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NEWS FROM...

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Lowndes County, Ala., Jan. 1,... A group of Lowndes County, Alabama, voters, all members of the newly formed Lowndes County Freedom Organization, will seek an injunction in U.S. District Court in Montgomery, the first of next week, requiring that a complete slate of county officials be elected in the general elections to be held November 8, 1966.

The complaint, filed in U.S. District Judge Johnson's court, charges that "the white population of that County (Lowndes), constituting a small minority of the total, by unlawful and unconstitutional means, has seized and retained all political power and has by such unlawful and unconstitutional means prevented the majority of the population, being the Negro people, from participating in any manner in the administration of County affairs or the selection of its government."

These ends, says the complaint, have been achieved by, "the prevention of Negroes from registering to voter or from participating in elections, contrary to the provisions of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution of the United States... such prevention having been achieved under color of laws of the State of Alabama which on their face or in their discriminatory application are violative of such constitutional provisions..."

"In addition to the denial of the right to vote," the complaint charges, "segments of the white population of Lowndes County have from time to time, under color of law and otherwise, by threats, terror and violence, effectively intimidated Negroes from even attempting to exercise their franchise, and such threats, terror, and violence have been effective because the defendants who are involved with the administration of justice, to wit, the defendant T. Werth Thagard, Circuit Court Judge, the defendant, A.E. Gamble, Jr., Circuit Solicitor and the defendant, C.F. Ryals, Sheriff, have consistently failed so to administer justice in Lowndes County as to punish the perpetrators of acts of violence, have continuously conducted trials in Lowndes County before juries from which Negroes have been systematically excluded or included in token numbers, and have otherwise conspired ... for the purpose of impeding, hindering, obstructing, and defeating the due course of justice in Lowndes County, with the intent to deny to the Negro citizens of Lowndes County the equal protection of the laws."

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The complaint points out that as of November, 1966, the date of the last general election of County officers in Lowndes County, no Negroes were registered to vote in Lowndes County, although more than 80% of the County's population were Negroes, and that the "defendants office holders constitute the entire governmental machinery of the County who hold office through the elective process and in their capacity as such represent and are agents of the minority of the population who have unlawfully seized and retained political power..."

It further points out that "the laws of the State of Alabama provide for a 4-year term of office for all County officials with the exception of a 6-year term for Circuit Judge, Probate Judge, and members of the County Board of Education. Under the said laws the dates of election are staggered so that a 6-year period is required in order to replace all County offices...In 1966, the offices of Sheriff, Coroner, Circuit Solicitor, County Solicitor, Tax Assessor, Tax collector, and Board of Education" will be filled; "in the general elections of 1968, the members of the Board of Revenue and the Superintendent of Education" will be elected; "in the general elections of 1970, the offices of Circuit Judge, Circuit Clerk and Probate Judge" will be filled.

The complaint asks an order of the court declaring that the defendant office holders have been illegally elected, declaring each of the offices vacant, but permitting all of the defendants to continue to hold such offices as de facto officers until certification of the results of the general elections of 1966, and directing "that at the next general elections to be held under the laws of the State of Alabama in November, 1966, the following unexpired terms of the following offices be filled in addition to those otherwise prescribed by Alabama law, namely, the offices of the Board of Revenue and County Superintendent of Schools to be filled for the unexpired term up to the general elections of 1968, and the offices of Circuit Judge, Circuit Clerk, and Probate Judge to be filled for the unexpired term up to the general elections of 1970."

There are 12,425 Negroes in Lowndes County out of a county population of 15,417. Since March close to 2,000 Negroes have registered to vote. The Lowndes County Christian Movement claims to have organized over 75% of the Negroes in the county, but many are afraid to register to vote because of intimidation. Over 20 families have been thrown off the land because of their participation in the voter registration drive and the ASCS elections.