And in 1965, when Frantz Fanon — when his book was translated — we have accounts here, confirmed elsewhere, about the way that the movement consumed that book, how it assumed a kind of biblical status. I should like to tell the students here that what that book does, in part, is talk about the therapy of violence. It was a short step from the analogy and Fanon to conclude

that Black people in the United States should assume a revolutionary and violent posture toward their colonial oppressors in the United States.

And that became the line that SNCC offered Black people through its spokesman, Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown in 1967, when Black people were in the process of burning down their own ghettos. Now that issue was ignored until Stokely brought it up, and there did not seem to be much of a disposition among many people here to actually talk about it.

I got a quote from Stokely, just to show you that the man is consistent. He went to Havana in August of 1967, and he said there: “Comrades of the Third World, of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, I want you to know that Afro-North Americans within the United States are fighting for their liberation. We have no alternative but to take up arms and struggle for total liberation and total revolution."

H. Rap Brown, ideologically, was making the same point. [Indistinct] could face that. I'd like to hear other people in the movement respond. A lot of the people here had gone by then. What happened split those who were left, but many who'd gone the whole way, went the whole way with Stokely. I'd like to hear about that.

I'll tell you just one last thing, and that is: I've been interested in this movement since 1961, when Charles McDew came to Boston [MA] and talked to a bunch of us about it. And I belonged to Friends of SNCC, and I picketed Woolworth's and helped organize a [Harry] Belafonte concert to raise money for SNCC.

And then the Freedom Rides came, and people got assaulted in Montgomery [AL], and other people started to get down there. And I said to myself, maybe I should go. I said I was — I was a little busy. I'd go some other time. And 1964 came and I could go. And I knew that if I didn't go then, I'd probably never go. And I said to myself, was I ready to get down there and get killed? Because I knew something about it.

I tried to imagine what it would look like if I looked into a barrel of a gun, and what would happen if I got beat over the head. And I knew it wasn't in me — that I couldn't go there. And I'm not ashamed to tell you that, because a lot of people thought about going, and hardly anybody went. I was normal.

But these people went, and that's why they're the authentic heroes of the 1960s, and why they deserve a full and complete history — not a history that's going to romanticize, not a history that's going to ignore the warts — but a history of a great organization that's a full and complete history. And maybe sometime, the participants and the historians working together can produce that history.

Jack Chatfield: Clayborne Carson is the second historian to devote a book to SNCC — that is, to write a book on SNCC. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* was published several years ago. It remains the most recent scholarly study of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Mr. Carson is professor of history at Stanford University and the director of the King Papers Project at this time. Mr. Clayborne Carson.

Clayborne Carson: As I have sat here through the last few days, it's an interesting experience — one that's very daunting, because you know that at the end you've got to come up here and somehow come to terms with everything that's gone before.

And in a way, it kind of replicates my experience of writing the book *In Struggle*. Because I think, if I have one good quality as a historian, it's that I listen a lot and try to take in what I hear. And I've tried over the last few days to do pretty much the same work that I did in writing the book on SNCC — and that is, listen a great deal, try to take it in, and then try to come to terms with aspects of it, and try to make some sense of it.

And I think that one of the things that I would certainly agree with—some of the defenses of the craft of history—is that the kind of truth we arrive at is not the Truth with a capital T. And I think most of you know that. I think the kind of truth we arrive at is something that is personal to us. It's very limited in terms of time, and most of all, it's limited in terms of the kinds of materials that we had to work with. And that's what I'd like to spend a little bit of time talking about, with respect to my own work on SNCC.

I'd like to just start by saying a bit about an experience that's now 25 years old. And I think that Kwame Ture might remember the first time we met — I don't know if he remembers, but I certainly remember — it was at an NSA [National Student Association] conference some time ago, and I was a freshman in college and just beginning to get involved.

And I went that summer of 1963 to that conference, I think, with the idea that I would somehow meet a lot of these people who had been active, because I had met some of the people from SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]. I was way out West, way away from a lot of this activity.

And at that conference, I saw — not only who was then Stokely Carmichael, Bob Moses — I saw that also within that same period. And I think the importance of bringing that up right now is that, to me, that was the start of becoming a historian.

And I think it's important to bring that up because when I walked in on Thursday — I guess I came here on Friday morning — one of the questions that was asked at the desk outside was something like, "Are you a scholar or are you a participant?"

And I thought, gosh, that's a strange choice to have to make and it's one that would have never occurred to me in terms of my own background. I'm a product of the movement. My work is a product of the movement.

I wouldn't be teaching at a university if it were not for the movement. They didn't have Black professors at Stanford University 25 years ago. I wouldn't have had the job. There wouldn't have been a Black Studies program. None of my ability to do my work would have existed without the movement that I had my first contact with then.

Shortly after that — one of the reasons why Kwame was there was he was trying to get the National Student Association to do a very radical thing. You know what that radical thing was? Do you remember? It was to support the March on Washington. To support the March on Washington. And it was a very interesting kind of experience to watch an organizer at work, and to begin to understand something about an experience that was quite different from the one I'd grown up with.

When I got out of high school — I guess my ambition, as the first person who had a possibility of going to college in my family — I had the chance of going to the Air Force Academy. I thought that was just the top of the world.

A few years later, as a result of meeting people like Kwame and Bob Moses, I was a draft resister. I think that that transition was very rapid. And one of the things that becomes clear from looking back at that experience is something else that has come up as a general theme in this conference — and that is that experience that people had of meeting the movement and being changed by it in very dramatic ways.

Now, some of the people, most of the people who have been talked about, are people who were changed in a way that brought them into SNCC. But there were many thousands of people out there, like myself, who were changed in just as fundamental ways, became part of the movement, who didn't join SNCC, didn't become a field secretary in the South, but we were also — at least we considered ourselves — part of that movement.

So that when I went to school and became a historian, it would have never occurred to me to make that kind of distinction between being an activist and being a historian. My activism was writing *In Struggle*.

Now that is not to say — that is not to make it any better or any worse than any other kind of work. It is simply my activity that I chose, one of the activities that I chose, in addition to other kinds of political activities that I chose to engage in.

Now, one of the things that I think I saw as the result of looking at SNCC is that the story was multifaceted. And the process by which the book got written, I think, tells a lot about the historian's craft.

Because SNCC didn't have an archive, at least when I did my work. And when I began to do my work on SNCC, it came from interviewing the people in it, meeting them individually. I remember sitting down with Kwame a number of times in different locations. I remember sitting with Cleve [Cleveland] Sellers.

I typically went where these people were. Some of you, I didn't reach — I tried, I really tried to reach all of you. I recall — one of the things that people do not understand, I think, who have not done this kind of history, is how difficult it is sometimes to have this sense that you've got to reach these people who have the story.

Everyone was telling me, for example, Willie Ricks is going to be this really hard interview — and some of you probably told me that — and yet what I found is that the people I did reach wanted to tell the story. They invited me into their homes. Many of you put me up overnight, introduced me to your attics. Sometimes you had boxes of material up there. Those were the SNCC archives, and that's what had to be brought together.

And that work of doing that, I think, introduced me — sometimes the message that you delivered to me that was very, very important was not so much what you said, but where you were and what you were doing while you were saying it. That was very important to me — to see people who are still in Mississippi, to see Maria Varela. I visited her in a small town up in northern New Mexico, still doing organizing, still in the community — and that delivered a message.

Now, another thing about historians is we work with the surviving record. It's the past that survives, and the records that survive. And the records were very limited at that time, and they're still very limited.

So if I had any urging to those of you in this audience who are part of SNCC, it is to begin to play that role of making SNCC accessible — of putting your interviews on the record, putting your stories on the record, putting your memoirs on the record, and most of all, getting those documents into the record.

Now I'd like to just end by talking about what I would see as the main thrust of what I would see as a theme throughout this conference — and that is that SNCC was, most of all, organizers.

And we hear a lot about political leadership, we hear a lot about demonstrating, and most of what is delivered about the [19]60s is this notion of protest and rallies and these big marches — the March on Washington and so on.

And yet, the story that I got was a very different one. I remember when I told Kwame that I wanted to go to the March on Washington, and he said that was a middle-class picnic. I thought that was the most radical thing that I had ever thought of doing in my life — going to that march — because it was a first protest for me.

But he was talking about Albany, Georgia. He was talking about Mississippi. He was talking about this other reality out there of people organizing communities. And that was something that was very central, and remains very central in terms of understanding SNCC.

And I think that if we have to get a message — it seems to me the purpose of this conference is not to amuse either the historians or to provide a forum for former SNCC people — but rather to reach the students in this audience who have to create their own struggle. And that is the importance of community organizing and how to do that. And I think that we've gotten not only some lessons about the centrality of that, but also some very important lessons on how that is to be done.

And I hope that one of the things that historians can do is to begin to understand that organizing experience, to begin to write about it in very creative ways. That means that they have to begin to get into that experience.

I think that there's some unfinished business, and that is one aspect where I would certainly agree with the former speaker — and that is that we do have some unfinished business. Where do we go from here? That question Martin Luther King addressed in 1968 in his last book — *Where Do We Go from Here?*

And one of the ways in which I would like to address that is to recall something that Bob Moses once said — I think it was on the 75th birthday of Ella Baker. He said the question — one of the questions implicit in that — is "Who are we?" And we still have to deal with that question: who is the relevant "we," as well as where are we going?

And I think that's still, as we can see from this day's discussion, still an important and unresolved question. Also — and this is really the last of the items of unfinished business — I could go on for a lot of unfinished business — but there was something mentioned yesterday in one of the talks, and it had to do with myth.

Who brought it up? Danny Lyon. And there was some question about mythology and history. And that's an interesting question, because as a historian, you would expect me to come down on the side of history as opposed to myth. But I think both are very, very important.

And I'd like to explain that just a little, because history, in a way— they both deal with the past. History recreates the past for the benefit of the intellect, and it's an intellectual exercise. Myth

also recreates the past. And I would argue that myth plays the same role with respect to culture as history does for intellectual life, and that culture ultimately is the medium that carries on — is the basis of any struggle.

I think that when you look at what Bernice Reagon did last night, you understand the importance of the cultural medium that allowed the struggle to take place — and how that can be not only a basis, a foundation for struggle, but that culture itself has to be transformed.

The reason why I mentioned myth is that right now I'm in an exercise — another part of a project — carrying on the King Papers Project. And I think most of you recognize that there is already, in the process of being created — perhaps already in place — a series of myths about the [19]60s.

And there's also what I could particularly call the King myth — and it's been referred to before. It's a myth. And I'm not saying this pejoratively. I'm saying it as something that is very necessary — that there should be a King myth and what King represented. Just as there should be — in American white culture — we have a George Washington myth and an Abraham Lincoln myth, and we have a variety of myths. Well, we have a King myth.

And that King myth — and this is the importance of myth — is that it is that aspect of history that can provide lessons, cultural lessons, that enable us to get into a future, enable us to survive, thrive, move forward.

Now, what I'm saying is that in addition to that King myth, there has to be another kind of myth — a myth that is based on a different kind of struggle that also took place during the 1960s. I think, in a way, that King myth is only an aspect of a story, and SNCC is another aspect of that story.

And in addition to that historical, analytical history that I think historians like to have — you know, those mind games where we sit around and we talk about interpretations of history and analysis of history. And somehow we wonder why we don't get a wide readership, and why no one even listens to what we're talking about, and why we are so irrelevant to what is a political process that we would like to have an impact on.

I think part of that is that we don't play that other process of doing cultural work, of creating stories about the past that help people get to a future. And those stories, I think, have to be created, because that is what really survives.

And I think if there's anything that we can do — and begin to do that right now as part of our process of perhaps celebrating the King holiday — a basic aspect of myth is ritual.It is that notion that that is how we pass on stories to a new generation — stories about heroes, stories about people who did tremendous things on behalf of their people.

I think those stories have to be told, and they have to be told well. And that's not to say that we can't engage in analysis and all these other kinds of things, but that has to be a central part of our activity also. Thank you.

Jack Chatfield: It has been said by Guyot and perhaps one or two others during the course of these three days that, among other things, SNCC was a collection of profoundly intelligent people who engaged in the highest level of intellectual dialogue. There were many people in SNCC who gave it that character, and one of them was certainly Mr. Michael Thelwell himself.

A former participant in the movement, active in Mississippi and in the Washington office in the middle of the 1960s, now familiar to you as a member of our former panel, a professor of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, and the author of *Duties, Pleasures and Conflicts: Essays in Struggle*.

And I must say, a man who, when I reached him on the phone several months ago, when the shape of this conference was still a very dim and blurred vision, gave me some very, very strong advice on how to construct this conference, and also said that he would be an enthusiastic participant in any capacity in which he was needed. Mr. Michael Thelwell.

Michael Thelwell: Kwame — the other one. There's an African proverb, my brother — two of them. One says, "Truth is like a goatskin bag. Each man carries his own." But there are certain truths, my brother, which people who experienced it can agree on and know to be the case.

The other one that I want you to ponder, my brother, is an Ashanti proverb which says, "A log can lie in the river for ten years, but it will never become a crocodile."

SNCC was an extraordinary experience for a large number of people — both the small group of organizers who constituted a staff and the large number of people that it put in motion.

I think that the historians and the media of this country have failed to properly interpret and demonstrate the change and effect that that little organization had — not only on the way Black people live and are defined by this country today, but on a subsequent wave of social activity.

The extent to which it gave form and language and a posture to any number of political movements which have since come out — but it can be demonstrated, I say, without resorting to a kind of parochial, self-serving analysis — that the work that SNCC did was perhaps the most profoundly effective work, both in the kinds of legislation which came down to affect the conditions of life for Black people, but in the institutions that it left behind.

But it was also, however, a formative experience for almost a generation — certainly for the people who were involved — of young Americans, Black and white.

And it certainly has — and that experience proceeded with a certain logic. It proceeded with a certain logic. And if I can just jump ahead to [19]66–[19]67 and the ultimate demise of the organization, one really has to understand that that roller coaster ride of political activity — a very dangerous, very intense, very heightened experience in the South — left people profoundly emotionally exhausted.

I mean, it doesn't matter how young and how fit you were — that would have sapped your physical and psychic and emotional energies anyway — so that there's a period of time, it seems to me, when also the political events of the nation had escalated and careened almost out of control, largely as a consequence of the disillusion of a whole generation of American youth in the myths and in the principles and in the values that they had imagined that this country held — were all dissolved in the violence, bloodshed, and class injustice and racial injustice of the Vietnam War.

And in that period — really chaotic, almost hysterical period — this band of brothers and sisters, this circle of trust, having soldiered their way through and begun that process, were caught in a wave of forces that even today we're only beginning to understand.

I'm going to try to develop now — but the logic of the movement was very, very clear. I want to talk about that logic, and I want to talk about its character in a minute. It began in the American South. And it began with students protesting nonviolently against the overt symbols of humiliation and discrimination — public accommodations.

And the point I want to make here — the theme I'm trying to follow here — is that the movement proceeded in a creative, pragmatic, problem-solving way, addressing real problems. And theory and ideology, to the extent that that existed, were always disciplined in service to very concrete material problems, and how to affect those.

And when strategies and tactics evolved — some of them extraordinarily creative and intelligent — they evolved in response to the pressing need of how do you organize people? How do you put people in motion? How do you analyze the system to find where the chinks are, to find where the weak spots are, to find the vulnerable points, and then how do you best exploit them?

And it is that creative process of pragmatic analysis, and the willingness — not only to risk lives, not only to jeopardize your existence and to risk torture, which sometimes is worse than just assassination — but the willingness to work.

I mean, I have a letter from Casey actually that talks about the drudgery, the tediousness, the teaching of it. It wasn't always excitement, but a willingness for the back-breaking, slow, unglamorous, serious work of working with and organizing people.

The resistance to the indignities of public discrimination soon ran upon the very hard fact of political power in the country. And it became clear that the Republican Party was not — that the political parties of the country were of no help, that this system was prepared to coexist with, live with, and countenance the systematic disfranchisement of millions of Black people in the South, which robbed them of any political representation and left them the victims of legal discrimination — left them the victims of violence — left them absolutely powerless.

When we talk about victories and failures, you must cast your imagination back to what it was like for a Black person to live in Mississippi in 1950. The cops didn't have to respect you. In fact, I remember in Canton, Mississippi, when the sheriff would go in and deputize all the drunkards in the bar on Saturday night and give them sticks and guns — garbage men, rednecks, drunk—it's 12 o'clock, and they're deputized, given badges, sticks, and guns, and sent out to go beat Black people, where the murder of somebody Black wasn't a crime.

Trying to impanel the jury to try the murderer of Medgar Evers — who has still never been brought to justice — and who was being feted up and down Highway 49. In every bar he went, people would buy him drinks as he told them how he had assassinated Medgar Evers.

Trying to impanel the jury, the federal prosecutor asked the prospective jurors — all of whom were white, since they're taken from the voters list — "Do you think it's a crime for a white man to kill a Negro?" And a lot of people were excused from duty because they didn't think so. One old white farmer gave the most honest — in terms of Mississippi — answer. They said, "Well, that depends on what the nigger done done."

Now, these are real conditions. These are very real conditions, and they don't exist in quite the same way anymore. But I want you to just visualize a sense of absolute and total vulnerability that American citizens had who happened to be Black — knowing that none of the institutions of society existed on their behalf or would protect them. That was changed.

Now, when the movement moved into the question of voter registration, it was the most profound decision it could have made, and we are still seeing the consequences of that — and that isn't finished yet.

I do not believe, my brother Stokely, that the Democratic Party is going to save us, or that the vote will liberate us. But I do believe very profoundly that to the extent that the Black vote in this country is organized into a precise instrument of pressure — one of many that we will need — is the extent to which the political institutions of this country will take Black people's needs and demands much more seriously than they have traditionally done.

And it is our responsibility to advance that process in every way as we look for those other processes and those other strategies which will help us to hasten the liberation for which we all seek.

Now, when people went into the rural South, a remarkable thing happened. A remarkable thing happened for those Black organizers from the North who went, and for those white organizers from the North who went. And I'll tell you what that remarkable thing is. You saw a little example of it in the extraordinary performance of Bernice Reagon here the other night.

What we encountered was a massive dignity and power and principle, and the evocativeness and the force of traditional Black Southern culture. And that discipline then instructed us — because of the culture — not only with the theoretical expressiveness, the great artistic beauty and power that is our African heritage, but it is a culture winnowed by oppression and infused with a clear moral vision, a certain principle.

When we talk of the local people with the reverence that we do, it is because we went down there — many of us — expecting to find, quote-unquote, "the most oppressed people in the country," "the most psychologically beaten down people in the country," people deprived of much formal education.

In some counties — in Mississippi — they didn't build schools for Black people until the Supreme Court decision to integrate schools. That's when they built schools. People deprived of education and economic opportunity — so therefore we're talking about "Wretched of the Earth."[4]

When we got down there, what we discovered was a dignified, proud, principled, decent people, and a culture which had sustained them, ironically enough, because of segregation — where they had developed institutions and practices — one of which, of course, was the Black church — an institution widely misunderstood in this country. They developed institutions and practices and values before which we were humbled, before which we were humble and instructed.

We also discovered another thing. We discovered the youth there. And the power and the effect of SNCC is due to the Dorie Ladners and the Joyces [Ladner] and the Lawrence Guyots and the Hollis Watkins and a host of other young local Black Mississippians and Alabamians and Georgians, without whom there would have been no movement. And my respect for those young people was and is profound — because they knew better than anybody else what the consequences of resistance to American racism were.

They all had. I remember a case of one guy who refused to drive a car into — it wasn't Tchula— where's that place? And people got to him for saying, "You're undisciplined and you're not working. Why won't you go there?" Well, it turns out he'd almost been lynched in that town, and a member of his family had indeed been lynched in that town.

[4] "The Wretched of the Earth" is a landmark 1961 book by Frantz Fanon, a Martinican psychiatrist, revolutionary, and anti-colonial theorist. The title refers to the colonized and oppressed peoples of the world, those relegated to the margins of society by systems of imperialism, racism, and exploitation.

And those young people came forward and made the movement work. It didn't work because of the Howard intellectuals. It didn't work because of Jewish liberals and radicals who came in there — though they contributed. It didn't work because of the Anglo-Saxon liberals who came down to work. It worked because of the power of traditional Black culture, and the courage and bravery of the local people, and the resources.

And the other thing we discovered — that was very instructive — was that these oppressed and depressed and psychologically worn-down people, who had been converted by slavery into "Sambos" — we heard all of that (I won't use that expletive) — when we got there, what we discovered was that simply by constructing the institutions through which they could struggle, we were in the presence of some of the most creative — this is not just the courage now — resourceful, ingenious people.[5]

And that all of that, suppressed by the system of racism, flowed in an incredible way. And it is that period — the so-called heroic days of SNCC — that will linger, that we talk about, that we glorify in our imaginations when we remember the development of the organization.

But the point here is a little more profound than that. Because what I'm saying without saying it is that the character and spirit and strategy of SNCC was, in fact, an expression, therefore. Sure — you know — white liberalism helped to color it. [Albert] Camus saw it, and certain intellectualism helped to color it. But it was fundamentally an expression of Afro-American culture — Afro-American Southern culture — in its principles, in its value, and its character.

And it was very — it was not only democratic, it was not only courageous, it was not only egalitarian, as you've been hearing this weekend, but it was profoundly principled. There was nothing cynical about it. What it said it was doing is what it did. What it said it was about is what it did. And it took very principled and honest positions, and continued to do so.

An earlier speaker had made a reference to the effect of liberalism on the organization — the alliance with liberalism — and we should look at that. As the movement grew and progressed — for example, an example of the incredible creativity of— and let me go back to that other point. Had the movement been an expression of Southern Black culture. And this didn't only affect the Black northerners who went down there. It affected the white people in the organization as well.

It's interesting that when we talk about, for example, the radical nationalist strategy of the Lowndes County Party, the Black Panther Party, so to say — that a person who discovered the legal basis where this would take place was Jack Minnis, who was white. So that we were working — there was a certain pressure that was going to move us, inevitably, into a certain nationalism. And I want to get them to discover — to discuss that.

[5] The derogatory term "Sambo" is a racist stereotype rooted in slavery and colonialism that caricatures Black people—especially Black men—as docile, lazy, submissive, childlike, or foolish.

When we decided on the strategy of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party [MFDP], that was because Black people couldn't vote in Mississippi. So what kind of political activity is possible?

It wasn't ideology that led us to this — it was strategy. It was a very creative strategy. Since we can't vote and we can't participate in the Democratic Party, since the Democratic Party in Mississippi is the state and it's racist — then let us take it into the wider arena of the country, and let us summon the forces of national liberalism and let them decide the case. And of course, we know what the result of that was at Atlantic City.

Well, the fact of the matter is that what is also not said about Atlantic City is that if [Lyndon B.] Johnson — the president — had ever permitted a vote on the floor of that convention, the party would have rejected its leadership, just simply given the force of our arguments, the tragedy of that summer, and the massive organizational effort that we launched on them. And had that happened, the political history — at least the electoral history — of this country might have been very, very different.

And again, when we came back with another challenge — [indistinct] who found the statute saying that Mississippi, when admitted to the Union, was admitted on the basis that it would not discriminate against people, or else it wouldn't have seats in Congress — and we launched that challenge, we also came very damn close to succeeding. And if I had the time, I would develop that discussion much longer.

And again, the political institutions of this country, turning their backs on the very constitutional principles out of which their own power derived, rejected that challenge. And it was at that point that people saw very clearly that traditional liberal morality and political practice was not dependable — that the interests of Black people could only be advanced when there was a base of strength, political strength, from which to advance it.

And that started the thinking in the direction of Black Power. It wasn't simply a response to some ideological insight on the part of somebody — it sort of came out of the concrete, material experiences of people in that struggle.

And we also began to see something. We began to see that we perhaps could get a Civil Rights law knocking out the visible symbols of discrimination and oppression — but that there were problems.

And these are problems that don't just deal with us — economic problems and social problems, problems having to do with the status of and the place of the Black community in this country, which were anchored in 300 years of racism and discrimination. And that to get to those

problems, there would have to be profound changes in the way the Black community defines itself and approaches them. That's another thing that led to Black Power.

But what is not generally spoken about — talked about very much — and I was in Washington, so I saw it — is the extent to which once our “liberal allies” — end quotes — were not able to determine the agenda, once we didn't simply follow accepting whatever they handed to us, once we began to say, "Look, this is basically and fundamentally not in the interest of Black people. This is not what we're about. We want to do something else."

The vituperation, the anger — when the Black people of Mississippi didn't accept two seats at large in the Democratic Convention — the vituperation, the anger, the attempt to exile us from the political community, the attempts to make pariahs of us, the attempts to red-bait us — was a whole revelation about the limits of, and the viciousness of, so-called American liberalism.

And as I say this, I have to say there were certain figures who were splendid. The late Robert Spike of the National Council of Churches behaved with uncommon principle and courage in that matter.

And another thing that would have proved interesting for the Marxists — the labor movement, the organizations of the white working class in this country — were the worst.

And the churches and the religious organizations — which in my experience and my perception tended to be dismissed as wishy-washy Christian do-gooders — took positions which were really very progressive and fundamentally politically effective. And they would be important allies to have, if one is going to attempt to make any changes legislatively and politically in this country.

So those failures of liberalism — and also the very real growing perception of the dangers of integration, which we are now experiencing. And I think that as we began to articulate the necessities for Black Power, point into the limitations of integration, those statements were prophetic.

Because what we saw was — and is — the irony. In a segregated situation, the culture could flourish, institutions could flourish. And the solution to the oppression that Black people were undergoing was projected as this mythical integration — people failing to understand that, like the working class according to Karl Marx, who wanted to abolish itself, the logic of integration was that the Black race wanted to abolish itself and its culture.

And so the call was absolutely necessary — and again, coming out of concrete and material experience that way. Hold on one minute. Let's examine this here thing now.

Here's an organization, inspirited by and imprinted by and fashioned by and strengthened by traditional Black culture, that is working for a solution which will lead to the obliteration of that culture and of that reality. And we were called — very well now — that when we first started talking about Black folk, people said we were going to segregate ourselves again, that we were calling for institutional segregation.

In a certain sense — in a certain sense — not in the sense they intended it, and in an ironic sense, that was certainly true. We had to create within the communities — or begin the process of creating within the communities, the Black communities — responsible political institutions, whether these be for electoral politics or any other kind of politics. Responsible cultural institutions.

We had to, as we used to say, take over — which we have not succeeded in doing — the education of our young. Because, as Kwame used to say, "No people ever freed themselves by allowing their oppressor to educate their children." And that is part of the unfinished agenda.

It is that consideration that led me — if I may speak personally for a minute — into Black Studies as a professional vocation. So that as we engaged and improved conditions for Black people, and as we engaged and opened up the more obvious expressions of racism and oppression in the country, we began to see the profundity of the problem and the problems beneath that, which had been exposed.

And as we opened those problems up, we saw the problems beneath that. And now I believe we're at a place where we're facing the crucial and fundamental problem which I referred to earlier. How are the inner cities to be organized? How are we to take control of what are, in effect? And this is not rhetoric, and I'll join my brother Kwame on this one — colonial enclaves?

The property and land are owned by people who don't live there. The laws are enforced by people who don't live there. The institutions are run by people who don't live there. And the people who are the victims of these institutions have absolutely no power or control over them. And what are the techniques we are going to use to develop those?

What also was exposed was the limitations of political power. I confidently expected in 1965 that as the Black populations in the inner cities grew, we would take control of them politically. That has happened. I did not anticipate that corporate America would move the tax base to the suburbs. That they would abandon those cities, that Marion Barry would become mayor of Washington, D.C., and discover that he doesn't have the economic base or the leverage or the access to the kind of financing to put into place the programs that he wanted to put into place when he first sought that office.

The very real constraints of purely elective office to change and affect fundamental kinds of situations in the society. With your permission, I'm going to take my time and finish this.

So clearly, a whole bunch and level of other problems have been exposed — not so much by the failures of the movement, but by its victories. And the problems that we now have to engage, that this generation inherits, are fundamental and profound. And it's going to require an incredible amount, not only of commitment, but creativity.

And now that the Afro-American community's vote is beginning to express itself in the national arena with something of the force and the pull that it should have commanded all along. I see that as the fruition of this struggle, but I see it also as the starting point for talking now about realistic coalitions.

We got some cards to play. We got some cards to play in the Democratic convention that's coming up this summer, and we will see — and we will be instructed, and we will learn — by how well those cards are played.

But the Democratic Party knows right now that if it is to take the White House — I mean, it's a fundamental problem — it's got to get the Black vote, which the two campaigns of Reverend Jesse Jackson have so galvanized and energized in the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement. And it's got to get 30% of the white vote that's been voting for Reagan for two terms.

And somebody was talking about — who was it — the increased awareness and radicalism of the national minorities in this country, by which I guess he means the ethnic minorities, the white ethnics. And I want to ask you: who the hell elected Reagan twice? Well, let us go on.

The seeds that were planted bear fruit in many and profound ways. I remember going to Tchula, Mississippi, meeting a young Black man who introduced himself as a mayor. I was overwhelmed — just a couple years ago.

We got into a conversation, and I said, "Well, how did you come to politics? Where did you get the notion that you could be mayor and what interested you in politics?" He was very articulate. He said, "My first introduction to politics was in the Freedom Schools in 1964 in Mississippi — was in the Freedom Schools."

The other thing about SNCC — and I'll finish here — is that when a small group of organizers moved into the American South to engage the problem there, they didn't set out to build themselves into a permanent organization. They didn't recruit members. They didn't sell membership cards.

They encouraged the people to address their problems by their own independent organizations. That was a departure from any practice in the ongoing struggle for civil rights by any previously existing civil rights organization, any previously existing Black organization.

And though it may not be on the scene, when you go down and look, for example, at the campaigns for Jesse Jackson in these elections, when you go down and look at the local elections, you find that many of those organizations are still in place — that those people are working and developing — and that the political character of the South is being changed by organizations that a ragtag group of students helped to bring to life in the early [19]60s.

Not being in the business of prophecy, I don't want to make any predictions of the future. But I have to say that I have an incredible sense that there's more of a feeling of confidence, more of a feeling of effectiveness, more of a feeling in the Black community nationally — that we're beginning to pull into ourselves those collective resources, both of people and of material, that will enable us — the Black community — to really make a much more effective drive on power and on wealth in this country.

And that the Black community is getting poised to be in the vanguard — and I hate to use that word because of certain resonances — but to be in the vanguard of a progressive movement in this country.

And white progressives are going to have to learn that there ain't no harm being members of an alliance, members of a movement, with a Black leadership. Our white members learned that, and it didn't bother them, because that was what SNCC was. That was what SNCC always was.

And as a measure of the extent to which — if you want to talk about the contradiction in terms — I just want to go back and word this one point a little bit — that those people operated in a national spirit, operated in terms of the needs and necessities as it grew and as we understood the problems and as we developed strategies to engage them.

Is that when they left the organization, something described by one person to me the other night as — while we were sitting here — as the worst thing in her entire life, not one of those comrades, not one of them, went to the press — that was really looking for sticks to beat SNCC with — not one of them went to the press and said a mumbling word.

That was the kind of principle and devotion of our white folk. I call them that. God, they don't make white folks like that no more, as far as I can see. That's all I got to say.

Julian Bond: Mr. Chairman, I'm sorry Dr. Matusow has gone. Many of us took to heart his suggestion — and his suggestions of others — that following this occasion, there ought to be others. As a consequence, we have circulated a list of those of us willing to talk about our sex lives.

I'd like to read some of the names. They're my own, Joyce Ladner, Joanne Grant, Connie Curry, Billy Rogers, Casey Hayden, Dorie Ladner, Faith Holsaert, Alvin [indistinct], Penny Patch, Nancy Reagon, Mary King, Jim Johnson, Michael Sayer—who appends the note, "Why don't I

have any?"—Hollis Watkins, Lucile Montgomery, Jim Clark, Miriam Makeba [laughter], Charles McDew, Betty Garman — and most importantly, Mrs. Allen Matusow.[6]

Lawrence Guyot: Had Dr. Matusow stayed here, I would have defended his acceptance of my challenge on yesterday. I challenged him and everyone else here to look in depth, to give no quarter, and to challenge me, Mary King, and everyone here. Primarily SNCC and the Freedom Democratic Party and everything that SNCC created.

The Lowndes County Freedom Organization was primarily about freedom of speech. And anyone here who appreciates what SNCC really is — passed it down in support, but respects the unglaring truth — this was not, nor was it, nor was it advertised as, a SNCC reunion to be perpetrated by frivolity. I pleaded for the absence of frivolity. And in his first three attacks, that is what he attacked. He has the right to do that.

And I want to reopen my challenge. I know of nothing that SNCC has done that cannot be objectively and pragmatically evaluated. As for the reading of the previous list — I am very happy to feel confident that SNCC can be vindicated by pragmatic observations of truth. So I want to publicly dissociate myself from that frivolous fucking list.

Student: One source of liberalism discovered is the semiotics within American culture. I can recall being in elementary school, told that the word to describe my interracial, personalized "mulatto." That word is a Spanish word that means "ass."[7] So for that, I've chosen not to use the word so often. I don't feel it provides a helpful self-image for myself.

Here at the conference now, twice I have heard coming from panelists that we all should keep history straight. I know that in an African village, the griot carries the history and the music to be made to the society. And here in the Northeast, that role is being fulfilled by Black lesbians. And so to use words — the use of your words like "so" — is simply incorrect.

Audience Comment: I'm really appreciative of coming to the conference, and would like to invite this kind of forum — if we're going to do it again — to take place in the Black community, particularly the Black community of central Brooklyn, where, as an organizer, I've been living for a long time.

We need very desperately this kind of discussion. And I would like to invite you to Medgar Evers College in central Brooklyn, because some reference was made to what are the next steps.

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[6] Visit https://snccdigital.org/category/people/ to learn more about these individuals.

[7] The term "mulatto" has historically been used to describe a person of mixed Black and white ancestry, but it is now widely recognized as offensive and outdated, due to its colonial roots and dehumanizing connotations. Etymologically, it likely derives from the Spanish and Portuguese word *mula* (from Latin *mūlus*), meaning "mule"—a hybrid animal, the offspring of a horse and a donkey.

Many of us who are organizing in the Black community now need to know the history of how organizing evolved from the speakers.

And I would like that — if we think about doing this again — that it takes place in our community, because we are trying to confront some of the questions that often — how to organize, what is the principle of relationships around nationalism, self-determination, how to build coalitions, and how to be empowered. And I wish my children were here. I wish my community were here to hear what people said.
Thank you.

Clayborne Carson: I would like to just comment that I certainly agree with what Mr. Guyot just said about the necessity of accepting free speech and all of these kinds of things. I would add, though, that historians, like everyone else who look at SNCC or any other subject, have certain kinds of obligations. And that comes to — I guess the easiest way of expressing that is: why are you asking? For what purpose is being served?

And I think that there is a real distinction to be made in the writing of history about radical movements, about whether or not the purpose of it is, in some way, to move the struggle forward. Now, I think that I write critical history, so a lot of people in this room have brought to my attention things they basically disagree with in my book.

But I don't think very many of them have any doubt that my purpose in writing it was to criticize in order to move something forward. And I think that is critically important when we talk about the academic profession — where the purpose of writing history is to move oneself forward in terms of career advancement. And you get career advancement in this country by being cynical. They call it irony, but it's cynicism.

Audience Comment: You basically said what I wanted to say. There really is no such thing as pure truth, any more than there is anything like pure journalism. Everything you do grows out of the values you bring to what you're doing. This conference, which was a historical conference, was a good example of just that. This was not basically a situation in which people took the opportunity to focus on the warts and the defects and so forth that may have been there for a moment as a matter of fact.

The whole conference — and the way in which the panelists approached it — was to draw out of their experience those lessons that would be most helpful to moving us along, as you suggested. And in that sense, it was an immensely successful conference.

We could have spent a great deal of time focusing on largely irrelevant issues — the fact that there are, or were, disagreements about how best to do something, or where we go from here —

was not a bad moment in the conference at all. That is part of our present reality. Those debates, those differences, need to go on.

That dialectical process that Kwame talks about is just that — and that will never end. And the more progressive each of the vectors or the elements of that dialectic are, the more progressive the synthesis growing out of that dialectic must be.

I think that the frivolity that Larry was responding to wasn't really frivolity. It was a gracious way of covering over the deep anger that was felt at the raising of certain questions that no one could understand as having been relevant to this conference or the motive behind it. So in that sense, I think there was an attempt to be gracious rather than anything else.

I'm going to raise two questions.It's sad that Matusow is not here. People may or may not wish to have their sex lives examined. It seems to me, I'm perfectly willing to have my sex life — or any movement I've been associated with [examined]. But the professional historian should examine the sex life in the ruling class with the same enthusiasm as they come to examine the sex life of our organization.

The second point I want to make is the vicious canard that Black people burned down their own ghettos. The premise and assumption that that rebellion was mindless — and so therefore people burned down their own homes. Every rebellion that occurred in this country was a result either of police provocation or an attack against Black people in this society.

And in each instance, the clarity with which people went about that task was evidenced — in both Newark [NJ] and Detroit [MI]. With the National Guard in Newark, where if you put "Soul Brother" on your business, the people passing by — and the National Guard — were so angered by this selectivity of destruction that they broke down the stores of Chinese and other people that had not put "Soul Brother" on.

In Detroit, people burned down the blind pig.[8] The firing would not go into the area.
The wind blew, and houses were burning — but people were purposeful in their rebellions. And this notion — that either polarizing in the South or rebellions in the North were mindless and barbaric and primitive — is incorrect.

Jack Chatfield: One very short question, and make one very short statement. We have to continue our discussion.

[8] The Detroit Rebellion of 1967 began in the early hours of July 23, when police raided an after-hours, unlicensed bar—known as a "blind pig"—on 12th Street, where a party was being held for two returning Black Vietnam veterans. The aggressive police response, including mass arrests, sparked days of intense civil unrest fueled by longstanding grievances over police brutality, housing segregation, unemployment, and economic injustice. The burning of the blind pig and the surrounding area marked the ignition point of the rebellion, which lasted five days, resulted in 43 deaths, and remains one of the most significant uprisings in U.S. history.

Audience Comment: I guess a key point that I would want to leave, especially to students, is this notion of history for liberation. History for what? History for liberation. Because I think in the first presentation, what we've had here is collective autobiography that is as flawed as academic scholarship, I think it's just fundamentally incorrect.

Because what we have here, though, is something very important, and that is a group of people who were quite responsible for revealing to us some real insights into political and personal transformation.

I hope people listened very attentively to what Michael said, because we're all tired. And there's a tendency to kind of go [indistinct]. The question that Mike Thelwell raised at the end… this is the era of the bicentennial of the Constitution, and I found much more profound the discussion of the Civil Rights Movement and democracy than we do what happened 200 years ago.

So I hope, especially for young students, that we are thinking not only in terms of practice and the lessons about how SNCC organized, what SNCC did, but also the lessons in terms of theory. Because it really is about history for liberation, trying to rebuild a social movement that can carry on the task of social transformation.

Second thing I want to do, on behalf of a lot of people in Mississippi, is invite the SNCC people here to Mississippi. And for the last five years, we've been developing a whole series of activities. A Medgar Evers documentary and other things and we have a meeting — and others.

We have a process going now that we think will lead to a formalization of a 25th commemoration, 25th revisiting of Freedom Summer — not just Freedom. Summer, but really 1964, MFDP [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party], COFO [Council of Federated Organizations], the Congressional challenge, the Summer Project, and so on.

And we're quite serious in trying to bring this discussion — not to the campus at University of Mississippi — but to the Delta, to Greenwood [MS], to McComb [MS], to Jackson, to Jackson State, and places like that. So we're quite serious in trying to do that, and we extend that invitation.

I'm very concerned. You know, you talked about Black people being an oral people. I'm most concerned that this conference — and one of the reasons we created and suspended to get these cameras here, okay — was because what happens is that we come to these conferences, and we share a lot of clarity and a lot of wisdom, but too often those words don't get back to our community.

So we're very concerned about taking these words and trying to turn them into some form that we can get out into the schools, out into communities, so that young people who need to hear this

story can have access to it in a direct way. So we'll be contacting you about that process to develop over the next year.

Audience Comment: My name is Emerson Washington, and I'm from New York, from the Bronx, and I'm with a Black history program. I'm running libraries in School District Nine. I just want to say that I appreciate the fact of what you people are doing here — this momentous occasion — and just got my two brothers on the end, the historians.

And like the brother said before, we've got to take all this information and translate it down to the children — of course, the most educated.What I'm concerned with is taking information — these high ideals you can express — and putting it down below so the younger generation can get these ideas and grow those ideas, which I'm doing now.

As you all know, there's a whole revolution taking place in the making — the intellectual community [indistinct]. We've already developed lesson plans with children. I'm running a program in New York City right now.

And I would like to talk to many — I would like to invite my brothers on the podium to come down to New York and share your ideas, your inspirations, your expertise, so we can present this program for this generation. And that's what I'm about [indistinct].

Jack Chatfield: It is difficult — a difficult task — to bring this exhilarating conference to an end point. A very practical business: cocktails downstairs for the SNCC people, the friends of SNCC, and those coming to the banquet dinner upstairs.

What we have seen here — and I certainly wouldn't want my opening remarks to be misunderstood — what we have seen here, perhaps the better word is what we have witnessed here, was the culture of the Civil Rights Movement.

The words, the accents, the rhythm of speech, the music, the stories, the incomparable drama, the tragedy, and not least — I believe, perhaps not to be confused with frivolity — the humor that this movement generated.

And perhaps humor, like nothing else, testifies to the sense of mortality which all of us feel in our deepest moments — and which SNCC people, under certain circumstances, felt all the time. Closing word will be spoken by Victoria Gray Adams, who would like to read a poem. Vicky.

Victoria Gray Adams: Gathering in this room at this particular moment for the last few days — is the body of hope. Hope for this country and possibly hope for this globe. And when I say that, I say that in all sincerity. Some of us are the heart of this body. Some of us are the eyes of this body. Some of us are the ears of this body. But we are all a part of this body.

And as a part of this body, we all are the seeds that are going to determine the ultimate product. I'd like to have us culminate this particular phase of the activity by sharing with you what I call a send-out. Some people call it a benediction, and that's okay. But I'm saying it's a send-out for each and every one of us. And the title is: "A Seed"

I feel we are at the threshold of a new age, and that we need now, more than anything else, a new approach to human relationships and to social organization. We need a planetary approach. We need a synthetic approach. We need something in which the individual learns his own function in the world.

Because if you are to have a global world, the individual has to be so well established in his own identity that he can afford to cooperate with other people all over the world — independent of their culture, their race, their traditions, and so on.

It is very important, therefore, that one should learn how to establish oneself in one's own identity. We need a new type of human being. We need something which is based no longer so much on conflict, but on a full acceptance of total human being — body, mind, soul, feelings, everything.

An aesthetical approach versus an ethical approach — so that you can see the relationship in which everything stands inside of the whole. So you can look at the whole and become identified with the wholeness of that whole, rather than with any particular part.

Now this is, of course, a very difficult situation. We're certainly in a difficult time. And what is ahead of us today — I'm not enough. I'm rather pessimistic as far as the immediate future is concerned, considering the way the world and our nation are moving at the present time.

But you must realize that crises are sometimes necessary to accomplish what is to be accomplished. The only problem, however, is this: something must be ready before the great crisis comes.

When the new cycle begins, for it will have to begin on the foundation of those seeds which have been sown before the crisis.

And if you have a winter followed by a spring, but there was no harvest in the fall — no seed will germinate during the spring — and you will have to start at the very beginning into the most primitive time manifestation.

That's why I have stressed so much all my life the idea I call the seed person — the person who is willing and able to gather within him or herself, as it were, the past of humanity, and particularly of the Western world, of course, but also of other cultures. Because what we want to emerge from the future, after whatever crisis will come, is a global world.

We therefore need persons of great vision, persons who are not specialists — generalists, as they are sometimes called today — persons who have the vision and courage to wait and to, in some way, through their lives, through their example, and through whatever they leave after their deaths, become the seeds of the future world.

That's, of course, the choice — the great choice — we all have to make. And we all can make it. We can follow the mass vibration and decay — like all the leaves of the world in the fall. However beautiful the golden leaves may be, they will have to decay and to become manure for the future of civilization.

But it is only the persons — it's only the seed persons — that really count. And it is those you should look for. If you yourself do not feel yet to the point of being ready to become a seed person. Because it is that — the only insurance for the future, rebirth of humanity.

I think today it is no use to try to look to the immediate future, because it looks very dark. But it is to look — to prepare for the possibility — that a new world may arise, if not tomorrow, the day after tomorrow.

I think it's the only thing which gives value to our sacrifice, all our courage, decisions, and choices today. It is to become seeds for the development of the future.

So I hope every one of you — each one in your life, in your own way — can someday soon, very soon, if you have not done so already, make the choice and become seed persons — seed men and seed women. I thank you.

Hollis Watkins: It's not a part of the program, but Ms. Gray's point compels me to ask the question. And the question that I want to ask is:

[singing]

Do you want your freedom?
Certainly Lord…