

January 10, 1965

John Lewis

cc: Orman, ██████████

Dear John:

Your letter to the staff bothered me a great deal. I don't know who told you about the October Atlanta staff meeting and the November Waveland meeting, but I want to let you know what I think.

About the chairmanship: All three workshops at Waveland agreed that there should be no chairman. One of the workshops suggested a ritualistic chairman who would preside over coordinating committee meetings, but that idea was rejected too. This happened because of a new position among the staff -- that structures be developed from functions, that offices emerge from functions. You were not deposed. The staff, many of them remembering your own dissatisfaction with an absentee role of figurehead, decided that one man should not have to be mediator with the country as a whole, but that several people could share that responsibility. You have been out of the country for some time, so actually, we did not have a chairman.

About the executive secretary: Jim opened the Waveland meeting with an appeal that his health and fatigue demanded he have several months leave. And the meeting closed with all the staff present agreeing on a three-man interim administrative group with co-equal powers. So, in fact, we do not have an executive secretary except in the sense that old name designations were kept.

About the Mississippi project director: Bob has been away from Mississippi for several months and has not been director of the state. The meeting at Hattiesburg went on without him as everything had been going along without him. This meant that others acted as "directors." It is a healthy sign when a movement or organization can get along and progress when you were in Africa or the North, when Jim was in England or Africa, when Bob was in the North or Africa.

One of the things that disturbs me about your letter is that for the first time, on paper, you have appealed to the staff to accept the definitions of us made by our critics. Further, you in effect said we must alter our definition of ourselves for the people who give us money. We have always said the people who give money cannot make policy. The Waveland meeting reaffirmed that position. One of the things that has made us different as an organization is that because we held that position, we were able to do things and be more uncompromising than other groups.

It is important now that we do what we have done in the past with regard to our critics, precisely because we are undergoing internal change. We must explain the changes that are taking place, not deny them. We, who have worked for some time now to create dislocation and disruption (or to use your words, to destroy the system) cannot ourselves be expected to be placid, unchanging, stable. Stability and rigidity exist where there is fascism, dictatorship. Moreover, there is no reason to expect the American press to be any different from what it is showing itself to be. Because the press in this country is set up to deal with incidents, events and leader figures, it has managed mainly to distort our message all along, and will continue to do so.

For some time now the staff has been expecting massive red-baiting. Perhaps the intensity of red-baiting has picked up now and is worse than in the past. I can remember several junctures in the past where we were being attacked. It is time for another Dorchester meeting. We must get together as staff, decide our stand, and hold it. If, as some staff suspect, this is only the start, and the Congressional Challenge for example will bring powerful onslaughts, it is more important now that we seriously determine our course, and that as a group we decide what to do.

Your letter states that you have asked Betty and Julian to use their departments to dispel rumors. Most of the staff seem to feel that they are the ones to make decisions now, and that unilateral policy decisions are not democratic. To decide to dispel or deny rumors is a serious policy decision. In the past our stance has pretty much been that we will not try to correct statements, will not spend our time answering charges, but will decide our position and keep it. To engage in debate over Communism through the press is doing exactly what is wanted. A story can be kept alive a long time through denials and counter-denials. If we start trying to stop rumors now without having staff consensus on what our position shall be toward even such things as a Congressional investigation, we will limit our alternatives later.

You have spoken of our kinship with new African governments and movements. What surprises me is that you seem to go along with what is the equivalent of a "Western" attitude toward SNCC, and you have now -- according to your letter -- placed yourself in the position of African leaders who continually assure the West that their governments are "stable."

One last thing. I am not sure I agree with using the mails for setting forth what is basically a personal position unless it is done in the spirit of a working paper. This is particularly true for people who are in command posts with greater access to information and the broader perspective of the national office.

Sincerely,

Mary
Mary E. King

PS. Sorry I did not get chance to talk to you about this in Washington.
Casey, Emmie & I are in WYaco learning basics of film strip & slide making, and raising equipment for a darkroom in Miss. Hope you are getting a chance for ^(time) some free time filled of your choice.

M.