

\$3

# Freedom Summer 1964



By Bruce Hartford

Excerpted from "History & Timeline"  
Civil Rights Movement Veterans Website  
[www.crmvet.org](http://www.crmvet.org)



# Freedom Summer 1964

By Bruce Hartford

Published by:  
Bay Area Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement  
510.658.6271  
bayvet@crmvet.org  
Copyright © 2004, 2011 Bruce Hartford

Excerpted from "History & Timeline"  
Civil Rights Movement Veterans Website  
[www.crmvet.org](http://www.crmvet.org)

# The Mississippi Summer Project

## *The Situation*

According to the Census, 45% of Mississippi's population is Black, but in 1964 less than 5% of Blacks are registered to vote state-wide. In the rural counties where Blacks are a majority — or a significant minority — of the population, Black registration is virtually nil. For example, in some of the counties where there are Freedom Summer projects (main project town shown in parenthesis):

### **Black Voter Registration Example Counties**

<b>County (Town)</b>	<b>Eligible to Vote</b>	<b>Number Registered</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Coahoma (Clarksdale)	14004	1061	8%
Holmes (Tchula)	8757	8	-
Le Flore (Greenwood)	13567	268	2%
Marshall (Holly Spgs)	7168	57	1%
Panola (Batesville)	7250	2	-
Tallahatchie (Charleston)	6438	5	-
Pike (McComb)	6936	150	-
Source: 1964 MFDP report derived from court cases and Federal reports.			

To maintain segregation and deny Blacks their citizenship rights — and to continue reaping the economic benefits of racial exploitation — the white power structure has turned Mississippi into a “closed society” ruled by fear from the top down. Rather than mechanize as other Southern states have done, much of Mississippi agriculture — particularly the Delta cotton plantations — continues to rely on cheap Black labor. But with the rise of the Freedom Movement, the White

Citizens Council is now urging plantation owners to replace Black sharecroppers and farm hands with machines. This is a deliberate strategy to force Blacks out of the state before they can achieve any share of political power. The Freedom Movement is in a race against time, if Blacks don't get the vote soon, it will be too late.

In Washington DC, Mississippi's Congressional delegation of five Representatives plus Senators Eastland and Stennis are among the most racist and reactionary in the halls of power. With Blacks disenfranchised, the state's undemocratic, good 'ole boy, crony politics returns the same corrupt incumbents to Congress year after year, allowing them to build seniority and amass enormous power over process and committees. They use that power to block civil rights legislation, prevent the Federal government from defending racial minorities, and halt any national program or reform that might benefit the poor and working class regardless of race.

Everyone, white and Black, understands that when Blacks try to vote they are defying a century of oppression and demanding social, political, and economic equality with whites. For three hard years the Mississippi Freedom Movement has been trying to register Black voters against the adamant opposition of the white power structure, the vicious terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan, and the economic warfare of the White Citizens Council. Blacks who try to register still face intimidation, violence, and arrest at the Courthouse, a phony literacy test, tricks, and abuses from the Registrar. After leaving the courthouse, they face arrest on trumped up charges, Klan violence, and economic retaliation — evictions, firings, foreclosures, business boycotts, license revocations, credit denials, and insurance cancellations. And lest there be any doubt as to whom should be targeted for this retaliation, the names of those attempting to register are published in the local newspaper.

With steadfast courage, freedom fighters have suffered and endured beatings, jailings, shootings, bombings, and

assassinations in places like McComb, Jackson, Greenwood, the Delta, and Hattiesburg. They have built a broad and determined mass-movement, yet no more than a few hundred new voters have been added to the rolls. The number of Blacks registered by the Mississippi Movement is so small that at the end of 1963 the Voter Education Project (VEP) halts all funding for COFO projects because they are simply not cost-effective. The VEP grants are critically important, without them the Mississippi Movement faces financial starvation.

Violent repression of Blacks is a traditional component of Mississippi's *"Southern Way of Life."* Since 1880, the state has averaged more than six racially-motivated murders per year in the form of mob lynchings and "unsolved" assassinations. After three years of sit-ins, Freedom Rides, pickets, rallies, marches, and thousands of arrests, the fundamental rights of free speech and assembly are still denied to Blacks in Mississippi — any act of defiance, any protest, any cry for freedom, is still met with violent state repression and immediate arrest.

Despite their many public promises, neither Kennedy nor Johnson take any effective action to defend Black voters in the Deep South. Though laws are on the books making it a Federal crime to interfere with voting rights, neither the FBI, nor the Department of Justice (DOJ), nor the Federal courts enforce those laws. The FBI is able to track down and jail bank robbers, counterfeiters, and kidnappers, but when crimes against Blacks are committed right before their eyes they claim they are "only an investigative agency" with no power to make arrests. The DOJ files lawsuit after lawsuit, which they often win in court, but nothing changes and no voters are added to the rolls because no action is taken against the politically well-connected officials who violate the law and flout the court rulings. And there is no relief in sight because the Johnson administration has stripped out any effective voting rights protection from the draft Civil Rights bill being debated by Congress.

While most of the national media covers dramatic, photogenic events such as the Freedom Rides and the Birmingham marches they either ignore the issue of Black voting rights or relegate coverage to small articles on the back pages — leaving most Americans unaware of the brutal realities in the Deep South.

### *The Dilemma*

By the end of 1963, Movement activists in Mississippi are exhausted, frustrated, and discouraged. Their efforts and strategies have built a movement — but not increased the number of Black voters. But movements *move*, if one strategy fails you try another. Something new is needed, something dramatic, something bold.

In October of 1963, SNCC leaders note that the presence of northern white supporters at Freedom Day in Selma encourages Black turnout, draws national media attention, and restrains the normally vicious Sheriff Clark and Alabama State Troopers from the kind of violence and arrests they previously inflicted on Blacks lining up at the courthouse to register. Similarly, they note the heightened FBI presence, extensive media coverage, and decrease in violence during the two weeks that white students from Yale and Stanford are in Mississippi to support the statewide Freedom Ballot. As SNCC/COFO leader Bob Moses later put it: *“That was the first time that I realized that the violence could actually be controlled. Turned on and off. That it wasn’t totally random. I realized that somewhere along the line there was someone who ... could at least send out word for it to stop. And it would. That was a revelation.”*

If the presence of a handful of northern whites can restrain Jim Clark in Selma, and if 80 white students can reduce violence in Mississippi for two weeks, what would happen if a thousand northern students, most of them white, came to Mississippi for the entire summer of 1964?

Structurally, the Mississippi Movement is led by COFO, the coalition of SNCC, CORE, NAACP, and SCLC. But CORE's

attention and resources are primarily focused on the North, particularly at this time around protests at the New York World's Fair, and much of their small southern staff is concentrated in Louisiana. SCLC's participation in COFO is small, and its attention is on St. Augustine, Florida and the state of Alabama. The NAACP national leadership is mainly interested in legal cases and they are uneasy with the growing radicalization and militance of the young organizers of SNCC and CORE. SNCC provides most of the COFO staff, and with VEP funds cut off, SNCC is now shouldering most of the financial burden as well. So the decision of what to do falls largely on SNCC — as SNCC decides, so COFO will go.

In mid-November, the COFO staff meets in Greenville after the Freedom Ballot. They discuss the idea of a summer project involving a large number of northern white students. The debate is long and intense.

Proponents — among them Fannie Lou Hamer, Lawrence Guyot, and CORE's Dave Dennis — argue that the only way to break Mississippi's iron-grip of repression is to create a crises that forces the Feds to seriously confront the state. Asking the sons and daughters of white America to join them on the front line of danger might do that. And if nothing else, it would focus national media attention on the realities of Black oppression in the Deep South. As SNCC Chair John Lewis put it: "Mississippi was deadly, and it was getting worse each day. Our people were essentially being slaughtered down there. If white America would not respond to the deaths of our people, the thinking went, maybe it would react to the deaths of its own children." Moreover, bringing white supporters to share the dangers of Mississippi will clearly show Black communities that they are not alone, that there are people across the country who stand with them. By breaking down the sense of isolation fear can be reduced and participation encouraged.

But many of the most dedicated and experienced organizers on the COFO staff — including Sam Block, Wazir Peacock,



Hollis Watkins, Charlie Cobb, Ivanhoe Donaldson, and Macarthur Cotton — are firmly opposed to the idea. Some argue that white volunteers will increase the danger to local Blacks because the presence of “race traitors” will enrage the Klan and Citizens Council. And unlike Black activists, whites cannot blend into the community, instead they will be beacons drawing the attention of both KKK and cops. Others are concerned that recruiting an army of white students is an admission of racial dependence — that Blacks need whites to get anything done — and that whites urging Blacks to register to vote will simply reinforce traditional patterns of racial subservience. Ever since the sit-ins of 1960, Movement activists have confronted and opposed racism in whatever form, whenever and wherever they encountered it, but the strategic premise of the summer project is based on using the racism of a mass media that covers whites but not Blacks, and the racism of a Federal government that has not protected Blacks, but which *might* protect whites. The proposal for a summer project appears to acquiesce in, and accommodate, the very racism they are trying to oppose. And many Black organizers are uneasy that whites — with skills and confidence born of privilege, Ivy League educations, and ingrained attitudes of superiority — will push aside both Black organizers and emerging local leaders. One long-time SNCC organizer expressed the worry of many: *“The white volunteers who know more about office work such as organizing files and making long-distance calls will end up in charge, telling me what to do.”*

Though it is not obvious at the time, when dedicated organizers doing serious work with real people passionately disagree, it is usually the case that both sides have valid points. When abstract issues are debated in coffee houses and university classrooms, choices may seem clear. But when you're actually on the ground there are often no ideal solutions to imperfect realities. The Greenville meeting ends with no decision.

But as the discussion continues over the following weeks a central fact emerges, the local people who are the heart and soul of the Movement need and want all the help they can get. If northern students are willing to put their bodies on the line in Mississippi, local Blacks in the freedom struggle will welcome them no matter what color they are. The firm support for the summer project by local leaders like Fannie Lou Hamer, Amzie Moore, and E.W. Steptoe carries great weight with field secretaries who are deeply committed to the principle of *"Let the people decide."* As does Fannie Lou Hamer's argument that *"If we're trying to break down segregation, we can't segregate ourselves."*

The debate continues at COFO's meeting in December, ending with a tentative agreement for a very limited summer project of no more than 100 white students. At the end of December 1963, SNCC's Executive Committee weighs the pros and cons at length. The motion they adopt— *"To obtain the right for all citizens of Mississippi to vote, using as many people as necessary to obtain that end"* — implies a large project with many northern whites.

The final decision comes down to the January COFO meeting held in Hattiesburg after Freedom Day. Freedom Day itself is an argument for the summer project. The presence of white clergymen on the line at the Forrest County courthouse not only restrains police violence and state repression of free speech rights, but encourages Blacks to try to register in large numbers — 150 on Freedom Day, more than 500 over the following weeks.

The COFO meeting is interrupted by news from nearby Amite County — Louis Allen has been murdered. Bob Moses later recalled: *"...it became clear that we had to do something, something big, that would really open the situation up. Otherwise they'd simply continue to kill the best among us. ... that's when I began to argue strongly that we had to have the Summer Project."* A majority of the COFO staff agree. The concerns regarding large numbers of white volunteers remain serious and real,

but something has to be done to confront the repression. The Summer Project — which grows and expands into Freedom Summer — is on.

[Note on terminology — In this discussion we use “Summer Project” to refer specifically to the project organized and led by COFO/SNCC, and “Freedom Summer” to refer to the totality of Movement efforts in Mississippi over the summer of 1964, including all Movement organizations. In this article, we use the term “volunteer” to refer to people from out of state who came to Mississippi for Freedom Summer, though, of course, the thousands of Black Mississippians who participated were also unpaid volunteers.]

### *Pulling it Together*

Though the mass media seems to think that the Movement just occurs spontaneously, in real life careful planning is essential and where planning is absent failure results. By March, the basic structure of Freedom Summer is coming into focus — recruitment and training of volunteers, voter registration, building the MFDP, challenging Mississippi's all-white delegation at the Democratic Party convention in Atlantic City, Freedom Schools, community centers, and legal support. But as always, the devil is in the details and some of the issues are thorny.

**Finances.** The Freedom Movement is always starved for funds, and with the loss of VEP grants the financial situation is desperate. The plan calls for a Summer Project budget of \$800,000, but by early May only \$10,000 has been raised and there is not even \$5 to fix the clogged toilet at COFO Headquarters in Jackson. Comedian and Movement stalwart Dick Gregory does a fund-raising tour that nets \$97,000, but that is nowhere near enough, and on three occasions before summer, SNCC is unable to pay its staff their munificent salary of \$10 per week (equal to \$68 a week in 2009).

**Nonviolence.** The issue of nonviolence is troublesome. Some activists hold to Gandhian “philosophic” nonviolence, but most organizers in Mississippi are “tactically” nonviolent.

They adhere to nonviolence on protests because anything else is both counter-productive and suicidal, but self-defense outside of demonstrations is a different matter. Most Blacks in Mississippi are armed, and they are determined to defend both themselves and Freedom Movement guests.

But civil rights workers are caught in a “trick bag” — unarmed they cannot defend themselves from the Klan, but police frequently stop, harass, and arrest them, and possession of a weapon can be used as a pretext for charges carrying heavy prison sentences. If the stop occurs on an isolated rural road with no witnesses, there is nothing to prevent the cops from shooting the activist in cold blood and then claiming “self-defense” with the worker's gun as “evidence.” In regards to firearms, some field secretaries have already adopted the self-defense philosophy of *“Rather be caught with it, than without it,”* while others judge the danger of police assassination and prison to be greater, and they rely on agile feet and a fast car to escape.

Within SNCC, questions related to nonviolence are hotly debated: Should SNCC staff carry guns? Should weapons be stored in offices and freedom houses? Should SNCC declare itself in favor of armed self-defense as Robert Williams did? The decisions they reach are based on practical politics and tactical realities. Away from protests and those public events where search and arrest is highly likely, going armed is left up to individual staff members, but the highly-visible white volunteers are not to carry weapons. Weapons are not to be kept in offices or freedom houses because police raids are expected and the presence of guns can be used to whip up media-hysteria and jail Movement leaders on phony charges. But during the night, armed locals will be stationed as guards around offices and freedom houses as necessary. SNCC will not publicly endorse armed self-defense at this time — but neither will they condemn it.

**Anti-Communism.** Though beginning to weaken, in 1964 the “red scare” anti-communist hysteria of the McCarthy era still

exerts a powerful influence on government, the media, and mainstream America. Government officials and many liberal organizations & individuals still shun groups that work with, or have among their members, “known Communists,” “pinkos,” or “fellow-travelers.” Dr. King and SCLC endure, and at times occasionally succumb to, unrelenting pressure from the Kennedys to disassociate themselves from individuals whom FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover deems too radical, including Jack O'Dell, Stanley Levison, and Bayard Rustin. Few Freedom Movement activists have ever met an actual Communist, but those who have generally consider them to be part of the *“You're going too fast, you're going too far”* wing of the liberal establishment. So to those on the front lines of the Movement, the obsession over “Communist influence” is absurd and laughable — except when it threatens desperately needed fund raising. Which it very much does.

With rare exceptions, CORE and SNCC resist pressure to disassociate themselves from “dangerous radicals.” Their attitude is that so long as leftists refrain from disrupting the Freedom Movement with extraneous political controversies, anyone willing *“to put their body on the line”* is welcome to participate regardless of their political beliefs or affiliations.

After John Lewis' speech at the March on Washington, and with growing media attention on the upcoming Summer Project, liberal pundits such as Theodore White and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. step up their attacks on SNCC, and SNCC's association with “Reds,” while conservatives such as Evans & Novak allege that SNCC has been “penetrated” by “subversive elements.” The FBI's COINTELPRO operation increasingly focuses on SNCC, working to isolate it and destroy its funding base. A favorite tactic is to plant false stories in the media. One example is the *The New York Times* article titled “Hoover Says Reds Exploit Negroes,” which runs shortly before the start of Freedom Summer. Hoover is enraged when Lewis responds with *“The Director of the FBI should spend less time turning over logs looking for the Red*

*Menace and more time pursuing the bombers, midnight assassins, and brutal racists who daily make a mockery of the United States Constitution."*

But the national leaders of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in New York and Washington threaten to withdraw their considerable legal and financial support if the Summer Project accepts help from anyone affiliated with the National Lawyers Guild (NLG). In the past, NLG attorneys have defended Communists in court and before Congress, and some self-acknowledged Communists and former-Communists are NLG members. NLG attorneys have also defended labor unions, peace activists, abortionists, beatniks, homosexuals, and other social-undesirables. Leaders from the NAACP, CORE, SCLC, and National Council of Churches (NCC) all advise SNCC to reject any assistance from the NLG. But NLG lawyers such as Len Holt, Arthur Kinoy, William Kunstler, Ben Smith, and Victor Rabinowitz have been in the forefront of the struggle throughout the South. SNCC refuses to abandon its *"body on the line"* principle, and NLG lawyers provide desperately needed legal services throughout the summer — as do NAACP lawyers.

**"What If?" Dilemmas.** No one really knows what to expect. In a very real sense the Summer Project is a huge leap of faith into the unknown — *"jumping off a cliff and learning to fly on the way down."* Inevitably, there are long discussions about *"what if"* hypothetical situations. What if the daughter of a U.S. Senator is arrested, who decides when she is bailed out? The Movement? The daughter? Her father? If she's arrested with local Blacks, must everyone be released together? What happens if her father pulls strings to spring her while the local folk languish in jail? How do you weigh their safety and suffering against the political value and media attention of continued incarceration? As it turns out, when actual events on the ground pose these kind of questions they are answered on the basis of the specific circumstances at that time and place, rather than abstract theories and principles. And for the most part, the summer volunteers prove to be

courageous and committed, standing in solidarity with Mississippi Blacks regardless of their parents' fears, desires or demands.

### ***Mississippi Girds for Armageddon***

Mississippi's white power structure and white media react to Freedom Summer as if they faced invasion by another "War of Northern Aggression" (their term for what the rest of the nation knows as the "Civil War"). Amid rhetoric about *"...savage blacks and their Communist masters,"* and the absolute necessity of *"...the strict segregation of the races controlled by Christian Anglo-Saxon white men, the only race that can build and maintain just and stable government,"* the Klan issues its own warning — on a single night crosses are burned in 64 of the state's 82 counties. Some of the churches that had agreed to host Freedom Schools are firebombed. In many cases, shortly before churches are burned their fire insurance policies are suddenly cancelled by their white insurance agents — a typical example of the Ku Klux Klan and White Citizen Council working in tandem.

The state legislature passes laws outlawing Freedom Schools, allowing officials to declare dawn-to-dusk curfews, and making it a crime to pass out leaflets advocating a boycott. The number of State Troopers is doubled, cities and towns hastily deputize and arm white men (many of them Klansmen) to repel the "beatnik horde." Jackson police purchase 200 new shotguns, stockpile tear gas, build troop carriers and searchlight trucks, and convert an armored car into an urban-battle tank. Mayor Allen Thompson tells a reporter: *"This is it. They are not bluffing, and we are not bluffing. We are going to be ready for them. ... They won't have a chance."*

### ***Washington Does Nothing***

While white Mississippi mobilizes to defend the *"Southern Way of Life"* with billy clubs and jail cells, guns and bombs, the White House and Justice Department do nothing. Despite repeated pleas from civil rights leaders, they refuse to

condemn or criticize the hate and hysteria being whipped to fever pitch in Mississippi. They refuse to issue any public statement or give any private signal that violence or state repression against nonviolent voter registration efforts will be prosecuted as required by Federal law. They refuse to even acknowledge that registering voters and teaching children are neither criminal acts nor subversive plots. FBI Director Hoover does, however, tell the press: *"We will not wet-nurse troublemakers."*

In early June, just before the project is to begin, a Black delegation travels from Mississippi to Washington to warn of impending violence and beg for protection. The President is out of town. The Attorney General is unavailable. Congress is uninterested in holding any hearings. The FBI rebuffs them as subversives and Communist dupes.

Desperate for someone to hear their pleas, the delegation holds a conference at the National Theater, addressing a volunteer panel of writers, educators, and lawyers, along with several hundred ordinary citizens. Fannie Lou Hamer describes the brutal police beating in Winona MS, Mrs. Allen testifies about the recent murder of her husband, a boy of 14 tells of police brutality against peaceful pickets, and SNCC worker Jimmy Travis talks of being shot in Greenwood and asks for Federal Marshals to protect voter registration workers. Legal scholars describe the statutes allowing — in fact, requiring — the Federal government to enforce the law, make arrests, and protect the rights of voters. The transcript is sent to President Johnson and Attorney General Robert Kennedy. There is no response.

At the volunteer-orientation in Oxford Ohio, DOJ official John Doar addresses the volunteers who are about to go down into Mississippi. They ask him: *"What will be the role of the Federal government in protecting our lives?"* He replies that so far as their government is concerned they will have to take their chances with a hostile state — defenseless. They will be in the same situation that southern Blacks have endured for



generations. The volunteers boo, but Bob Moses stops them, saying “*We don’t do that.*” He tells them that Doar is just being honest.

This utter failure of the Johnson administration and Congress has tragic human consequences. Kwame Ture (Stokley Carmichael) later comments:

*“I remain convinced to this day that the slightest intervention — public or private — indicating firmly to the Mississippi authorities that acts of terrorism and lawlessness would bring serious federal consequences would have saved lives. But that would have required a ‘profile of courage’ from someone in the Johnson administration.”*

### ***Recruitment & Training***

**Recruitment.** The responsibility of recruiting the volunteers falls mainly on Friends of SNCC and CORE chapters in the North. By March, brochures have been printed and SNCC leaders like John Lewis are touring campuses and speaking before Movement and religious groups.

Recruitment focuses on the elite private and state universities. In part, this is practical politics, those are the schools where the sons and daughters of the rich and powerful are to be found. But more important are the hard financial realities. SNCC and COFO are broke, the Summer Project is operating on a frayed shoestring. There are no funds to pay for transportation or bail bonds. Summer volunteers have to pay their own way and bring \$500 in cash (equal to \$3400 in 2009) for bail and other expenses. Most students — particularly Black students whose families are scraping every dime to keep them in college — don’t have and cannot possibly raise that kind of money. And many Black students have to work at full-time summer jobs to pay for Fall tuition.

CORE chapters, Friends of SNCC in the North, campus SNCC affiliates in the South, NAACP youth groups, and

independent civil rights organizations are the other major source of volunteers. As it turns out, close to half of all Summer Project volunteers have previously been active in the Freedom Movement, primarily in the North. Most of them are students, though not necessarily from elite colleges. Some have been arrested on protests, many have participated in pickets and marches, others have been involved in fund-raising and support work.

**Parental Opposition.** The opportunity to endure long hours, stifling heat, likely arrest, possible violence, and perhaps even death, all for no pay and no reward other than the satisfaction of a just cause, proves surprisingly attractive. Well over a thousand young men and women apply. Their parents, however, are not so enthusiastic. Most parents fear for their children's safety — with good reason. And among whites, some oppose the whole concept of equality and civil rights for Blacks. Others are aghast at the thought of social interaction between their daughters and Black men. In tenor with the times, SNCC requires that female volunteers under the age of 21 provide written consent from their parents, many of whom refuse. The number of male and female students who would like to participate but whose parents prevent them from even applying is unknown, but a quarter of those who do apply and later withdraw do so because of parental opposition (lack of money is the other major cause). But there's a rebellious wind beginning to stir among America's youth, and many Summer Project participants go to Mississippi in open and wrenching defiance of their families. For some of them, the break is permanent.

**Screening the Applicants.** By April, applications are arriving at COFO headquarters in Jackson — close to 1200 by June — and the screening process begins. The most important issue of concern is a volunteer's willingness to accept and work under the leadership of Blacks who might have little or no formal education. Where feasible, candidates are interviewed by SNCC or CORE staff, Friends of SNCC or CORE chapters, or sympathetic professors. Kwame Ture later recalls:

*"In truth, we ended up actively discouraging many more people than we accepted. [We needed volunteers who were] "in control of their lives. Sober, intelligent, self-controlled, disciplined folk who were clear on what they were getting into and why. ... People, we hoped, who could handle a kind of stress they had never before imagined, much less encountered. ... No missionaries going to save the benighted Negro or martyrs looking for redemption through suffering. ... No mystics. No flakes. No kids in rebellion, looking for attention or to get back at Mom and Dad. No druggies, beatniks, or premature-hippie types — too irresponsible. Plus folks in Mississippi wouldn't know what to make of them. Nobody flunking out of school and looking for a place to crash. No self-righteous ideologues or zealots out to make a personal statement to the world."*

**The Volunteers.** Most histories estimate the number of Freedom Summer volunteers at between 700 and 1,000, counting the 550-600 who attend the two training sessions at Western College for Women and the hundreds more who arrive in Mississippi later. But those numbers mainly count the volunteers who formally apply through COFO and work the majority of the 10-week Summer Project. They may, or may not, include the 140 or so SNCC and CORE field staff. It is unclear if they count the 300-500 professionals and students who serve a week to a month (or more) with medical, legal, and religious organizations. The 700-1,000 figure does not include the unknown number of out-of-state volunteers who come to Mississippi and participate for various lengths of time through personal or family connections, or direct organizational affiliations with SNCC, CORE, NAACP, SCLC, SCEF, or other Movement organizations. So the actual number of Freedom Summer participants from outside the state cannot be accurately assessed. Yet it is legitimate to say that in the summer of 1964 the very best of America came to Mississippi to confront and challenge the very worst.

The average age of Summer Project volunteers recruited by COFO is 21 (though a few are well into adulthood including

at least one veteran of the Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War). Depending on how you count the volunteers, roughly 85-90% of them are white, the remaining 10-15% are Black with a few Latinos and Asians. Most of them are from middle and upper-middle class families, and the majority (57%) are from the top 30 universities in the nation (123 are from Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and Princeton alone). Almost half (48%) are already members of a Freedom Movement organization (mostly CORE or Friends of SNCC), 21% actively participate in a religious group, and 14% belong to leftist or Socialist organizations. Not surprisingly, the graduate student and professional volunteers recruited by supporting organizations for legal, medical, and religious duties are older, and among them are even fewer Blacks.

But focusing on the out-of-state volunteers — their numbers and who they are — can give the false impression that they are the central totality of Freedom Summer. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is Black Mississippians — the local activists who provide leadership and guidance, the youth who canvas and help teach in Freedom Schools, the Freedom School students, the Citizenship School teachers, the families who feed and house outside volunteers, the people who register FDP voters in their homes and shops and churches, the men who guard the Freedom Houses at night, the people who drive workers around the county, the ministers and deacons who open their churches, and of course the courageous men and women who risk their lives and livelihood by trying to register to vote at the court house — it is they who are the heart and soul of Freedom Summer. And they number in the many, many thousands, far more than the northerners.

**Volunteer Orientation.** Two orientations for Summer Project volunteers are funded and coordinated by the National Council of Churches (NCC). Berea College in Kentucky agrees to host the sessions, but they back out when faced with angry denunciations from southern alumni and trustees.

Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio (today, part of Miami University) steps up with an offer to use their campus.

The first of the week-long sessions for roughly 300 volunteers begins June 13, the second session commences June 20. Most of those attending the June 13 orientation are assigned to voter registration and building the MFDP, most of those at the second are to be Freedom School teachers or work in the community centers. Roughly 150 volunteer lawyers and law students, from the National Lawyers Guild and other organizations also participate, as do clergy recruited by the NCC. About 100 SNCC and 40 CORE staff members and local activists provide most of the training, along with guest speakers such as Bayard Rustin, James Lawson, and Vincent Harding.

COFO Project Director Bob Moses tells them:

*"Don't come to Mississippi this summer to save the Mississippi Negro. Only come if you understand, really understand, that his freedom and yours are one. ... Maybe we're not going to get many people registered this summer. Maybe, even, we're not going to get very many people into Freedom Schools. Maybe all we're going to do is live through this summer. In Mississippi, that will be so much!"*

The format is varied — general assemblies, small group discussions, work team meetings. The curriculum is intense: racism, voter registration, poverty, Movement history, exploitation, the Black community, police repression, role of the Federal government, health, purpose and strategy of the Summer Project, housing, Jim Crow and segregation, psychology & sociology of oppression and liberation, songs, safety rules and procedures. And above all — violence.

Stories of violence, warnings of violence to come, training in how to survive beatings and jailings, frank discussions about fear and courage and endurance. Workshops in Nonviolent Resistance teach the techniques of survival when under

attack and the volunteers are trained in the safety practices and security procedures that are habitual with SNCC and CORE field staff:

- Don't let cops or whites see you enter or leave the Black home where you are staying.
- Don't carry the names of local supporters on you, don't tell whites who you are living with.
- Keep the shades down at night and never stand in a lighted doorway.
- Remove the dome light of your car so it doesn't illuminate you when the door is opened.
- Learn all roads in and out of town, and the danger spots to avoid.
- Vary your driving routes, and never let anyone pass you on a deserted road.
- Always be prepared for arrest and police-search at any time.
- Never go anywhere alone.
- Leave word where you are going and when you are expected to get there. Check-in on arrival.
- Each morning check your car for bombs (Volunteer David Gelfand does, and discovers 4-sticks of dynamite wired to his ignition).

**The Role of Volunteers** There is thorough discussion about the role of volunteers in relationship to the Black communities they will be working with. The volunteers are to bring their energy, ideas, and skills to the service of the local community, but they not there to be leaders, or to supplant local activists. In a memo to volunteers, Annelle Ponder of SCLC's Citizenship Schools program sums up the tight line they are expected to walk:

Let the people speak for and with you. Whenever possible get some good, strong local person (and there are many around) sold on your idea and ask him or her to tell others about it. You may need to do all of the arranging and contacting for

setting up the opportunity in some cases (often spelling out or rehearsing with the local what he should get over, or going along with him) but if people see one of their neighbors either alone or with one of the volunteers making a bold step forward, they are more likely to see such action as possible for themselves. ... Talk to them with confidence, with a sense of "expectation." ... Remember that they are adult, though many of them will be overly dependent because of this repressive culture ... As you work you must somehow resist the temptation to do things for the people, but share the work, the planning and the decision-making with them, so they realize that if the center is to continue after the summer, they will have to do it.

**Black and White Together (Mostly).** The dominant theme of the orientation sessions is Black & white together fighting racism. But given the realities of race, class, and culture in America there are inevitable tensions.

In her excellent memoir, *Freedom Summer*, volunteer Sally Belfrage wrote:

[The Black staff] were very much an in-group, because of what they have gone through together. They tend to be suspicious of us, because we are white, northern, urban, rich, inexperienced. We are somewhat in awe of them, and conscious of our own inferiority. ... Implicit in the songs, tears, speeches, work and laughter was the knowledge, secure in both them and us, that ultimately we could return to a white refuge. The struggle was their life sentence, implanted in their pigment, and ours only so long as we cared to identify...

SNCC worker Frank Smith commented: *"I grew up hating all white folks. It wasn't till a couple of years ago that I learned that there could be good white — and even now I sometimes wonder."*

Emotions are intense and complicated. The COFO staff are uneasy about the role of white activists in Mississippi, and deeply ambivalent about sending them into the danger that they are so familiar with and the white volunteers so utterly ignorant of. Said one Black organizer: *"We cried over you in the staff meeting, because we love you and we are afraid for you."*

Commenting years later, Kwame Ture said:

*"Was there tension? What'd you expect? 'Course there was. Were people nervous and edgy? Wouldn't you be? Was this based on race? Not really. I mean, yes, the Mississippi staff was mostly black, Southern, and poor, and the volunteers mostly white, Northern, and middle class. ... In truth, many of the volunteers, like most white Americans, had never really been around black people in any significant way. And the Southern staff was not in the habit of assuming anything about strange white folk. ... Given the climate they had left in Mississippi, people had a deep foreboding. But race per se was the least of it. ... "*

Everywhere they go the white volunteers are followed by the mass media in full feeding frenzy — reporters, photographers, TV cameras. But they only focus their attention on the whites, ignoring the Black freedom fighters who have risked their lives on the front lines for years. The resentment of Black staff and volunteers is volcanic, and the white volunteers also become disgusted. Said one: *"At the beginning it made me feel important. But they have a way of degrading everything they touch. I feel unclean."*

Kwame Ture later noted:

*"I think that a lot of the exaggeration about **racial** tension came from the media. They were of course all white and*



*probably felt real discomfort in our black presence. The press also really contributed to this 'racial difference' in their own inimitable way by making it immediately clear what story they had come to report. What and who, so far as they were concerned, represented the real importance of the event."*

### **The Disappearance of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman.**

The first group of volunteers leave Ohio and go down into Mississippi on June 20th. On the following day three of them, including one summer volunteer, disappear. Word arrives in Oxford where the second orientation session is underway:

There was an interruption then at a side entrance: three or four staff members had come in and were whispering agitatedly. One of them walked over to the stage and sprang up to whisper to Moses who bent on his knees to hear. In a moment he was alone again. Still crouched, he gazed at the floor at his feet, unconscious of us. Time passed. When he stood and spoke, he was somewhere else; it was simply that he was obliged to say something, but his voice was automatic. "Yesterday morning, three of our people left Meridian, Mississippi to investigate a church-burning in Neshoba County. They haven't come back and we haven't had any word from them...."

In the days that follow, hope wars with dread, hope that the missing are held in captivity but still alive, against the growing certainty that they have been lynched. Anxious parents call or come in person, urging, pleading, begging, their sons and daughters to come home and not go to Mississippi. A few leave, a few under the age of 21 are forced against their will to quit. But most hold fast.

On the last night of the second orientation, Bob Moses addresses the volunteers and tells them: "*The kids are dead.*" When he finishes speaking the auditorium is deathly silent.

Then a woman raises her voice in song, "*They say that freedom, is a constant struggle...*" The next morning the second wave of volunteers board the buses to go down into Mississippi.

## 10 Weeks That Shake Mississippi

The volunteers arrive in Mississippi on June 20th and June 27th. To the extent that they encounter whites, they are greeted with suspicion and outright hostility. But they feel welcomed — even loved — by the Black communities they become part of.

But the volunteers, Blacks and whites both, soon discover that the Black community is split. Many local Blacks eagerly await their arrival and the support they bring. As Holly Springs resident Rita Walker put it in, "I always pictured them coming in a bus with "FREEDOM" written on it. I would meet with some of my friends, and we would go up to the bus station and wait for them so that we could welcome them in." Other Blacks, however, fear white retaliation if they even speak to a civil rights worker — they are polite, but distant. They assure their white employers and landlords that they are not involved in "*that mess*," and when white volunteers approach them as social equals they are deeply uneasy and profoundly conflicted — hesitant to offend these white strangers, but terrified of what will happen to them if their boss or the sheriff thinks they are defying the "*Southern Way of Life*."

For the volunteers, the work is long and grueling. Up at dawn with the family they live with. No hot shower. No morning paper. No leisurely cup of coffee. Often, no toilet. Strange food for breakfast — hominy grits, collard greens, biscuits & gravy. Then out the door into the brutal, muggy heat. For project staff, the work is even harder. SNCC Chairman John Lewis later wrote of the Summer Project:

It was hot, tiring, tedious work. Walking door-to-door, canvassing and convincing people to come to class at one of our

Freedom Schools, to come to the courthouse to register to vote. Standing in unmoving lines outside those antebellum courthouses for hours on end, facing heat and hunger and harassment and worse. Our Freedom Schools — nearly fifty of them, all told — were often hardly more than shacks, with hand-painted signs out front and classes held as often on the grass or dirt outside as in, where the heat was stifling and the small rooms too dark to see. We reached people wherever we could, staging meetings and workshops in beauty parlors or barbershops, in storefront churches, even out in the fields where the people were plowing and chopping.”

Kwame Ture later said of the volunteers:

*“For most of them the next two and a half months would be the sternest test of their lives thus far. How would they do? This heah was for real now, Jack. For the most part, I’d say they did just fine. For the overwhelming majority — white or black — it would a life-changing experience politically and culturally. In black Mississippi, the whites experienced at first-hand a side of America they’d not seen and could scarcely have imagined. They learned something about their country, about black culture, and about themselves. Their presence changed black Mississippi, but clearly black Mississippi changed them even more.”*

**Headquarters.** Day-to-day, the Summer Project is coordinated out of the narrow, crowded, COFO office on Lynch Street in Jackson. A shabby, run-down building which functions as command post, press room, administrative center, personnel department, bursar, supply depot, emergency first-aid station and basic training camp for volunteers who missed the Oxford orientation. A hand-lettered sign declares: No one would dare bomb this office and end all the confusion. The office is also a terminus for the Wide Area Telephone Service (WATS) phone

line, a forerunner of “800” numbers which do not yet exist. Volunteers monitor the life-saving WATS line around the clock, recording incidents of violence and arrest, dispatching lawyers and doctors, notifying press and Justice Department, and compiling the daily “WATS Report.”

For the duration of the Summer Project, SNCC's national office temporarily moves from Atlanta to Greenwood. For three months, this office on Avenue N becomes the nerve-center of SNCC activities nationwide, raising money, and mobilizing national political support for the MFDP challenge. The nationwide WATS line is manned (or, more accurately, woman-ed) 24 hours a day. Local men with rifles are discreetly posted in the vicinity to protect the office which is also the home of two cats — one named “Freedom,” the other “Now.”

**Projects.** Local projects — a team of staff and volunteers assigned to a particular county or community — are the basic unit of organization. Grouped by Congressional District for administration and MFDP organizing, there are at least 44 projects across the state, with the heaviest concentration in the Delta (see map). The biggest project is in Hattiesburg serving Forrest County with 50 staff/volunteers. At the other end of the scale some projects have as few as two workers. The number of projects and the number of people assigned to them change over the summer, some projects start late, others grow and spawn new sub-projects, some wither and die in the face of unrelenting opposition from the white power structure.

Projects are not imposed on Black communities. They are only established where local folk ask for one and are able to provide housing for volunteers and a church or other building for Movement use. In many Mississippi counties, white opposition is so intense, the fear so great, that there is not enough local support to sustain any Freedom Summer activities. Though media attention is on the danger to white volunteers, the risks taken by local activists and those who

open their homes are far greater. To defy the white power structure by publicly standing for the Freedom Movement, or to break the segregation taboo by inviting whites — including young white women — into a Black home, are irrevocable steps of enormous courage. The volunteers are scheduled to leave at the end of the summer, but local Blacks will bear the consequences for the rest of their lives. And white retaliation is swift and brutal — churches are burned, people are fired and evicted, there are arrests, beatings, and shootings that continue long after the summer ends.

Each project is led by a project director, all of whom are Black (except in Greenwood where SNCC veteran Bob Zellner is the director). The projects focus on:

- **Voter Registration & MFDP.** Every project engages in voter registration and building the MFDP.
- **Freedom Schools.** Most projects operate a Freedom School taught by volunteers. Mississippi's segregated school system is designed to keep Blacks "in their place" — low-paid, docile, subservient, and intellectually-isolated. The Freedom Schools challenge that regime, beginning a process of opening up new worlds of thought and possibility for Black children. Yet it is difficult to say who learns more, the Freedom School students or their volunteer teachers.
- **Community Centers.** Many projects open community centers that provide cultural and educational programs for the Black community, including political organization, adult-literacy courses staffed by Citizenship School teachers, health-education classes taught by MCHR volunteers, vocational training centers, and live theater shows by the Free Southern Theater. Libraries of books donated by northern sympathizers are established to serve communities who have been denied access to the state's publicly-funded "white-only" libraries.

- **Letters.** A major strategic objective of the Summer Project is to raise national awareness of Mississippi realities, demand Federal action, and mobilize political support for the MFDP. All volunteers are urged to write frequent letters to family, friends, teachers, and ministers about the Freedom Movement and their experiences. Many volunteers arrange to have their letters published in local newspapers, school or church newsletters, or reproduced and distributed to informal networks. This is before the era of cheap copy-machines, so to distribute letters they have to be retyped with carbon copies, or mimeographed from hand-typed stencils, often by parents who only weeks earlier had been desperately pleading with their daughters and sons not to go to Mississippi. Some of these letters are later collected and published as a powerful statement in the book *Letters From Mississippi*.

In the lives of participants — SNCC & CORE staff, local activists, and summer volunteers — the projects become life-altering experiences. Writing years later, SNCC staff member Cleveland Sellers' remembrance of one project stands for them all:

The Holly Springs Project with Ivanhoe Donaldson as its director, was a true reflection of the "beloved community." This project became a fervent, collective spirit born out of the hearts of many caring, committed, and diverse individuals. The unsurpassable sense of love and hope among us created such an unbreakable bond that for one brief period of history the "band of brothers (and sisters)," the circle of trust felt invincible, even in the face of relentlessly imminent danger. Never has any experience paralleled the intense exhilaration and passion that we felt for our work, the local people and one another.

**The social revolution.** The Freedom Movement as a whole, and within it the Summer Project, is about far more than voter registration or education — it is at heart a social revolution. A revolution that defies fear, throws off enforced subservience, asserts dignity and rejects inferiority. A social revolution that demands an equal share of economic and political power. A social revolution that abolishes old relations, and forges new personal, political, and social identities.

Social revolutions are not made from manifestos or political analyses, but rather by people fundamentally altering their view of themselves and their place in society. Such revolutions are not imposed by leaders from above, but are rather nurtured by organizers from below. Nor are social revolutions accomplished in a single summer. The social revolution transforming the South neither began, nor ended, with Freedom Summer.

Writing later, COFO Director Bob Moses addressed an important aspect of this social revolution:

Today's commentary and analysis of the movement often miss the crucial point that, in addition to challenging the white power structure, the movement also demanded that Black people challenge themselves. Small meetings and workshops became the spaces within the Black community where people could stand up and speak, or in groups outline their concerns. In them, folks were feeling themselves out, learning how to use words to articulate what they wanted and needed. In these meetings, they were taking the first step toward gaining control over their lives, and the decision making that affected their lives, by making demands on themselves. This important dimension of the movement has been almost completely lost in the imagery of hand-clapping,

song-filled rallies for protest demonstrations that have come to define portrayals of 1960s civil rights meetings: dynamic individual leaders using their powerful voices to inspire listening crowds. Our meetings were conducted so that sharecroppers, farmers, and ordinary working people could participate, so that Mrs. Hamer, Mrs. Devine, Hartman Turnbow, all of them were empowered. They weren't just sitting there.

**Unita Blackwell, a Mayersville Mississippi sharecropper with an 8th grade education recalls how the social revolution first affected her:**

To have wonderful new friends – black and white, educated, people of means, some of them, who'd been places and done things I'd never even dreamed of – sitting on the floor or in the old broke-down furniture in my front room, talking about our lives and times, gave me a feeling I'd never had before. Nobody had to say that all of us were equal; we could feel it. These were the first moments of my life when I knew that people outside my family respected me for what I knew and what I had to offer. They wanted to know my ideas, to get my advice about what they should do. I was telling them what to do. Even in my own community, as a woman, my opinion didn't mean much unless it was in agreement with a man's. I had been beat way down, and the realization that I had something of value to give someone else was a powerful sensation. At the time I didn't even know how to describe it, but it gave me strength.

**[Unita Blackwell goes on to become a SNCC field secretary and MFDP Delegate. In later life she**



becomes the first Black women in living memory to be elected Mayor of a Mississippi town, founds the U.S. China People's Friendship Association, receives a Masters degree from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, and is awarded a MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Fellowship grant in 1992.]

By definition, social revolutions run deep, deep down to the very bottom. The worst poverty and fiercest oppression is found among the plantation sharecroppers and farm laborers enduring semi-slavery on the vast feudal domains of the richest and most powerful cotton planters. Often forbidden contact with the outside world, terrorized by the unrestrained physical and sexual violence of white foremen, forced to subsist on over-priced, shoddy goods at the company store — not even paid in money but rather working off constantly increasing debt. Yet by 1964, the Freedom Movement's social revolution has reached down even to these depths. For the organizers and volunteers sneaking onto plantations to visit the tumble-down shacks in the dead of night the deadly dangerous work is reminiscent of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railway stealing away slaves from America's "Egypt." As one summer volunteer wrote:

On a drooping cot to our right as we came in the door lay a small child (six months old). The child's eyes, nose, and mouth were covered with flies. Not being able to stand such a sight, I tried to chase them away only to be met with the reply of the mother "*They will only come back again.*" The whole house seemed diseased, rotten, and splitting at the seams with infection. Nevertheless, the people knew what we were coming for, and the forms were filled out without our asking... This is a scene that was burned into all of our minds and which will make quiet sleep impossible."

**Violence.** Across the state there is widespread violence, police repression, and economic retaliation against local

Blacks and Freedom Summer participants. For example, the following violent incidents are culled from the daily WATS report for the week of July 6-12:

July 6, Moss Point. Lawrence Guyot addressing a voter registration rally. Racists shoot into the crowd seriously wounding a woman. Three Blacks arrested when they chase the attackers.

July 6, Jackson. McCraven Hill Missionary Baptist Church damaged by firebomb.

July 6, Raleigh. Two churches destroyed by fire.

July 8, McComb. Freedom House bombed, wounding SNCC organizer Curtis Hayes and summer volunteer Dennis Sweeney.

July 9, Vicksburg. Young Freedom School students stoned while walking to class.

July 10, Hattiesburg. Klansmen attack Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld with steel pipes. He and two other summer volunteers hospitalized with injuries.

July 11, Canton. Firebomb thrown at Freedom House.

July 11, Vicksburg. Black cafe that served white volunteers bombed.

July 11, Browning. Missionary Baptist Church destroyed by fire.

July 12, Jackson. White man attacks Black woman at Greyhound depot. After being treated for injuries, she is arrested for "Disturbing the Peace." Her attacker is not charged.

July 12, Natchez. Jerusalem Baptist and Bethel Methodist Churches burned to the ground.

And from the same period, the following reports of police harassment and abuse:

July 6, Itta Bena. Police seize a civil rights worker and disappear him, triggering a search by SNCC and Federal agents.

July 7, Greenwood. Six local students and three volunteers arrested for peacefully picketing.

July 8, Hattiesburg. Rev. Robert Beech of National Council of Churches arrested on felony charges because his checking account is briefly overdrawn.

July 8, Columbus. Three volunteers arrested for "trespass" after stopping at a gas station to buy cold soft drinks.

July 9, Clarksdale. Cops spray cleaning chemicals on two Black girls inside the courthouse. A volunteer arrested for taking a photo of the incident.

July 9, Gulfport. Four volunteers arrested on anti-picketing charges as they escort Blacks to courthouse for voter registration attempt.

July 10, Greenwood. A cop overhears a SNCC staff member tell another activist: "We've got to get some damn organization in our office." The SNCC organizer is arrested and jailed for "Public Profanity."

Over the course of Freedom Summer there are:

Six known murders and one “mysterious” fatal accident  
35 known shootings, 4 people critically wounded  
At least 80 Freedom Summer workers are beaten  
More than 1,000 people are arrested  
37 Churches are bombed or burned  
30 Black homes or businesses are bombed or burned

COFO's assumption that the mass media and Federal government will swiftly respond to attacks on white volunteers proves correct. The disappearance of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman is headline news and lead story across the nation. Reporters flock to the state and the DOJ springs into frenzied action. But the strategy of using white students to bring attention and protection to all Movement participants — white **and** Black — fails.

For the most part, both the media and the Federal government are only interested in attacks and threats against the white volunteers. A massive Federal search is launched to find the missing men, and President Johnson meets with the parents of the two white activists at the White House. When white activists are beaten or shot at, the FBI quickly investigates (though they rarely arrest anyone). But both media and government show little interest in attacks on either local Blacks or Black freedom workers. Civil rights leaders demand that Federal Marshals be mobilized to protect people working on voter registration. They are ignored. The number of FBI agents assigned to Mississippi is increased from 15 to 150, but when FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover opens the new FBI office in Jackson, he assures white Mississippi that the FBI will give “*no protection*” to civil rights agitators.

Throwing the corpses of murdered Blacks into the nearest river is a traditional component of the “*Southern Way of Life*,” so hundreds of Navy sailors are assigned to search the swamps, and Navy divers drag the rivers. Soon Black bodies are being pulled from the waters. Among them are Henry Hezekiah Dee and Charles Eddie Moore, lynched by the Klan

after Moore is expelled from Alcorn A&M for participating in civil rights protests. Another young victim, tentatively identified as 14-year old Herbert Oarsby, is found wearing a CORE T-shirt. The remains of five other Black men are never identified. But none of the bodies are those of the missing white men, and both the media and the FBI quickly lose interest in them.

The death of Black activist Wayne Yancey and serious injury to Charlie Scales in a mysterious "car crash" is another example. SNCC staff member Cleveland Sellers of the Holly Springs project later wrote:

I remember a black man, someone I had never seen before, rushed up to us and said, "A Freedom Rider has been killed up the road in a car crash!" We had not seen an ambulance nor any emergency vehicle. We began to scout around to see what was going on. We found the badly damaged car at a service station and then went to the hospital. Oddly, the police were already at the hospital. We were shocked to find Wayne's body lying in the back of the ambulance/hearse with blood dripping into a puddle beneath. We could not tell how long the body had been there or if Wayne had died at the scene or while still in the ambulance waiting for medical attention.

Charlie was inside the hospital when we took Kathy Dahl, the project's nurse, inside to check on him. Even though the hospital had not provided extensive medical treatment to Charlie, the chief of police was trying to put him under arrest for vehicular homicide. Immediately Ivanhoe asked Kathy to work on getting Charlie to a Memphis hospital. Kathy, in her authoritative voice, said that Charlie was in need of immediate attention and if

he didn't get to Memphis quickly he may die. The police chief was reluctant to let Charlie go. More negotiations were required for the sheriff to finally release Charlie, who was driven to Memphis and then flown to Chicago. Charlie maintained that he was lying on the ground immediately following the wreck, some white men walked over to him and said, "Stay still or you will get the same as your buddy.

Wayne's death had a profound impact on those of us in Holly Springs, not only because we loved him like a brother, but because for some they saw first hand how the lives of poor black males were not valued in Mississippi. There was no fanfare, no FBI, no investigation, no massive press coverage. No named civil rights leader rushed down to Paris (Tennessee where he was buried). Just us, the family and our brother. [5]

It is no surprise then that a bitterly ironic, hand-lettered sign hangs on one wall of the SNCC office in Greenwood:

There's a street in Itta Bena called Freedom  
There's a town in Mississippi called Liberty  
There's a department in Washington called Justice

It is the local Black community, not the Federal government or local law enforcement, that provides protection. As volunteer Gren Whitman writes in his journal: I am writing this at 6am. Just now coming down the hall from the bathroom, I met Mrs. Fairley coming down the hall from the front porch, carrying a rifle in one hand [and] a pistol in the other. I do not know what is going on ... [All she said was] "You go to sleep, let me fight for you.

**A New Kind of Leadership.** Though they are repeatedly cautioned not to act or think of themselves as leaders, the inexorable reality of day-to-day circumstances force the volunteers of both races into assuming leadership roles far greater than most of them have ever previously experienced, with greater responsibility for their own lives and safety — and that of others.

From their class background, academic & organizational experience, and familiarity with the power manipulations and media-hype of American politics-as-usual, the volunteers are familiar with traditional styles of leadership based on social position, organizational title, personal prestige, intellectual brilliance, verbal rhetoric, posturing, domination, and ego-gratification — and the broader civil rights movement certainly has its share of those kind of leaders.

But by their example, many of the SNCC and CORE staff who head the projects provide the volunteers with a new model of leadership that is profoundly different from the American norm. In the field, status and leadership is, for the most part, based on what people actually do, what they endure, and their success (or lack thereof) in organizing real people to do real things to improve their lives. One Freedom Movement activist later described the goal (if not always the reality): *"No self-promoting, 'I'm the boss, look at me, do it my way,' type leaders. It's the concept of ego-less leadership. It was the complete opposite of the kind of leadership that seems so common today — 'I'm the leader! I'm in charge! I'm important! I'm on stage! I'm the one who goes on TV!'"*

At root, the difference in leadership stems from the organizer's point of view compared to that of the self-centered leader. Self-promoting leaders seek power and prestige for themselves on the promise of providing benefits to their constituents. But an organizer's goal is to find and nurture leaders among the local folk who will build their own organizations and achieve a share of political power for themselves — thereby allowing the organizer to move on to

some other community to repeat the process. At least in theory. In practical reality over the long run, that concept proves difficult to achieve, but in 1964, field secretaries of the Southern Freedom Movement are doing their level best to live up to that ideal.

Kwame Ture of SNCC is COFO project director for the 2nd Congressional district (the Delta), and therefore an acknowledged leader by necessity. From that perspective, he later described the demands placed on him:

*"People depended on you to inspire confidence. You inspired confidence by showing confidence. Yeah, they expected clarity and decisiveness at all times. But the decisions had to be seen to be fair and intelligent. No stupid moves. No bombast, no empty guarantees: no overstated promises that you couldn't keep and which people knew you couldn't keep. You had to be **credible**. To keep trust, you had to perform. To keep authority, you had to earn it, over and over. To lead not by fiat, but by example and work."*

**Internal Tensions.** Fear, exhaustion, heat, the passion and depth of commitment, cultural differences of wealth & poverty, black & white, north & south, urban & rural, and the enormous gap between hope and reality, all combine to create an emotional pressure cooker that intensifies inherent conflicts of race, gender, and class. As the weeks pass, the strains increase, "Fear can't become a habit," writes one volunteer — but it can, and it has. Writing late in the summer, volunteer Sally Belfrage acknowledged that "There are incipient nervous breakdowns walking all over Greenwood," and one volunteer later recalled "...crying myself to bed at night. ... I was just seeing too much, feeling too much. Things weren't supposed to be like this. I was just a mess. I just remember feeling sad, guilty and angry all at the same time."

**Race.** The deepest tensions are around race. Most of the white volunteers are fervently committed to the ideal of an inter-racial "beloved community." But the habits and assumptions



of white superiority are deeply ingrained and often manifest despite their best intentions. In the pressure of events, some of the white volunteers fail to understand that their skills, training, and confidence are the product of privilege. In their eagerness, they sometimes push Blacks aside. Then they are bewildered and hurt when the Black staff verbally slap them down.

After three years of Mississippi's blood and brutality, and three years of failure on the part of liberal white America and the Federal Government to live up their professed ideals and oft-stated promises, some of SNCC and CORE's Black staff no longer see inter-racial brotherhood, integration, or appeals to white liberalism as a viable strategy for ending the nightmare of racism, segregation, exploitation, and powerlessness. They find it hard to trust any whites, even the summer volunteers working beside them. Some of them are moving towards Black pride, Black self-reliance, and Black Power. Inevitably, there is friction with both white volunteers and those Black activists who do not share the beloved community outlook.

The mass media exacerbates and exaggerates these internal tensions. Black organizers who have endured years on the front lines are humiliated and embittered when the white gentlemen of the press ignore them and instead milk recently arrived white volunteers for their wisdom and insight regarding America, race, and politics. And when Black anger is expressed to the white volunteers, the mass media emphasizes it out of all proportion, over-reporting the conflicts as if to deny the broader current of racial solidarity that characterizes Freedom Summer.

**Gender.** Beneath the surface, tensions related to gender fester — particularly among some of the white women volunteers. In 1964, the term “sexism” has not yet come into wide use, and compared to issues of race there is little articulation and even less discussion about discrimination against women in the broader society, women's roles and treatment in the Movement, or inequality and abuse in personal interactions

between women and men. One woman later said: *"Sexism was not something that ... had been made conscious to me at the time, but looking back on [Freedom Summer], that's ... what it was."*

Some SNCC staff view the presence of white women volunteers as a mixed blessing. Kwame Ture later observed:

*"Not through any fault of the women's, but because of the deeply ingrained, almost psychotic Southern male attitudes about 'white womanhood.' This was cause for real concern, Jack. Young white women in the black community would be seen as a provocation and a flash point for violence. That was reality. A security risk to themselves and everyone else in communities in which lynching was by no means a distant memory. ... One expedient was to try to 'hide' the women in libraries and freedom schools as opposed to sending them canvassing door-to-door. (Course, some women did do canvassing, but in all-women or all-white teams.)"*

Yet while individual safety and project security are valid concerns, they are not the only factors. Though some Black women are involved in voter registration, most are assigned to Freedom Schools, community centers, and office jobs. For some staff and volunteers, particularly some of the men, there is a hierarchy of work-related prestige; voter-registration is the "real" work, Freedom Schools and community centers are of secondary importance, and office-clerical is the least valued (except when paychecks or operating expenses arrive late, of course). Since work assignments are skewed by gender (9% of the women are engaged in voter-registration, for example, compared to 47% of the men), this sometimes results in women being treated as second-class citizens — not unlike the way that society at large under-values women, and "womens work."

But "sometimes" is not the same as "always," and "some men" is not the same as "all men" — particularly in SNCC. Some project directors and field leaders in SNCC's area of

operations are Black women, and overall the number of SNCC women in significant leadership roles is far higher than in other Freedom Movement organizations such as CORE, SCLC, and the NAACP.

**Class.** Issues and tensions rooted in class are examined the least and only rarely discussed. After a generation of red-baiting and McCarthyism, concepts of class division, class oppression, class consciousness, and class warfare are the taboo topics of American politics (as they still are today). In 1964, awareness of such issues has barely begun to stir. Most of the white volunteers are from the middle and upper-classes, but aspects of class are often overlooked, or interpreted solely as Black-white issues — or as North-South or urban-rural cultural differences.

Class divisions also exist within the Black community and among Black volunteers and staff. After years of organizing experience working in the poverty-stricken communities of the rural South, John Lewis later touched on SNCC's growing awareness of class when he wrote:

As for our black volunteers and staffers, we had to be as sensitive and careful about our behavior and appearance as the whites. We knew we could easily be resented by the local blacks as outsiders, college-educated kids from a different class, really from a different **country** from the one in which they lived. We had to be extremely careful about any hint of condescension or superiority, from the way we acted to the way we dressed. Overalls became the standard outfit for our black volunteers. Blue denim bib overalls and a white T-shirt underneath, became the symbol of SNCC. And it was practical. It fit our lifestyle of sleeping on sofas and floors and walking miles and miles of dusty back roads. It also identified us

with the people we were working with —  
farmers and poor people.

**Direct-Action and the Civil Rights Act.** Shortly after the volunteers arrive in Mississippi, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is signed into law on July 2nd. Though its passage is a huge victory for the Freedom Movement as a whole, it presents serious problems for the Summer Project.

From the beginning, with the first voter-registration effort in McComb after the Freedom Rides in 1961, SNCC's Mississippi strategy has been based on two basic premises: First, that the fundamental goal has to be achieving political power for Blacks, which requires voter-registration. Second, that most Mississippi Blacks cannot afford to patronize white restaurants and hotels, so integrating them is for the most part a symbolic victory. But there is a long-standing disagreement between those who argue that integration efforts provoke so much white violence and state repression that voter-registration is crippled, and those who believe that defiant direct-action by students and young people awakens courage in adults, and by helping them rise above their fears it encourages them to register.

After passage of the Act, Black youth across the state are eager to defy segregation and exercise their new rights, they want to "*spit in the eye*" of the white racists by integrating hamburger joints and movie theaters. Three years of Movement activity have filled them with courage and the law is now on their side. But whites are already enraged by the mere existence of Freedom Summer and further inflamed by Johnson signing the Act. In Greenwood and other communities, carloads of armed whites prowl the streets looking for trouble, some are members of the Sheriff's posse, others are outright Klan. One of the "auxiliary" deputies is Byron De la Beckwith, and everyone, Black and white, knows he's the assassin who murdered Medgar Evers. The COFO leadership fears that testing the Civil Rights Act will result in mass arrests and increased violence which will disrupt or halt

the work of building the MFDP and that desperately needed funds will have to be diverted to bailing protesters out of jail.

The question is thrashed out in meeting after meeting. The majority of SNCC/COFO staff agree with Bob Moses that they have to remain disciplined, stick to the plan, and not let themselves or the Movement become distracted. But some staff (and some summer volunteers) argue that it was the sit-ins and Freedom Rides of the early 1960s that sparked and energized the Movement and that if the Civil Rights Act is not tested and enforced immediately it will wither away and become just another unenforced law. By and large, adults in the community agree that now is not the time for integrating coffee shops, but the youth are restless. In some communities they take independent action on their own, and when they are arrested or beaten, a portion of Movement time and resources are diverted in response, but their courage and defiance does encourage and inspire the adults.

The issue is most acute in Greenwood which has been a center of Freedom Movement activity since early 1962. It comes to a head after national NAACP leaders swoop into town accompanied by reporters and FBI agents. They integrate a few upscale establishments to great media acclaim and then drive off. Afterwards, no one, not even SNCC, can restrain Greenwood's Black youth from direct action at "white-only" establishments. Then Silas McGhee goes to the movies, touching off a new front in the struggle. There are arrests and beatings and shootings, and SNCC Staff are assigned to keep protests disciplined, focused, and nonviolent.

**Freedom Day in Greenwood.** Martha Lamb is the Registrar of Voters for Leflore County. She is notorious for her refusal to register Black voters. To dramatize her violation of Black voting rights and pressure her to obey Federal law, Federal court rulings, and the U.S. Constitution, July 16 is declared "Freedom Day" in Greenwood. For more than a week mass meetings and house-to-house canvassing urge Greenwood's

Black citizens to sign up as members in the MFDP and then attempt to register at the courthouse *en masse* on Freedom Day. To support those trying to register, and call attention to the denial of basic human rights in Mississippi, Black students eager for direct action are asked to peacefully picket the courthouse in violation of the state's anti-picketing law — they know they will be arrested. Most of the summer volunteers want to join the line, but if everyone is in jail the main work of the project halts, so a limited number are chosen at random.

On July 16, the line of Black adults waiting to register stretches down the courthouse steps and around the corner. Only three at a time are allowed into the courthouse, the line crawls forward at a snail's pace — most will not even reach the door. A swarm of local and state police harass and intimidate them, as do “deputized” toughs and furious white citizens.

The first wave of young pickets and summer volunteers walk single file along the sidewalk singing freedom songs. They are quickly arrested. Their “One Man/One Vote” and “End voting discrimination” signs are torn from their grasp and they are shoved into a police bus. Their singing intensifies: “*Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round, turn me 'round...*” The pickets are staggered throughout the day, wave after wave are arrested, 111 in all, including 13 summer volunteers and some SNCC staff. Those arrested are sentenced to 30 days in jail and \$100 fine. They go on hunger strike. After 6 days they are released on appeal bond of \$200 each. The work of the project — voter registration, building the MFDP, Freedom Schools, and community organizing continues.

## **The Results**

Commenting later, Kwame Ture concluded:

*"In many ways, the Mississippi Summer Project was a turning point for a whole generation of us. It was certainly the boldest, most dramatic, and traumatic single event of the entire movement. It certainly had the most far-reaching effect: for national party politics, for that activist college generation, for the state of Mississippi and the movement there, and especially for SNCC as an organization. After the summer, none of those would be the same."*

**Voter Registration.** During the 10 weeks of the Summer Project, more than 17,000 Blacks defiantly line up at their county courthouse to register. But the Registrars add only 1600 to the voter rolls (just 9% of those who apply), and most of them are in counties where whites solidly outnumber Blacks. While 1600 is three or four times the number who have been registered over the preceding years of Movement struggle, it is still just a drop in the bucket. The DOJ files more lawsuits to wend their weary way through the courts, but the white power structure is adept at circumventing rulings they do not wish to obey. No Federal Marshals are sent in to enforce previous rulings or defend Black voting rights. Except in the case of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman, the FBI fails to pursue or arrest those who commit violence against civil rights workers or Black voters. Nor do they make any effort to rein in or punish rampant police repression or the economic terrorism of the White Citizens Council. In the short-run then, the Summer Project fails to achieve its goal of registering a significant number of Blacks and prodding the Federal government into effective action.

**The Black Community.** Though few voters are added to the rolls, the pall of fear that has held generations in thrall is beginning to lift. The signs are unmistakable. To take just one example, as an act of intimidation local newspapers routinely publish the names of Blacks who try to register to vote — thereby alerting white employers, landlords, and businesses who to fire, evict, boycott, and foreclose. But as one volunteer deep in the Delta writes, "In Panola County now the Negro citizens look with pride at their names in the Panolian, they point out the names of friends

and neighbors and hurry to the courthouse to be enlisted on the honor roll.” Where once it was a signal victory to find three courageous souls willing to go down to the courthouse, now Blacks in the dozens and hundreds are putting on their Sunday best to defiantly demand that they be allowed to vote.

**National Political Effect.** Though the mass media focuses almost exclusively on the white volunteers, the nation is nevertheless becoming aware of voter registration and denial of basic human rights in the South as important issues. Just as the Freedom Rides, Birmingham Campaign, and St. Augustine Movement forced segregation onto the national agenda, the news stories and letters from Freedom Summer volunteers raise voting rights to a new level of public concern. And that concern is now being brought to the attention of Congress and the White House by northern voters — white as well as Black. As Freedom Summer ends, Johnson is still saying that no new civil rights legislation is needed, but pressure is building, pressure that explodes in Selma, Alabama, just four months later.

**MFDP.** During the summer, 80,000 Mississippi Blacks (and a handful of whites) join the MFDP. Though that does not represent any significant increase over the number who participated in the Freedom Ballot the previous Fall, now there is a formal political party, with a solid membership base, a statewide structure, and an extensive network of activists down at the grassroots level. The MFDP thus becomes the vehicle for statewide and national political action.

As is the case with all other parties, there are political conflicts within the MFDP. The NAACP remains closely allied with the national Democratic Party and at the end of the summer the national NAACP leaders are furious over the MFDP's rejection of the so-called “compromise” at the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. Moreover, SNCC's organizing work in states other than Mississippi is moving



toward independent politics and strategies that increasingly challenge and confront the Johnson administration. On the national level therefore, SNCC-NAACP relations are strained. In Mississippi, the MFDP continues to consider itself the true Democratic Party of the state, which leads it to organize an MFDP Challenge to the Mississippi members of Congress, which puts it in conflict with both Johnson and the national Democratic Party leadership.

**COFO.** Originally established to coordinate civil rights activities in the state and administer & distribute VEP grants, by the end of Freedom Summer COFO as an organization has outlived its usefulness. There is no longer any VEP grant money to divide up, so that function is gone. After Johnson's election victory in the Fall, NAACP participation in COFO dwindles away. While CORE is still active in the 4th Congressional District, most of its southern resources continue to be concentrated in Louisiana. SCLC is focusing more and more on Alabama, and SNCC's primary work in Mississippi is the MFDP. So COFO's importance as a coalition of national organizations diminishes. Over the next year, the MFDP and the Delta Ministry supplant COFO as the main organizations for grassroots action and organizing in the state.

**SNCC & CORE Staff.** The brutal violence, the stark contrast between the Federal government and the media's concern for the safety of white college kids and their indifference to Black suffering, the refusal of Washington to offend segregationists by upholding Black rights, and above all the white liberal establishment's betrayal of the MFDP at the Democratic Convention embitters and radicalizes most of the field staff. After Atlantic City, integration as a goal, appealing to the conscience of the nation as a method of change, and nonviolence as a strategy are all called into question by more and more of the veteran organizers. SNCC Chair John Lewis later identified Atlantic City (and by extension, Freedom Summer) as "*the turning point.*" Going forward, both SNCC and CORE begin to move in new directions, away from

integration, away from nonviolence, towards Black self-reliance and Black Power. And the human cost of the Summer Project on the organizing staff is high. In the words of Kwame Ture:

*"[By the end of the summer] the staff, as Mrs. Hamer would say, 'was all wore out.' All of us were physically exhausted from the sheer burden of all the organizing work. Many more of us than we knew then were totally burned out. Emotionally scarred, spiritually drained from the constant tension, the moments of anger, grief, or fear in a pervading atmosphere of hostility and impending violence."*

**Volunteers.** The out-of-state volunteers are profoundly affected by Freedom Summer. Over and over, they report the same reactions:

*It was the most intense moment of my life.  
It changed my life, I'm still here [in Mississippi]  
[It was] the most creative and powerful time of my life.  
It was the most meaningful time of my life, and the activities  
I am most proud of.  
[It] changed my life in so, so many ways — all for the better.  
In many ways it set me on a path continues to this day.  
My brief time in the movement changed and has guided my  
life and how I try to be in the world.  
[It] was a significantly defining experience in my life.  
The greatest public contribution I have ever made...  
The experience has continued to shape my life ...  
Life was never the same after being in Mississippi and I carry  
my experiences with me to this day.  
[It] changed the course of my life. I became committed to  
working for a different and better world, one with racial  
equality, economic justice, and peace.*

The personal, emotional, and political metamorphosis experienced by the volunteers is enormous. Most obvious are changes in their political awareness of poverty, systemic racism, widespread injustice, media bias, and government

complicity in oppression and exploitation — not just by the state of Mississippi, but by the Federal government as well. For most of the volunteers, Freedom Summer is the beginning of a lifetime commitment to social activism in a variety of forms. *"I became political in Mississippi. I began to see the world in strictly political terms,"* explained one volunteer. The volunteers who leave Mississippi join protest movements, run for office, become community organizers, and engage in humanitarian work; many dedicate themselves to ongoing struggles against racism, colonialism, and the Vietnam War, for women's liberation, student rights on campus, the environment, economic justice, and a host of other causes great and small.

**Staying On.** Not all the volunteers leave at the end of summer. More than 80 — most white, some Black — cancel their college plans and remain in the Freedom Movement. Some stay in Mississippi working with the local people they have come to love, others become activists in the broader struggle, moving from place to place as circumstances require. For the most part, those who stay are welcomed by the local Black communities who value their dedication and service and also the access northerners provide to skills, resources, and political support that are desperately needed. But SNCC and CORE are ill-prepared to absorb a large influx of mostly northern, mostly white, activists into what had previously been overwhelmingly Black and southern organizations. Black-white and North-South cultural tensions escalate, causing internal friction and conflict.

**Down at the Grassroots.** The social revolution and organizing work at the community level does not halt at the end of the summer. In counties and local communities, a variety of post-summer activities are undertaken. Some are continuations of the Summer Project, others are aimed at controlling the poverty program in Mississippi — or at least gaining pieces of it for local endeavors. SNCC & CORE staff and volunteers who stay in the state continue working on voter registration, building the MFDP, local political action,

freedom schools and community centers. And going forward, new ideas and activities emerge including coops, ASCS elections, Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) which is the state's Headstart program, the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union, and other efforts.

See the “History & Timeline”  
Civil Rights Movement Veterans website ([www.crmvet.org](http://www.crmvet.org))  
for descriptions and analyses of other Freedom Movement  
events and struggles.