

PROPOSAL FOR THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA VOTER REGISTRATION PROJECT

The Mississippi delta is comprised of the eighteen counties in the northwest section of the state. In most of those counties 65% of the population are Negroes who are very dependent upon the white people for their livelihood. The delta is on a plantation economy. Most of the Negroes live in towns where the population is less than 10,000 and in rural communities. In most of these small towns the Negroes are employed as teachers, domestic workers, sharecroppers, or day hands.

In the past and even today the whites have worked very diligently to disfranchise the Negroes. They have done this by keeping the Negroes illiterate, immoral, fearful, unorganized, and dependent.

There are only five accredited Negro high schools in the state and only two accredited colleges, and they became accredited only in the last few months. The Negro high school teachers are not allowed to teach citizenship responsibilities to their students. The white superintendents keep a very close watch on the teachers to make sure they don't teach good citizenship.

In Laurel, Mississippi a teacher was fired and so was his wife because they advocated paying poll taxes and registering. In some counties in the delta even teachers are not allowed to register. When a student leaves high school and college in Mississippi he knows very little about the political situation. Therefore in the delta even the public school cannot be relied upon at all to help in voter registration programs.

In most of the delta towns the only meeting places are the churches, and often people who work in voter registration are not allowed to meet in the churches because the people are afraid of

economic reprisal and the ministers are not trained. Therefore it is very difficult to even find a meeting place in most of these communities.

There are no civic organizations to carry on this type of work. Therefore, at present there is no developed leadership in these places. The people who have attempted to organize in the past have been put under economic pressure or intimidated until they gave up the idea or left the state. Of course, in many small towns there are potential civic leaders.

There are only three counties in the delta with any kind of voter registration programs. They are Cohoma, Washington, and Leflore Counties. These programs are limited to the three largest cities in the delta which are the county seats in the above three counties. These cities are Clarksdale, Greenville, and Greenwood. The programs that are being carried on in these three cities have the potential of affecting only 42,325 Negro people out of the delta population of 357,895.

First of all we should see if the programs employed in the past have been effective--if so, how effective? If not, why not?

There have been voter registration programs carried on in the delta before, but they have not been very successful. The fact that only a very small percentage of the Negro people in the delta are qualified voters is evidence that the programs have not been very effective. The programs in the past have sought simply to get the Negroes to pay poll taxes and to register, without taking into account the total program of the whites to disfranchise the Negroes.

So what has happened is that a few Negroes have registered, but the real problem remains because the programs in the past have not been inclusive enough.

Any program that is really going to be effective must counteract the total program that is employed by the whites to disfranchise the Negroes.

THE TYPE OF PROGRAM THAT WILL BE EFFECTIVE

The first thing that should be done is to develop the potential leadership on the local level, including the ministerial leadership, college and high school leadership, and leadership among the working people.

For the best and lasting results, money should be spent to train local leadership rather than importing people into communities to work for a short time. When workers are imported the work goes on only as long as there are funds to support the imported leadership but if money is spent to train local leadership, the work of voter registration goes on year 'round and even if there are no funds available.

Perhaps one could go into a community and get a lot of people to register, but simply getting the people "on the books" could be dangerous. Getting people on the books without teaching citizenship will mean that the whites will simply control a large number of Negro votes because the Negroes are still dependent upon the whites. With the adult education program, the urge to vote will have its proper motivation.

HOW ARE WE TO TRAIN LOCAL LEADERSHIP?

Because of the "Hitlerism" tactics that are employed by the whites in the delta, it is extremely difficult to go into a community and start people to registering.

First, they must lose all the fear that now grips the hearts and minds of 99% of the Negro people.

Secondly, they must regain their self respect and self reliance. This can be done by teaching people the philosophy of nonviolence.

Thirdly, they must be taught how to willingly accept suffering because if there are any changes in the immediate future, there will undoubtedly be a lot of suffering among the people who attempt to exercise their Constitutional rights.

These things must be taught before a voter registration program in the delta can be successful. Through community meetings a sense of solidarity must be built and local organizational structure will emerge.

If and when Negroes start working on the local level there will be a number of Negroes "blacklisted". There must be some effort to help sustain the Negroes who will identify themselves with the first class citizenship movement.

The potential local leadership at this point has no place to receive the kind of training that is necessary. Therefore, a center should be built in order to bring together all the potential leaders from all parts of the delta for the type of training that would enable them to carry on a full time first class citizenship drive in their communities.

The center should have a full citizenship program. A program that would teach everything from reading and writing to worship.

THE CENTER

A citizenship center should be built because there is no place where Negroes can meet and study their problems together.

Without an adult educational center to really get to the base of the Negroes' problems in the delta area, there is really little that can be done. Before any program can be employed there must be something upon which to build. What we are actually doing by proposing an adult educational center is proposing to develop leadership in the local community that will serve as a basis for implementing a voter registration program. A voter registration program can never be implemented without local people with enough courage and intelligence to carry it out. This center could serve as an adult educational center for the delta, and it could also serve the local community with a community center.

A center built in Cleveland, Mississippi would have a number of geographic advantages. Cleveland is on two main highways, "61", running north and south, and "8", running east and west. ^{The center} / would be accessible to all the people in the delta... not more than 70 miles from most places. Tunica is about 75 miles to the north; Belzoni is 65 miles south; Charleston is about 45 miles east; and, Rosedale is about 20 miles west. The rest of the delta communities are located within the above area.

The center could have a large assembly room that could also be a gymnasium. There should be class rooms that would be used for citizenship and vocational training. It should have two dormitories to house people who would come to study over a period of time. It could also have a regular recreational program for young people in the local community.

WHAT CAN BE DONE BEFORE THE CENTER IS BUILT

A person should be canvassing the delta looking for potential leadership in all the small towns and rural communities. The person

could also have community meetings, showing films, and talking, trying to combat some of the fear that even keeps people from doing small things like paying poll taxes.

WHAT IS NEEDED TO CARRY OUT THIS PROGRAM

- A. Center
 - 1. Adult education
 - 2. Vocational training
 - 3. Christian education
 - 4. Wholesome recreation
 - 5. Citizenship training

- B. Transportation--a Volkswagon bus or a station wagon
 - 1. People must be contacted
 - 2. People must be brought to and from the center
 - 3. People must be visited after they have gone back to work in the local communities.

- C. Personnel
 - 1. Director of the center
 - 2. Two good field workers
 - ~~3. People must be visited after they have gone back~~
 - 3. Teachers for the center

- D. Educational supplies--books, movie projector, etc.