"A Path Forward"
SNCC 60th Conference
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Streaming Video

Speakers include-
Charlie Cobb, Moderator and SNCC Veteran.
Imani Perry is a professor of African American studies at Princeton University.
Derrick Johnson- President and CEO of the NAACP.
Judith Browne Dianis- Executive Director of The Advancement Project

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This discussion centers around various strategies that need to be taken within the black community to ensure that we see progression regarding all facets of life, including civil rights, quality education, etc.

Moderator: Welcome to the final day of the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] 60th Anniversary Conference. I'm sure you'll agree that this event was both insightful and energizing. Today's sessions will be among the most significant, and we especially hope you'll stay with us through the closing plenary session, *Where Do We Go From Here?* You will have access to this website until the first week of January. Be sure to visit the *Book Talks* and *On-Demand* sections to catch up on anything you may have missed.

Our plenary session today begins with a reflection on the current environment to help guide us forward. Our moderator is Charles Cobb Jr., widely known as Charlie Cobb. Charlie joined SNCC after stopping in Mississippi on a trip south, where Bob Moses and others persuaded him to become part of the SNCC voter registration campaign. He went on to serve as an SNCC field secretary, organizing voter registration drives and Freedom Schools.

Charlie is a poet, a journalist, and a co-founder of both the Drum and Spear Bookstore and Press, as well as the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ). He was also the first Black staff writer employed by *National Geographic* magazine. An award-winning author, Charlie, has published over five books, with a new work currently in progress. And now, here's Charlie Cobb.

Charlie Cobb: Welcome. I'm Charlie Cobb, a veteran of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who primarily worked in the Mississippi Delta. Since those years, I have spent most of my life as a journalist and author. However, I am not here to discuss myself.

The panel I will introduce is titled *The Path Forward: A Look at the 21st-Century Racial Environment.* This is an enormous topic, far too vast to cover comprehensively in just one hour. Nevertheless, it is crucial to begin addressing some of the key issues suggested by the title.

In a moment, I will introduce the panelists. Let me emphasize in advance that this is a remarkable group, deserving of your full attention. But before I do, let me briefly note that the Black community has historically used protest and legal action as powerful tools in the ongoing struggle for freedom and liberation.

Some aspects of this struggle have been highly visible, while the critical organizing work underpinning it has often been less apparent. This combination of efforts, direct action, protest, and community organizing, has led to significant victories. These include desegregation [1], an increase in Black elected officials holding key positions, and the substantial growth of the Black middle class.

However, much work remains to be done, and important questions about the path forward persist. While the Black middle class has expanded, so too has the gap between those who have and those who have not—not only in the disparity between Black and white communities but also within the Black community itself. Our young people face the devastating impact of police violence, which often seems designed to eradicate them. Meanwhile, schools continue to fail many Black and brown students.

The country as a whole teeters on the edge of what can only be described as fascist rule, as powerful forces seek to undermine and suppress hard-won voting rights. The future remains uncertain, with the view ahead clouded. Engaging in meaningful discussion about these challenges is essential.

Can we effectively use the levers of power we have achieved to bring about necessary change? And what exactly are those necessary changes? How do we define the Black community in this context? The growing Latinx community and the discrimination it faces suggest the possibility of unity—but can such unity be realized?

These are just starting points for our discussion. With that, I will now turn things over to the panelists, beginning with an introduction of Imani Perry from Princeton University. She is a faculty associate with the university's programs in law and public affairs and the author of six books. Her work, *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem,* won the 2019 American Studies Association John Hope Franklin Book Award for the best book in American Studies. Her forthcoming book is a narrative journey through the South, arguing that for better or worse it is the nation's heartland.

Derrick Johnson is the President and CEO of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), bringing fresh energy and original approaches to the organization. In 2018, for instance, the NAACP launched a "Log Out Facebook" campaign, pressuring the platform after reports revealed Russian hackers targeted African Americans. Johnson, a graduate of Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi, is also a lawyer. He served as a regional organizer for Southern Echo, an organization founded by SNCC veteran Hollis Watkins, providing legal, technical, and training support to communities across the South.

Judith Browne Dainis is the Executive Director of the Advancement Project. Through innovative tools and strategies, the organization is committed to strengthening social movements to drive high-impact policy change. She has been a pioneer in efforts to challenge the school-to-prison

[1] Desegregation- the ending of a policy that enforced racial segregation

pipeline and has partnered with various civic engagement nonprofits to combat voter suppression. Dianis has also been honored with the Prime Movers Fellowship, awarded to trailblazing leaders.

These three remarkable individuals bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to our discussion. While we do not have enough time to cover everything they offer, let's begin with short statements from each of them, starting with Imani Perry.

Imani Perry: Thank you. I am honored to be part of this discussion with such a distinguished panel, and it's wonderful to see you all. The first thing I want to say is that we are at a historically significant intersection. On the one hand, we are witnessing a tremendous surge in activism, particularly among young people, who are revitalizing the energy of protest.

Along with the issues you have so powerfully outlined, Charlie [Cobb], we are also facing the impacts of COVID-19 and the climate crisis, both of which are disproportionately affecting Black communities. As we consider the path forward, I want to acknowledge with humility that many people are already doing critical work. However, there are two primary things we must focus on moving forward. We must focus on developing political education across the board, so people can understand the connections between these various threats and crises, both locally and on national and even international levels.

It is important to establish practices of political education that can circulate in digital spaces, but also take place in person, on the ground, as much as possible. Another crucial point, which I have been reminded of through the growth of mutual aid programs in recent years, is that people need to belong to organizations with institutional membership that can work systematically toward addressing key issues. This is the way forward. Thank you.

Derek Johnson: I want to thank the SNCC veterans for continuing the legacy of movement work. It is crucial for all of us to understand the continuum we have inherited and recognize that it is through community-centered activities, organizing, and collective effort that we all succeed.

One of the most important lessons I have learned from the many veterans who have mentored and guided me is that this work is not about the individual. It is not about one's ego. It is about the broader legacy of the fight for freedom, and it's our responsibility to contribute to that legacy. We must ensure that the activists who come after us have the tools and successes necessary to carry that legacy forward.

I appreciate Dr. Perry's point about the importance of affiliating with organizations because it is about the collective whole. That said, as the president of the largest and oldest civil rights organization, I am not an organizational elitist. I encourage people to engage where they can truly add value. Social justice is not a competition; it allows all of us to contribute our voices to the advocacy work.

Judith Brown Dianis: I want to highlight and express my deep appreciation for SNCC—not

only for this conference but also for its legacy. As I reflect on this moment, I ask myself, what would Bob [Moses] say? What would Diane [Nash] say? What would Judy [Richardson] say? What would Charlie [Cobb] say? What would Courtland [Cox] say? What would Ella [Baker] say?

We find ourselves at a critical moment, where a resistance movement is taking shape on both sides: white supremacy and those who support it, who believe they are in their final stand. While they are indeed in their last stand, it means they are desperately clinging to the structures of power that allow them to maintain dominance in this country. This is a pivotal time for us to think about how we continue to build power.

What we witnessed last summer reaffirms what we learned from SNCC, young people will lead the way, and it is our responsibility to support them. However, we are also facing a powerful effort of disinformation and misinformation that is undermining the movements we are building. At the same time, something beautiful is unfolding people of color are rising to positions of power and being elected. We are becoming the rising majority, with opportunities to gain power in ways we have not experienced before. While we face resistance, we also have the promise of what lies ahead. I agree with Imani that part of our work involves connecting the dots for our communities and engaging them in "freedom dreaming."

Charlie Cobb: Judith, in response to what you just said, let me follow up with a question. One of your colleagues, Professor Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, wrote in her 2016 book, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, that "across the United States, thousands of Black elected officials are governing many of the nation's cities and suburbs. Yet, despite this unprecedented access to political power, little has changed for the vast majority of African Americans." How do you interpret that statement, and what is your reaction to it?

Judith Browne Dianis: We have not yet figured out the right balance between electing our people and holding them accountable. In some places, it works, but there is a tension between protecting those we elect and ensuring they do the job we send them to do. Sometimes, these two goals are not aligned. We need to figure this out because we are the rising majority, and more of our people will be elected.

Some of them are doing the work we elected them to do, but we also face moments like the crisis at the border, where Black people are being mistreated, with white officers and others on horses using lariats as weapons. In this situation, we have President Biden and Vice President Harris in power. Even with them in the office, we still need to call them out when necessary. We must insist that such actions are unacceptable. So, I think, Charlie, we need to learn how to strike a balance between having our people in the office while also being able to call them out and push them to do the things we elected them to do.

Charlie Cobb: Anybody else can react if they want before we move on.

Derrick Johnson: I do want to respond. So it's easy to say what's not happening. If you are sitting in your chair, just being a spectator. Power is not something that is simply given to you,

it's an ongoing process. Look at the work you, Charlie [Cobb], and others did in Mississippi. As a result, we have more Black elected officials than any other state.

But some may ask, with all these Black elected officials, why hasn't anything changed? Mississippi is still a poor state, relying heavily on federal tax dollars. The real question is, how do we gain control of state governance so we can redirect those resources to where they are most needed?

On top of that, there are still structural barriers in place, whether you are a mayor or a county supervisor. This fight has never been about holding neglected positions or simply being in office. It has always been about confronting the structural racism that devalues Black people in this country. Whether we are elected, whether we own homes, or whether we are struggling to provide a quality education for our children, it is not a single victory that will bring us freedom. Freedom is a constant struggle and getting someone elected is only part of the battle the war continues.

Imani Perry: I appreciate what both Judith[Browne Dianis**]** and Derek[Johnson] just said. I also want to add that in that section of the book, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor is highlighting something that resonates with SNCC history, there are real and wide-ranging political perspectives and different ideas about how to solve the challenges facing Black people. This is not a weakness; it is a strength. If we can engage in good faith with one another, we can work together to address the various forms of suffering and ensure that justice matters.

Your work, Charlie, is part of what I am talking about—the difficulty of navigating between organizations and differing strategies. This is especially important today because, too often, we seem to turn away from each other in complete rejection, rather than trying to engage with each other, even when faced with political challenges. That is just a summary of my thoughts.

Derrick Johnson: I love that book, and for our leadership program, *Disintegration* is one of the eight required readings. What Eugene Robinson did for me in that book was break down and help me understand the diversity of the African American experience. He highlights how dynamic we are as people and stresses that we are not a monolith. I must be attuned to that reality because I have Haitian members in Miami, Sudanese members in Minneapolis, and many others.

For example, Omar [Rep. Ilhan Omar] was the first vice president of the Minneapolis NAACP before she was elected to Congress. I also have Muslim members, including those in the Nation of Islam in Philadelphia, where Brother Rodney Muhammad just stepped down as president. I have good, old-fashioned, grit-eating country folks in Alabama, all of whom bring a rich diversity of experiences to our organization, which has members in 47 states. I see this as a beautiful strength, not a negative.

It's an opportunity for us to stretch, understand, and appreciate the value we bring to this country's experience. More importantly, it allows us to keep our ears to the ground and stay connected to the pressing policy issues people are facing, whether in the Low Country of South Carolina, with the Gullah and Geechee[2] in Georgia and South Carolina, or [3]Creole speakers in New Orleans. This diversity is a beautiful thing. What Eugene Robinson does in that book is force readers, especially African Americans, to embrace how dynamic we are as a people as we work toward solutions to perfect this thing we call democracy and meet the needs and interests of our communities and constituents.

Charlie Cobb: Imani[Perry], Judith[Browne Dianis**]**, either one, both.

Imani Perry: I just want to add that I haven't read the book, so I want to clarify that as a preface. I agree that it's important to acknowledge that there are multiple communities within Black America. It's also crucial to remember that race operates across all of these communities, regardless of their distinctions. For example, the Black middle class is a very fragile status, primarily based on income rather than wealth. Once you reach wealth, we're mostly all working-class people.

It's very difficult for Black middle-class individuals to maintain or reproduce their social class. Second-generation racial or ethnic groups, often stabilize or move up in class, but that doesn't happen as easily for Black people. We need to understand both the cultural and situational distinctions within these communities, while also recognizing the common bond that links us. And, to Derek's point, that's why it's so important to understand each other speaking as someone who comes from a grits-eating, Alabama background.

Derrick Johnson: At one component to that. If you look at Andre Perry's book *Know Your Value*, he talks about this, eluding the concept of wealth versus income. Many more people are high-income earners, but they are low in wealth. Many of them are still struggling 20 years later with their high income with student loans.

This is a huge impediment because as well, for those student loans, they don't qualify for quality housing stock. When they get quality housing stock, and if it's too many in a particular community, the value of the house goes down, therefore, they lose the wealth that they accumulate through equity because the valuation of their property is looser. This is the type of conversation we have. We need to have more of it.

Judith Browne Dianis: The only thing I, I would add to this is that part of the work that we need to do is having people see black people see themselves as part of this continuum that we're talking about because too often, um, we see that there is a divide that could be around the national origin. It could be around income. that we have to understand when, for example, low-income black people win. We all win when Haitians win, we all win. So that we are not

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[2] Gullah-Geechee- A group of African Americans who reside on the coast of South Carolina down into the coast of Georgia, this group of African Americans has been able to maintain African traditions that date back to the mid-1700s.

[3] Creole/New Orleans- otherwise known as Kouri-Vini, this is a language spoken in New Orleans. The language is a combination of French, African languages, and Native American Languages

throwing each other under the bus when it comes to some of the political decisions that have to be made about moving forward for our community.

Charlie Cobb: Let's drill down a little bit then into how this diversity is, this presence in both political arenas and, academic arenas and industrial arenas utilized to use the current phrase, make black lives better, and anyone can speak on that. How important is it to have as we have today, a black vice president or as we had just a few years ago a black president, how important is it to have black people with money and position and presumably some power that their, forbearers, did not have?

Judith Browne Dianis: Well, I'll, I'll jump in to talk about the courts. Okay. I guess I'm a lawyer.

Charlie Cobb: Ask you about schools, but that's okay.

Judith Browne Dianis: It's important that we know that all skin folk ain't kin folks. In the education system where we have a majority of black school districts that could have black administrators and black teachers, but black children are still not doing well in school and the outcomes are bad for them. In the courts the same thing.

We have that Justice Thomas [Justice Clarence Thomas] who has been sitting there, who we know was no replacement for Thurgood Marshall. It is important to delve down to another level to see whether or not those folks have our interests at heart. We're seeing now the Biden administration has been appointing black people to the courts, black women in particular.

I'm excited about many of those black women who are going to be on the courts because we do know due to critical race theory that having black judges who have had the experience of being black people in America can make a difference in a court decision. They can bring a powerful dissent because right now we know the courts are tilted against us. Or they can make a powerful opinion where they are considering things that white folks can't consider about how race and the law play out.

Charlie Cobb: Imani, you look like you're about to say something.

Imani Perry: So, I think that it's important to understand that we are all to some extent implicated in an unjust system. In terms of the political economy, at least we all are. For example, you know, somebody who's working at Walmart is being exploited by Walmart and the part of the engine, what Walmart is doing but that person is in a much more vulnerable position than someone powerful and implicated in the system.

I think for me, this sort of goes back to the point that Derek was making that, this is why we have to think in terms of collectives. I don't, I don't think that it's possible to have entirely clean hands. I certainly given, you know, my job at Princeton University, I don't think it's possible to have given their investments and the priorities.

Right. So I think that the question is less about representation, but thinking about where I am situated and where we're all situated, and thinking about ways that not only justify our position

but instead think about ways that move us towards justice.

The question is always the question of collective, right? What's a priority? What is happening to black folks at large? What can I do? What, how am I implicated? What can I do positively? How can I implicate and how we do think about what matters most? I'm much less interested in representation. People who are power representatives might do really important work. That's great. I'm much more interested in the conditions of black America at large.

Charlie Cobb: Well, Derek[Johnson] and Judith[Browne Dianis**]** again too. Why don't you take a shot at answering the questions that Imani has posed in her last response?

Derrick Johnson: Well, I agree, that black representation will not, and does not automatically mean equity, opportunity, and fairness. I could give you multiple examples of having a school district superintendent who believed in, believed in corporate punishment and it was unfairly delivered.

Actually, Judy and I were working on a situation where we had a school superintendent who was referring elementary and middle school kids to the court system who then assigned them to do manual labor. Geez. All right. And this was 20 years ago. We were in this huge community meeting with the superintendent asking, have you lost your damn mind. We were able to turn that around.

A black face in a place isn't a victory. Removing and tearing down structural barriers that are racist is the goal, and that can be done with the right people in the seat. We've seen people who come from our community get into positions who refuse to acknowledge, and lack the understanding, and the skill of the ability to address the structural barriers. And that's why we are up against that.

If we walk into the same seats of people who create those seats to prevent us from advancing and all we do is become stewards over their policies, their procedures, their rules, without changing the policies, rules, procedures or providing opportunities for those, with the skills to come in, that's not success. That's a failure. That's colonialism with a different face. We have to address that.

Judith Browne Dianis: One of the reasons we started the Advancement project was because we knew that the courts were moving to the right and we were losing everything. At the same time, people were not centering on organizing. We wanted to do center organizing because we could have all the representation in the world, but if the people aren't resisting and the people aren't pushing through organizing, we're going to get outcomes that aren't the outcomes that we necessarily wanted.

So, I think that centering of organizing me means that you can push the courts in the right direction, right? If you're using communications and organizing and protests, it sets a different context for the courts to rule in. It sets a different culture and moment to which our elected officials and our courts have to respond. That has to be a 365-day engagement of our

communities.

We could have all the, we could have a lot of black faces sitting on, on courts and in, you know, and in chambers of Congress and state legislatures who aren't doing anything unless our people are forcing their hand to do the things that we need them to do for our communities.

Charlie Cobb: That implies a kind of on-the-ground grassroots organizing for lack of a better phrase at this particular moment. Do you see signs of that in that?

Judith Browne Dianis: I would say that black organizing in particular has become much stronger in the last 20 years. I'd say that it's come with fits and starts after the murder of Mike Brown and the murder of Trayvon [Martin], we saw a broadening and a deepening of organizing in black communities, especially with young people at the helm, and that we're winning some things. We're winning some of these defund campaigns with black people being at the forefront of that.

The work we do at the advancement project, young people, and I'm talking about high school students are winning police-free schools. We need to do more, and this was Imani's first point about how we need to do more political education and we have to deepen and broaden the bench in organizing so that we're not just relying on social media. We're not just relying on emails to people, but we're doing what y'all did. We're going to be in a relationship with our people.

Charlie Cobb: Derek, I feel compelled to ask you this question because I have such vivid memories of what the NAACP was in the 1960s at how changed it is under your leadership. I'm asking you if you are envisioning a different kind of role for the NAACP,

Derrick Johnson: NACCP has always been the eyes and ears in local communities across the country and what the NAACP was in the sixties, based on my response to your statement compared to what the role they had in local communities, that's two different dynamics. When you got to Mississippi per Hollis [Watkin], because he tells me everything right. You had Vernon Davis, Hartman Turnbow, Amzie Moore, and CC Bryant who took in students and was a part of that intergenerational model of organizing. One generation will not carry us forward. It has to be intergenerational. We always need to lean into wisdom with energy and continuity young old, and those who are between ages, that is the magic ingredient.

Having that understanding, my goal now is to make sure at a national level, we amplified that as the model, as opposed to working to suppress it because that's what was going on in the sixties, you had people nationally trying to suppress the local movement. Fortunately, at least what Bob [Moses] called the Mississippi theater of the movement. Those men and women were strong enough to say nationally, stay out of our state. We're going to do this our way, and they did it successfully.

I ventured a say of all of the theaters as Bob would say, Mississippi was the most successful because it demonstrated a level of local deep organizing, not mobilization, but organizing that had that still we can see the tangible outcomes from whether it's the four areas that that was the focus of freedom summer, for the right to vote, Mississippi freedom democratic party, healthcare is a true access to community health centers that came out of that.

The work you were doing at leading Charlie around, the sharecropper strike at Leland, and, some of the organizing collective bargaining work there, or the, legal strategy around school integration, which was led by Aaron Henry, all of those things were tangible, but it came out of the reality that when you all left the March on Washington, you were going back to the same hell you were working in. That March was only an event. We have to move away from protests as if it's the outcome and go to power and power is about organizing our mobilization.

We can control the narrative in a way in which we are not planning ourselves by holding up individuals saying this was the leader of the civil rights movement. That was no leader of the civil rights movement. There were plural leaders of the civil rights movement. I see a much more intense ground game taking place, we don't allow our young people or ourselves to be held captive by social media celebrities. They're not talking to anybody other than likes and, and retweets. They're not on the ground. They're just amplifying conversations, but they're not getting their hands dirty. We have to go deeper than that.

Charlie Cobb: And how do you plan to go deeper than that?

Derrick Johnson: There are multiple ways, one is to recognize that the experts of communities are those who live in the community and we need to follow them, not say, Hey, come follow us two for us through our next year's program, organizing and training the next group of individuals. Now I'm looking at this differently. Based on my experience, we missed the ball on this age group, 25 to 55 years old. There are containers for them when they are in high school and college.

Once you hit 25 out of college, between the age of 55, what do you do? Where do you go? And how do you get engaged? And that's the missing component. We even see young people who were like the stars doing the Ferguson event now that they are tipping at 30 and over 30. They're trying to figure out where I fit in this space.

As an organization, and as a community, it's not only in ACP, to figure out how we keep people engaged when real-life problems start hitting them like family, mortgages, and student loan payments. That's when it becomes critical to capture and create a funneling opportunity where people can deal with personal, real-life issues, but stay engaged with social justice movements.

Charlie Cobb: I can't resist saying, in saying at this particular moment, a comment recently from a young activist on his 35th birthday. And he said he told me he was wondering how much he might change now that he was getting old. Around this subject, I mean money, I'm curious because you're on a college campus or a university campus, what do you hear in this regard and

see in this regard?

Imani Perry: I'll say one of the things I see, and I really, I love the way that, um, the way that Judith laid this out is that it is true that power concedes nothing without a demand, as Douglas [Fredrick] said, and that students are learning that.

They're learning to shift anything, including what happens at the local level requires a demand that makes them quite vulnerable. I see the students in positions where they are willing to be vulnerable as students in the service of what they think is just good.

I also think that, and this is consistent with what Derek just said, you know, was talking about the history in Mississippi local history and SNCC, and those were like something different happens once they get access to a detailed movement history. So that's part of what we try to do in African American studies. And, but that's not widely accessible to young people who do not know before you want to in general. Right. So, this is a very rare experience.

A tiny number of students even have access to robust African American studies programs, for example, never mind the fact that you shouldn't have to have access to the university to get that education. I think there is a need to work with developing structures for people to enter into institutions, kind of organically at any stage of life. I also think they need to understand sophisticated human history to even imagine where they might fit in. I think that people write books, but I do feel like we still have to figure that piece out where you can get it anywhere.

Charlie Cobb: Can I ask all three of you because we're witnessing at this time sort of growth of fascistic tendencies in the United States, state legislatures, for instance, it's not all racial. In Texas, it's okay now to put a bounty on a woman who is getting an abortion or someone who helps, we're seeing these tendencies threaded through more than just the Texas state legislature, but in different kinds of ways in different parts of the country, what will it take? How will that get turned around, how optimistic are you about the future of the country in the first place? Donald Trump, the former president, let a Lynch mob into the US capital. That's unprecedented.

Derrick Johnson: I think this democracy is in a fragile state. I've said for a long time that the most brainwashed population in this country has always been working-class whites. They've been sold this proposition of white supremacy that never existed to justify their exploitation. We have seen that accelerated with the past administration, Trump[Donald], and his ability to communicate directly to their fears, to motivate them, to operate in a way that is beyond the outside of their interest.

But more importantly, for them to take a level of action that's treasonous, an insurrection is not a light thing.For them to be so brainwashed, they think they are doing a patriotic thing, and by doing so we are in a fragile state, secondly, this is all about money and power. That is why I'm always concerned with protests for protest's sake because it takes the eye off the true ball. This is

about power. I reduce it to here. That is who gets taxed. Who's not taxed and how are those tax dollars spent?

What we are seeing is the invisible hands of ultra-rich individuals, and possibly corporations seeking to prevent a realignment around the role of government and how tax dollars are spent and, therefore, how they are attacked in loopholes are closed. They are willing to deal with a future that may not look like the social contract we have called the constitution in exchange for more profit.

Judith Browne Dianis: I would add to that part about democracy, the democracy being fragile is clear. There is a power grab that is going on, whether it's through the voter suppression laws or through getting rid of election officials who they say are not doing the right thing, to redistricting that we're going to see to all of the other laws that are passing like the abortion ban, et cetera.

I am still hopeful, but my hope is tied to the idea of this, of the rising majority and the work that we had, but we're going to have a lot of work to do to make that rising majority coalesce around the future that we want. It is important that people say demographics are not destiny. I think what we need to be doing is figuring out how demographics do become destiny and how we make sure that this rising majority is working for all of us, and that it doesn't have anti-blackness in it. It centers on black people and the success of black people. That is going to be the thing that will push back and win against fascism.

Imani Perry: I want to admit I'm not particularly hopeful, but I believe in the work. I think the alternative to doing the work is unthinkable. We cannot lay down and let this go. I think so for me, the possibility exists, in the work. I think this is not a fair aspect of history, but, indeed, black people organizing are always the moral conscience of the nation and the beacons for deeper possibility. It's not fair, but it is the case. So we see every time there's organizing, on even primarily, even on behalf of our communities, cause of presenting a vision of a society and world that is more just, it ignites the imaginations of other communities. We are the nation's best hope still, I believe that.

Charlie Cobb: Are we at the start of change or in the middle of the process? Or where are we?

Derrick Johnson: I think we are in the messy middle. I think the messy middle is concerning. It can go either way that when you have legislative bodies to so openly and notoriously undermine the rights of people, whether you talk about women or our right to vote, you name it, it is messy.

Because the demographic shifts are so profound that they are, is alarming to those who are anti-progress. I think Georgia signaled how things have accelerated and that if a state like Georgia can go in a different direction. Texas is like the 800-pound gorilla and if it shifts it is, Katie barters it's done right. Not to mention the trends we're seeing in North Carolina, Mississippi, and South Carolina for that matter. I think this messy middle will define the future.

Charlie Cobb: I agree with that. Okay. What are the next steps ahead? How you envision and,

and, and I'm trying to go from the broad in general to the, to the very concrete, certain things stand.

Derrick Johnson: This position was four years ago with a five-year plan around civic engagement because I think increasing voters on election day is critical for the next steps. So I'm four years into a five-year strategy. The five-year strategy was inclusive of the redistricting process because someone who would draw maps, I know for a fact, you can draw a plan that locks in who gets elected for the next 10 years. I think it's at this moment, in November of next year, 2022 two's election really would define what is next.

For the next 13 months, it is all about November 2022. If you say, we want to take this action. My response is what impact can this have on Willis getting out the vote in November of next year? So, what's next for us is all about the ground game, making sure our people show up despite the suppression of nature and the measures the bears put in front of them so that we can define public policy moving forward, as opposed to being victims of government, positioned to be owners of our destiny.

Charlie Cobb: I'm struck by how low the turnout is in so many black communities. I live in Florida, and I live in a black working-class community and the turnout was low. I think it was 30% in this particular wow, community. I asked some people about that and, and, and what surprised me was a kind of cynical attitude.We do not hear from these politicians unless they want something like our vote now, but I'm struck by it and wondering what to do about it. Cause I agree with you. I think these upcoming elections are critically important and black and brown communities will make the difference.

Judith Browne Dianis: It makes sense that the turnout is low because people go to vote and they feel like it has not made a difference for them. I mean, that is for real. I do not think we can just focus on voting. I want to go back to this point about being in a relationship with our people and hearing from them. Now, organizations, we all have enough money to throw around, to do polling instead of talking to people directly and engaging them in being able to envision their future.

When you get on the ground and you talk to folks, they have a vision, they have freedom visions, they have freedom dreams, they know the things that would help fix some of the conditions in their communities. The question is, do we have, the stomach and the patience to do that work right? To do? I mean, it, it is Charlie. It is what is old is new, right? It is like going back to what you all did to be in a relationship with people and to have the conversations with them that we need to have so that they can see the road forward.

Charlie Cobb: I suspect that that's more difficult now than it was then black America has become an urban population. I tell young activists today, I can tell you anything you want to know about organizing in Sunflower County, Mississippi. But once you ask me about organizing on the west side of Chicago or south-central Los Angeles, I'm not sure how valuable that I have to say will be to you except for some broad general principles. I'm wondering if you are thinking along these same lines, that it's just harder in the 21st century to organize in communities and at the grassroots than it was in the middle sixties.

Derrick Johnson: I do not know if it is harder, it may be different, but not necessarily harder. Talking to people, talking to people, but more importantly listening to people is the key. And if you listen and you become a trusted partner with a community, they have their experts. Our job often is just to facilitate when needed. I recall straight out of law school working with Hollis [Watkins], and we went to either Drew, Mississippi, or Montgomery County.

It was in this meeting. It was fascinating. We left the meeting Hollis[Watkins] said it is our job to get in the back of the room to listen and not be in the front of the room to direct because as we are in this car, going back home, they got to live with the outcome. That's right. He said that is the role of an organizer. I've taken that to heart. It's about listening and at most facilitating.

Imani Perry: Can I say quickly?

Charlie Cobb: Yeah, go ahead.

Imani Perry: Just, two things that I think are challenges that are important to acknowledge. I think that in some ways black communities are much more transient now than they were. So you don't necessarily have a community where everybody has lived in that neighborhood, for multiple generations and people have been moving every couple of years cause of housing and security.

The kind of interdependence is made more vulnerable and the loss of local news. My grandmother is a person who would call elected officials about everything, she knew who was accountable for what. And, and knew who you could turn to. I have a hard time figuring out who the judges are when I go to vote, where their positions are. There is a kind of capacity for political engagement that I think makes it even harder to recognize how you can have as a citizen or as a constituent, how you can have to make choices that affect the changes, you need to happen. So, I do think for me, that's part of the political education equation also is access to about who's represents like just literally what their positions are.

Charlie Cobb: Okay. We're almost out of time, so let me very quickly get a concluding statement from each one of you. I've been thinking a lot about Bob Moses, since he passed and watching him all of my life. And I think that the model for me is one to embrace broadly, that he laughed us with is a deep humility and a rigorous, um, intellectual commitment to figuring problems out and having a bold imagination beyond what people can say is possible. So, I sort of want to match that with humility that allows for people to be creative and resourceful and develop new visions. So that for me, I guess, is what I feel like we all need to embrace collectively.

Derrick Johnson: So, I want to conclude by acknowledging SNCC veterans, they helped me understand the role that I must play at this moment. In addition to that, many of you continue to provide the type of support, and guidance, wherever possible. You know, last week I talked with Danny Glover, before he left to go to Bob's Memorial and we were talking about, Bob Moses, and Danny [Glover] was saying that as he was a teenager looking at what was taking place, he was an idol.

I feel that same way, even when Dorie Ladner reaches out and asks me to join her in something.

And as I'm talking, she's always directed me to say, well, tell them this, I appreciate that, Or Courtland [Cox] being firm with given directions, we commend you all. I appreciate Charlie[Cobb], your calm, demeanor, and approach just the way you analyze, and look at things. I appreciate the mentorship I've received from Hollis[Watkins], I appreciate that. I see this moment as an opportunity to be a good steward as I'm only a part of a continuum as we help mentor and support all of the activists that come behind and it's through your lessons to me, that I'm hoping I am also holding up with my lessons to all of the activists that's coming behind so that this continuum of social justice movement continue in our struggle fight for freedom.

Judith Browne Dianis: I want to start with SNCC also because I kind of learned to be a movement lawyer by being in rooms with Hollis Watkins and by being in rooms with Bob Moses and Judy Richardson. I think that it is important for us to go back to the lessons learned and to continue them because we are in the same fight. The fight and the enemy have not changed. How SNCC built relationships with black people so that black people were centered and listened to what we have to continue to do.

I think I take from learning from SNCC veterans, also that for lawyers like me, I must know. And I tell any lawyer who starts at the Advancement Project, the law is wrong. Your job when you come to the Advancement Project is to know that and to rewrite the law because as far as I know, the law has not freed my people yet; until it is rewritten in that way, we have work to do. I think that from organizing to pushing the law, we're going to win, but we're continuing the journey that you all were part of. We hope we are doing the right thing with you.

Charlie Cobb: Continuing the journey. I might say you're doing the right thing. Thank you all for the time you've given in your very busy schedules. I know I enjoy listening to you. I wish we had another hour, but we didn’t. See you next time.