

MFDP AND THE CHICAGO CONVENTION

In the aftermath of the final vote on the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's congressional challenge , Sept., 1965, a man who may have been a sharecropper, or unemployed, or on welfare - a Black Mississippian - rammed the US flag he had been holding, upside down into the turf on Capitol Hill. With their noted sensitivitiy and selectivity, the TV networks focussed on the incident.

So in this way, and in others, the MFDP assimilated the failure of their second challenge in two years to the American way of politics and power. Strictly speaking they were not, of course, failures - except to the Press and liberals.

The first "failure", the convention challenge, was not one because it helped to expose the falsity of the Liberal - Civil Rights coalition. And again, in the simplest terms, it could not be a failure for people with nothing to lose. The gain on the other hand was in understanding some of the subtleties of the system, and in political organization at a time when fewer than 30,000 Black people were registered to vote in Mississippi (today the figure stands at about 225,000).

Which brings us to 1968 and the possibility ( a probability in view of the number of times it has been mentioned) that, in a year which may see Lyndon Johnson strength nominated by bayonet/as well as a count of hands, the MFDP may seek to be seated as the group representing the Democratic Party in Mississippi. In the main externals, then, a repeat of the 1964 convention challenge.

One other Mississippi group, formed from an alliance of elements within the AFL/CIO, white moderates and the NAACP, has announced it will send a delegation to Chicago. And on top of this, there is the slight possibility that the regular Mississippi Democratic Party will attempt to claim its seats.

Next month the MFDP will be four years old. It has become in this relatively short period a political reference point, a means whereby the effort to redefine the political processes in this country, can be measured. The MFDP represents one thing to unemployed Black people in the Mississippi Delta, and a very different thing to White radicals, who in spite of their identification with the oppressed, are divorced from their experience, and something else again to those Black people who have moved away from the concept of attempting to change institutions from within.



The possibility, therefore, of a second convention challenge by the MFDP, raises implications outside of the Mississippi context. To a degree, the uninvited who turn up in Chicago <sup>during</sup> ~~for~~ LBJ's coronation, will have to deal with the presence of a Black group who want in at the convention. The challenge has yet to be fully debated by the MFDP. Its main proponent is perhaps Lawrence Guyot, the 28 year old chairman of the Party. Guyot, in the conversation , below, analyses what he sees and hopes from a fight, within the convention hall, Chicago, August 26th.

H : When you say the survival of the MFDP hinges on the Party making another Convention Challenge, what do you mean ?

G : I mean that that is my personal opinion. To begin with lets face the fact that the majority of Black voters in Mississippi think of themselves as Democrats. If you move throughout the Delta and throughout this State, you find three possible pictures on most walls; one of Bob Moses possibly, one of John F. Kennedy, and the other of Jesus. In other words what we have to consider is this prospective electorate , and the need for aggressive, independent, indigenious organizing with its emphasis on political education. The MFDP has been able to get both the benefits of working within the Democratic Party and not adhering to its racist, oppressive policies in the state of Mississippi or in the country and, at the same time, not get boxed into a third party position. We define, in other words, what it is to be a Democrat. The Democratic Party has historically been oppressive, but this does not mean that sharecroppers, the oppressed, and who people who are participating in politics for the first time, within the framework of the Democratic Party,

will, by definition, become repressive.

H : The FDP has, it seems, avoided the label of being a third party. I am wondering how you view the Peace and Freedom Party in California -- do you see any similarities between it and the FDP ?

G : The similarities are, number one: both parties are anti-establishment parties; number two: the Peace and Freedom Party was organized, as I understand it, because within the framework of the Democratic Party in California there was no option to work on what to the Peace and Freedom Party was the relevant and moving issue. That was peace, and the involvement of political outcasts like the Black Panther Party, who played an instrumental and key role in providing the impetus and the mass support that was necessary to get the signatures to place the party on the ballot. The similarity will be , I hope, that the Peace and Freedom Party will look at its organizing effort as a means instead of an end, and will move to continue dealing with other inequities and inconsistencies of California and the rest of the country. If it does not, then that would certainly be a dis-similarity between the Peace and Freedom Party and the MFDP.

H : Its been suggested by a number of people - and these critics I'm referring to are Black - that the MFDP has been co-opted by the Democratic Party, and that it is not really accomplishing very much at present.

G : What has the FDP done ? Well, in spite of attacks that it is communistic, of black nationalism, of a total absence of money to operate in a state wide basis, it has been able to continue projects, and developing the ongoing, most essential political product in the state, and that is - indigenous, aggressive leadership.

The attacks by our radical brethren has taken the form , 'well, it wants simply to become part of the Democratic Party, and there's too much diffusion, there's too many leaders along sectional lines'. I would retort by saying, number one : that the power of the image of the Democratic Party in the state is, politically, not to be neglected, and we feel we can get in without being tainted by it; number two : the question of an absence of central power is the entire basis for community organization and community union. This again is one of the values of the MFDP, because while it offers an opportunity to be identified with that institution which is quite American,

ie, a political party, at the same time it is open to new forms, new ideas and new concepts that turn on how to release the native energy and potential of people who are moving into politics for the first time, and who not do/have the traditional deification of the traditional symbols of either politics or social life.

H : Why, then , does the MFDP structure itself as nearly as possible on the model used by the traditional Democratic Party in Mississippi ?

G : At that time (summer 1964) that was the thing to do - at that time , both in liberal and radical circles the concept of parallel institutions was new. So we saw the need to create a political facsimile of that organization we were trying to replace. However, just as there is a difference in the function of the MFDP and the traditional Party, so there is now in the structure.

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H : Can we go on to something else ? I wanted to ask you about the present attitude of the Liberal establishment towards the FDP, lets say ADA, Walter Reuther and their ilk ..?

G : Well lets put it in this way: the MFDP has never been palatable to the Liberals of this country; certainly, not since our rejection of the seating compromise (1964 convention). And that is to the benefit of the liberals and the MFDP.

H : So there are to<sup>be</sup>/no alliances this time round with the liberals of some of the state delegations to the Chicago convention ?

G : Our alliances must be natural ones. The MFDP represents an oppressed faction of people. Our natural hook-up would be with the farm/workers in California, with SDS, SNCC, CORE and SCLC, with the National Welfare Rights Movement, and the Poor Peoples march to Washington DC.

H : What kind of a case will the MFDP present at the Chicago convention; besides the demand to be seated, what else will you be saying ?

G : In 1964 the argument was, to a large degree, based on the precedent of other challenges and the exclusion of Black people from the the right to participate in the operation and procedures of the regular Democratic Party in Mississippi. This year, race and the question of non-participation , will play a minor role. The basic \* issue will have to do with the function of the political party. What is the nature of a political party in this country. Well, its major preoccupation is with getting its members elected, not dealing , on a day-to-day basis with the problems of our society. All the emphasis is on the titular head of the Party and what he can or cannot do, when in fact it should be focussed on the Party. For example, the FDP will meet in convention, in Jackson, and it will listen to its constituency in the writing of a platform, and it will then go to Chicago and say here is our plank, here is what your plank should be - are you prepared to amend and reconstruct the entire definition of politics in this country so as to begin to deal with what we are talking about ?

H : You have mentioned the need to get away from the issue of race. Isn't it a fact, though, that the MFDP functions as a Party for Black people, and if its rhetoric does speak to the needs of poor Whites and some White students, there is little chance, for some time to come, of there being sufficient cohesiveness in the latter group to make an alliance possible?

G : When I said that we must get away from the question of race, I certainly did not mean that we would not raise that spectre - and attempt to use it for our political purposes. But what I am saying is that we must go beyond that and while the MFDP is 99% Black, from the very day it was organized it has been, and so far as I'm concerned, will always be open to all Mississippians. But the MFDP should not be blamed for the racial polarization in Mississippi, nor should it in fact cease to exist simply because it does not have a certain quota of White folk. By addressing itself to Black people in Mississippi it simultaneously addresses itself to the needs of the Poor because they are cointerminous, not only in Mississippi but in the country.

H : The MFDP and NCNP hav<sup>e</sup> filed a damage suit against Sen. Eastland (Miss. D) and his employees who stole material from the FDP at the NCNP convention in Chicago last Fall. What do you see as the real motive behind Eastland's attack on the MFDP ?

G : This is not simply an attempt to destroy two organizations, this is an attempt to define what shall be acceptable political action in this country. What is in question is the right to dissent. And the way to stop political dissent - and it is quite evident now - is to isolate, is to label , and to lie. Eastland has lied, he has stolen materials that belonged to the MFDP , and distorted their use and content. However, it would be unfortunate if MFDP and NCNP won this fight against Eastland's witchhunt alone, because this is really a fight for everyone who is concerned about the right to dissent, and radical, indigenou, issue-orientated political organization...which is exactly what the MFDP is all about.