

SELECTED ENTRIES FROM THE DIARY OF JACK MINNIS*

May 8, 1963...He[Wiley Branton]was suggesting that we needed to recount the registrations for the first fiscal year because he wanted us to have made as good a showing as possible. I[Jack Minnis, herein]told him that I had relied strictly upon those enumerations which the agencies had sent to us and that I had felt that we could not safely say that persons had been registered simply on the word of NAACP and SCLC staff people. I further said I thought it would be a good lesson for the agencies to not get the kind of credit they wanted—maybe this would teach them a lesson about reporting. He was more concerned about its also being a sanction against us—making us look ineffective. I told him I thought maybe we needed to take a bit of blame if it was coming to us because if we didn't there wasn't much likelihood we'd correct the errors that caused the deficiencies. He didn't take kindly to this. He had talked with Patton in his office yesterday and had hiked the NAACP figures from what had been reported to us on Patton's word that the registration in several of their programs had been higher than our reports indicated. I again cautioned him that we were passing up a good opportunity to discipline the agencies and thereby enhance the research possibilities of the project by ensuring better reporting. Then he told me what he had never before made explicit. He said that everybody concerned with the project, [i.e., the Voter Education Project], including the donors[the Taconic and Field Foundations, the Stern Family Fund, and others, all of whom were Democratic in nature], SRC[the Southern Regional Council, Inc.], and the Kennedy Administration, realized that the research angle was just a gimmick to get tax exemption and that nobody was at all interested in such things as methods and techniques but in getting people registered. He said that the donors had been critical of the project because it was not operating in areas where registration was easy...

It was at this point he told me that[Stephen]Smith had asked him in the meeting last night for an estimate of how many people had been registered. He[Branton]asked me what I thought about it and I told him I thought somewhere around 100,000. He said he had told Smith, with proper qualifications, around 105,000. He said Smith asked him how much he would need to be really effective between now and the presidential election of '64. He told Smith\$750,000. He said he had told Smith that he would handle this money without participation by the big agencies. He said both Roy Reuther[Walter Reuther's brother] and Richard Scammon[of the Democratic National Committee] passionately argued that the Democrats could be well served by non-partisan efforts in the South because 93% of Southern Negroes would vote Democratic automatically. Smith had complained that in some areas in the North (New Jersey was mentioned)they(meaning the Kennedys I take it) had put in big money for registration drives and had been unable to achieve any results. He said Scammon stressed to Smith that Wiley's[Branton] project had solved that problem through its reporting system. He said Smith asked him who his fund raiser was, and Wiley told him Stephen Currier at Taconic. He said Smith said he was going to see Currier. Wiley said that Smith was thinking of getting his "friends" to put up some money. I took this to mean the labor people and probably also the foundations friendly to the Kennedys. This probably explains the reluctance of the Rockefellers and Fords to put money into VEP.

* The following entries are a transcription the writer made from Minnis' diary in January 1966; all additions made by the writer are in square brackets.

May 9, 1963...Wiley at lunch told me a bit more about the meeting in Washington. He said that Phil Weightman told Smith that he sure had a tough time explaining to his people about why the Justice Department couldn't do any more for the Negroes in the South. Smith told him he should tell that to the Attorney General. Weightman said, well, since you're in the family, I thought you'd probably be seeing him before I do. Wiley said this made Smith visibly angry.

I asked Wiley what he thought about the legal possibility of the Justice Department arresting persons like the Holmes and Rankin [Counties in Mississippi] sheriffs and charging them under the civil rights act, whether or not they thought they could get a conviction and just letting the arrests serve as harassment in the same way the sheriffs are harassing Negroes. He said he didn't think it probable that J[ustice]D[epartment] would be willing to do that for political reasons. I asked him why, if the FBI and JD could ignore criminal procedure in spy, communist, labor and rackets cases it couldn't just as well ignore it in civil rights cases. He said he didn't feel like he could suggest such a procedure, though he said if he were doing it that's the first thing he'd do. He said that a month or so ago he had suggested in Washington that a slow down on Federal money going into Mississippi might help, but received no encouragement. He said that so far as he knew the only thing that the administration had to fear in Mississippi was [Sen. James O.] Eastland's power in the [U.S.] Senate. I suggested this could be countered effectively by executive authority over the money and he agreed. Then I asked why the Kennedys didn't proceed to intimidate the authorities in Mississippi and he said he supposed because they just didn't care. They figure they've got the Negro vote served up so they are just not interested in really getting on the ball about enforcing the civil rights act...

He said he is thinking more and more of the advisability of stopping the spending of money in the hard resistance areas, because there is so little registration to show for it. This seems to be a further development of the attitudes I mentioned yesterday about going all out for quantitative results.

May 10, 1963...Three things today that got me in the viscera and another that merely needs to be in the record. The last first. Wiley said today that he is more convinced than ever that we should cut back heavily on support for programs in hard-core resistance areas. His reasoning is that (1) we have no results to show in a quantitative sense (this curiously contradicts his insistence that Greenwood [Mississippi] was a great victory for the civil rights movement—he took sharp issue yesterday when George McMillan called him about the Post story and said he was going to conclude the Greenwood program was a failure) and (2) that there is no end to the expense in the hard-core areas once we get involved—that is, when the kids go into the areas and spend a month or six weeks then they invariably feel that they can't pull out and leave the folks alone with the white problems the kids have helped create. I mentioned this to Jim in a conversation this evening and he seemed to think this was pressure coming from the Kennedys because this voter registration movement has backfired on them and caused them more trouble than they ever anticipated. It could be that the pressure Wiley is getting from the donors (he never specifies them by name) to spend more money in easy areas comes from the same sources. There is question in my mind whether Wiley is being used by them, or whether he

2

is cooperating with them in cutting back activity in the hard-core areas. He is capable of putting up this kind of front. Maybe history will tell. Oh—one more thing before the visceral matters—Wiley hinted darkly this morning that big things were in the wind—I asked what he was talking about—he said he was not at liberty to specify—I said "Shiiiiiiiit." This afternoon he said with that mysterious air that I could read the 2nd section of the 14th Amendment. I suspect that means that Justice is about to file some kind of action in federal court to reduce Mississippi's representation in the House—Wiley's brother Leo expressed some interest in such an action when he was here last fall so it may be coming from him or from the [National] Lawyer's Guild rather than Justice. And one more record fact—I finished today typing the program for the...

May 15, 1963...Then this morning John Doar [of the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice] called Wiley and wanted Wiley to try to stop a student demonstration in Holly Springs, Mississippi [the location of the Negro Rust College], where, he understood, they were going to sit-in at a restaurant. Wiley told Doar that the only people he had anything to do with in Mississippi were the voter registration workers and he was sure they wouldn't have anything to do with a sit-in. He suggested that Doar call Bob Moses and Doar said he had but that Bob had simply said that he didn't know anything about it. Doar said that the department had been negotiating with some white lawyers in Holly Springs and with some Negro leaders for some time and he was afraid that a demonstration would destroy the progress made. Wiley asked him what Negro leaders they were dealing with and he said something about a school principal and a preacher. Wiley told him that he would have to get to the student leaders if he wanted to influence the students, because the leaders he was talking about were leaders without followers. He told Doar that there was nothing he could do to stop the demonstration. He gave him the same treatment he had gotten from [Burke] Marshall and seemed to take great glee in the telling of it...

May 21, 1963...As I was leaving this evening, Wiley told me that Matt Reece, deputy chairman of the Democratic National Committee, had called him today and asked him if he could use \$100,000 for voter registration work, and if the committee could pick the states in which it would be used. I understood that Wiley told him yes. Wiley repeated to me the story of how the committee figures, via Dick Scammon, that they'll get 93% of any new voters, so they can afford to spend some money on a non-partisan registration effort. I asked Wiley if they would also be interested in the Congressional races. I mentioned the four districts in North Carolina with a majority of Negroes. He said that he was interested in Congressional races, and that the committee would not have to know everything about what was done with the money and how it was spent. I cautioned him that if he took the money from the committee, he would, in his own interest, have to produce. His reply to this was that the committee was not interested in the high-resistance areas, that all they were concerned about was getting some Democrats registered, particularly in the Carolinas and Virginia. Wiley said he was particularly interested in the 6th Congressional District in South Carolina, because of the seat of MacMillan on the District of Columbia committee in the House. The really difficult thing is, and I didn't mention this to Wiley, that if they get plenty of folks registered in the easy areas, there is no guarantee that the folks will vote. These crash programs just don't produce involved voters, even though they produce

4

quantity in registration. I'm not going [to go] into [it] here at great length, but I think it important to sketch the outline I proposed to Randolph today for the present objective situation. I see automation as eroding the concern of the capitalists for continuing the Negro in a state of subjection, and continuing the agitation of race prejudice. I suspect a growing indifference to the Negro and the poor white since their labor power is becoming less important. I would expect them to overlook the political potential of these two groups. However, if this is the true picture, this is only part of what's needed objectively. The people, white and black, do not have the information necessary for them to make intelligent political [decisions]...

June 19, 1963...Matt Reece, Democratic National Committee deputy chairman in charge of voter registration, was in to see Wiley. WB[ranton] met him at the airport and brought him to lunch where Les [Dunbar], Vernon Jordan, [Randolph] Blackwell and I met them.

Reece talked about wanting to try to organize voter registration on a state-wide basis in the Southern states. He said that when he told the Committee chairman that he was coming to Atlanta, the Chairman told him for God's sake to be careful and not let it become public knowledge he was in town. Reece said that people on the national committee are really frightened about the South and very wary of it.

He said that he would like to know what was the cost of registration per voter in areas where there is no white resistance. We said something under a dollar. He asked if we thought it possible to get 300,000 folks (Negroes) registered in 1963 and early '64. This was, I think, clearly a hint about how much he had in mind for VEP. I judge it will probably be a 1/4 million [dollars].

He said he wanted to talk to us and look over the operation. He said the committee was looking for the most effective way to get Negroes registered and thought it would probably be to use an existing organization like VEP. WB and Les [Dunbar] jumped on that and told about our year's organizational experience. They, too, stressed the fact that we wouldn't have to give any of Reece's money to the big five [CORE, NAACP, SCLC, the National Urban League, and the Inc. Fund*], because the original commitment would not extend to money coming in after it was made. Then they sang the praises of local groups as opposed to the big five.

NOT A WORD OF CONCERN FOR RESEARCH WAS MENTIONED.

Reece said at one point that he wanted to make his observations and that then he would go back and report to the committee and to Bobby Kennedy. He talked about "substantial" financial assistance.

He seemed to be aware of the fallacies that are often claimed by organizations and mentioned himself the difficulty of determining just how many folks are registered as a result of a drive.

He spent most of the afternoon closeted with Wiley and Les in Wiley's office. Unfortunately I know nothing of what went on over there or what was said. For some strange reason, after he left, Wiley closed his office door for some time. That was the first time I had

*The NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Inc., or possibly SNCC; it is not clear which group is intended as the fifth of the big five.

seen him do that since I've been here when he was alone in the office. He did not make phone calls—I know because I watched the light buttons on my instrument. This may have had no connection with the visit of Reece. On the other hand, it was very puzzling.

Reece took samples of our reporting forms and procedures and wanted us to get copies of pictures of some of the techniques used in the Huntsville[Alabama]project.

He had wanted to take some of our files with him to the hotel to read overnight, but WB told him we did not permit the files to go out of our office, but that he was welcome to read anything he wanted to here. It seems clear that he came here with the intention of looking us over before a final grant is made. I regard his visit and his attitude as directly connected with Wiley's visit to Washington some weeks ago when there was a conference with the president's brother-in-law.

WB got a wire from the President requesting his presence at a White House conference of lawyers (prominent members of the bar, not civil rights lawyers) on June 21. Les is invited to a conference of civil rights leaders on June 22. Wiley was very proud of his invite. And he was particularly eager to observe the attitudes of the prominent white southern lawyers whom he knows will be there. He said he was delighted for this reason that he was invited as a lawyer rather than as a civil rights leader.

July 10, 1963...WAB[ranton] then told about the Mt. Beulah business with SNCC. It seems that [Bill] Higgs [a white lawyer, connected with the civil rights movement who was born in Mississippi and was driven out of the state for helping the movement] of SNCC promoted this school for adult political education at the Mt. Beulah, Mississippi, property of a Baptist group. The idea was to attract Negroes from all over Mississippi and give them a week or so of training in political action so they could go back home and become political leaders and organizers. Jim Dombrowski of SCEF [the Southern Conference Education Fund] had been contacted by Higgs for money and JD* went to Mrs. Stern [of the Stern Family Fund; see above] with the plea. Mrs. Stern wrote WB suggesting that \$5,000 of the SFF (Stern Family Fund) grant to VEP be turned over to SNCC for this purpose. WB demurred on the ground that VEP's agreement with IRS [Internal Revenue Service] would be breached by doing so. Actually he remarked today... WB is not at all sure that SNCC has the maturity or the personnel to carry out such a project. He seems to doubt that the premises of the organization's philosophy are sufficiently realistic from a political organizational view point. Anyhow, when WB demurred, he heard no more until a check came in the mail yesterday or last Friday from the SFF in the amount of \$1,500 with no indication of what it was for except that it was noted to be in addition to the commitment SFF made, about some \$60,000 per year for two years for VEP. It does not seem to be clear at this time what WB is going to do with the \$1,500, though he appears adamant about keeping VEP away from the SNCC Mt. Beulah operation.

* This refers here to Jim Dombrowski and not the Justice Department [JD].