

Interview

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White; male
CORE staff member

Q: It's much easier to talk about the movement and maybe we could start with that. Is there any particular reason why you're working, say, rather than SNCC?

A: Well, the reason is that when I went down to Mississippi last summer I happened to volunteer to go into a project in the fourth district and when I decided to stay I was able to put on CORE's payroll so that was that's purely fortuitous.

Q: Do you feel that there's any kind of specific differences down there?

A: Well, I would say that in the state of Mississippi one's work is not conditioned at all by being a member or being paid by CORE rather than SNCC.

Q: Had you worked with CORE at all in the North?

A: I hadn't, no. I was working at Princeton where I was doing graduate work with the Princeton Association for Human Rights and before that I had been involved in kind of free lance picketing and so on. I demonstrated and picketed.

Q: What was the extent of your involvement in civil rights before this time? How much picketing had you done?

A: Well, no more than going around with fair housing resolutions and this sort of thing. But it certainly wasn't, you know, an all-absorbing commitment that I had.

Q: Was it competing with other kinds of commitments?

A: Well, primarily with trying to earn enough to keep going and my school work.

Q: What was your field of study?

A: Philosophy.

Q: In both undergraduate and graduate.

A: That's right.

Q: Where did you do your undergraduate work?

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A: At Brooklyn College.

Q: And were you in graduate school when you - you were in graduate school when you went down.

A: Yes, I was. I had completed my first year of graduate school at Princeton when I went down to Mississippi last summer.

Q: Can you remember the circumstances when you first decided to go down?

A: I'm afraid not. I think the idea - once I heard about the summer project the idea very slowly took root without my realizing it until one day I was talking about summer plans and I said well I'm going to Mississippi.

Q: Was there any pressure from anyone to do this or not to do this?

A: No, not really.

Q: Did you have any friends that were also going down?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did you talk much about this with them?

A: Yeah, we talked quite a bit about going down.

Q: Would you consider these your closest friends in any way?

A: Well, close friends. No, I wouldn't say my closest friends.

Q: Do you remember any time when you really had to make a choice? You know, yes or no for the summer.

A: No, no.

Q: Was there a lot of rallies or orientation type of meetings at Princeton early in that year or was there a lot of information being distributed about...?

A: Well, not terribly much. We did have one fellow come up from Southwest Georgia who'd been working with SNCC, who was a Princeton student on leave, by the way. And he spent a couple of days on campus and talked to people and interviewed people so there wasn't terribly much organizing done, really.

Q: How many students went down from Princeton?

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A: I think about, something like twenty, in varying periods of time.

Q: So you went down the summer of '64 and can you say any thing about your summer experience in terms of your longer life-time commitment?

A: Well, I'd say that whatever reasons I went down and certainlythe reason I decided to stay was because I felt that something profoundly different in American politics was going on in Mississippi and in the South. And for the first time I saw a way to make theory and practice - to make that connection for my self and I was excited by this prospect. That's really why I decided to stay.

Q: Did you go down with the idea of political, you know, with that kind of political motive?

A: No, I didn't understand the movement well enough to see that those implications were somehow imbedded, you know, that those implications were imbedded in the movement. I didn't understand it well enough to see that.

Q: Well what sorts of feelings did you originally have when you first decided to go down during the summer?

A: Well, curiosity, excitement, and you know, more or less a automatic commitment to the idea that that was right and that the system had to be destroyed. But it was kind of an unreflexing commitment that I had carried with me ever since I can remember.

Q: Let's see, could we go back to your high school years a little bit or just about your family. Did they have that same kind of commitment? That is, were you raised in that kind of a...?

A: Well, I was raised in a family in which the shadow of Nazi Germany was pretty long. My parents left Germany in the late thirties and many of our people never left. And were destroyed by the Nazis. So that's an experience we lived with, but as far as commitment on the part of my parents to civil rights is concerned, there really hasn't been any. There wasn't any.

Q: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

A: No.

Q: Did you first get involved with civil rights when you were in high school or...?

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A: Yeah, I guess I did, you know.

Q: What were the conditions?

A: Well, the conditions were that I became interested in radical politics. And being in New York, even in those days and that was in the McCarthy period, remember? I'm much older than I look. Even in those days radicals could get together and do something - at least talk in New York. I imagine that was impossible most other places. Of course most of the places didn't have radicals at all.

Q: I guess not.

A: I came from Nebraska. And in those high school years I discovered I guess the intellectual - that there was in fact an intellectual problem and body of material on the race problem in this country. Something that I hadn't been aware of before. I was quite young, and that led to contact with Negroes and an interest in the movement.

Q: Was this mixed in with other radical political feelings - you know, economic and...?

A: Well, yes at the time, I guess, what I understood I was very pro-Soviet - very strongly pro-Soviet and very much involved in a kind of structural criticism of American society. You know, as much as I understood it at that time. I was very angry then. I hated school besides.

Q: Were your friends in high school integrated? You know, you mentioned...

A: Not in high school, no.

Q: Do you have close friends - close Negro friends before you went down to Mississippi?

A: Just one.

Q: Was he or she favorable toward civil rights?

A: Yes.

Q: I consider that sort of an academic kind of question. Did you have exposure in high school to civil rights kind of workers and leaders?

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A: No, there wasn't really anything like that in the old days, and that was 1951, '52, and '53.

Q: Let's see then - well in college I guess the movement just sort of grew then. Did you get in contact with the early freedom riders?

A: Well, my contact with the movement was as I said before kind of peripheral because I was busy going to school and trying to stay alive. And during those years - except for an occasional picketing and so on, I wasn't really emotionally involved with the movement.

Q: Were you independent of your parents?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Well then so you went down to Mississippi. Can you remember the kinds of experiences that stand out during your early weeks, early months in Mississippi?

A: Yeah, it's not that many that they are very... I went to Mississippi - I taught for the first half of the summer and I went to Mississippi in August, the fourth or fifth, and I arrived, I left on the day that the bodies of the three civil rights workers were found in Philadelphia. And I arrived in Meridian on the day of the burial and memorial service. And that was my first experience was that memorial service at Meridian which was as moving an experience as I've had during the past year. And I went to orientation at at Tougaloo College and it was announced there that COREFO was going to organize, was going to open a project in Philadelphia and they asked for volunteers and I volunteered to go and we moved into Philadelphia on August 14th and for the next several weeks we had a succession of incidents - very threatening but there was no overt violence. They tried to get us out but they didn't succeed. My experiences the first few weeks are very crowded with these sorts of memories.

Q: Well, when you first went down to work you weren't really aware?

A: That's right.

Q: And did you plan to come back to graduate school in the fall?

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A: Yes, I had planned to go back.

Q: What were the feelings that kept you down here rather than returning?

A: Well, as I said, I think it was the realization that radicalism no longer had to be an intellectual posture. And for the first time in a very long time, people who were really interested in changing American society fundamentally had allies in large numbers. And that seemed to me too exciting a prospect to let slip by.

Q: Do you plan to work much longer?

A: Well, I've made an indefinite commitment - an internal indefinite commitment and I'll work just as long as I feel that I can or want to.

Q: You were at the Vietnam meeting, weren't you?

A: Yes, I was, yes.

Q: Did you feel any a real sympathy towards this ...?

A: Yes, certainly. As a philosopher - as a student of philosophy, I've come to value consistency. And it seems to me that if one goes to the premises of the new radicalism in America, I think one finds a program - a very simple program really, from which a great many things follow. One of the things that follows are that adventures like the Vietnam War are immoral and that they involve decisions made by a relatively few people. And they affect the lives of us all. And it's potentially it might lead to a nuclear war.

Q: What are your feelings on the various means used by the different civil rights groups?

A: Well, I feel very strongly that even the term civil rights and the term integration implies an approach to the race question in this country that seems to be completely unrealistic. That is, that the - it seems to me to be impossible that twenty million Negroes should become parts of American society. And should achieve social justice without fundamentally altering the nature of our society. And I take that to be a very broad statement but in fact that seems to be a fairly good way to characterize different approaches through the question of social justice for the Negro.

Q: How do you feel about the difference between long term and short term projects?

A: Well, I mean I don't fight of this thing.

Q: Well let's say the difference between the NAACP philosophy, the long term education and that kind of advancement, or the direct kind of community organization.

A: Well, I think the community organization is a long time approach. It is perhaps the most far seeing approach and that the approach of the more moderate middle class organizations is an approach which tends to emphasize ways in which middle class Negroes can become more middle class. You know ways in which they can become whiter Americans and they ignore the question of 18 million Negroes who are poor and many of whom are disenfranchised, in fact, or by law.

Q: What do you feel about the possibilities of success?

A: Well, that would depend on how you define success. I think I've come to regard success very much a question of individual worth and I've seen so many people come along since I've been in Mississippi, in Philadelphia - especially the people I know, my friends in Philadelphia and how far they've come and how aware they've become of their world and of themselves and of their powers. And this is the way in which we must measure success because what we value is the individual human being.

Q: How does the maintenance of the various civil rights organizations as such plan in say alternate definitions definitions of success? You know for some the definition of success is the movement. I realize that may be somewhat nebulous, but I think it may be somewhat different than, you know, personal growth.

A: Well, again I'm afraid I don't quite understand the question.

Q: That is that for some the movement is tied very close to kinds of goals - that is, voter registration or ...

A: Well, I mean but why? But why should voter registration be a goal or? I mean obviously in the end it has to have some relations to the quality of an individual life.

Q: Well, I guess the thing that's sort of bothering me is - has nothing to do with the interview - but it's the kind of dualism between being goal oriented and beingoriented.

A: Well, I think that it's inevitable that if you're involved with political action, you've got to be program oriented, you've got to be goal oriented. But what happens all too often is that your commitment to people sometimes becomes displaced upon the commitment to program. And then in the achievement of a particular goal, you know, you may completely forget what that goal means in terms of individual lives. I think that happens.

Q: Is there any danger of that kind of thing being too successful?

A: No, no. That is a lot of political organizations have become almost that way. You know sort of the classic liberal dilemma of you give a guy the materials, you know, and he becomes a human - you give him education and economics. I'm really trying to work this out in my own mind. This kind of - dual or paradox in a way, but that you have to be goal oriented to be - just to keep going.

A: Well, it seems to me that a major problem in American society for many years has been that we haven't been willing to face the problem of human happiness and the quality of human life as it relates to the social-political-economic setting in which that life is led. And so we turn inward and comfort and convenience become principle values in our society. I think that this is manifested in the irritation which even friends of the civil rights movement feel toward any kind of inconvenience that the movement causes people. And in literature one of the big things in the past years is how to find salvation in marriage and happiness, you know, love and this sort of thing and psychoanalysis which is essentially another way of dealing with one's problems by turning inward and that for at last we seem to make that connection again between the individual and the quality of his life and the kind of society he lives in.

Q: How do you feel about the future or let's see...this seems to me a really radical, well it's a connection that's been made no where in the United States except in Mississippi, and would you say that's being carried on in the setting up of a political party down here - the FDP?

A: Well, I would hope that it is. I think that the FDP means that - that the people of Mississippi are involved in something now which is leading them to raise more profound questions about the nature of our society and I'd say that if this sort of thing can keep on and if FDP doesn't be-

come another hardened institution of whatever degree of power. You know it can be very much the instrument of people in this country begin again to make that connection between individual life and the political forum.

Q: Tell me, why did you come to Washington for this lobby?

A: Oh, wellwas coordinating the lobby and I worked together in Philadelphia and we became pretty good friends and Ralph asked me to come up here to me one of the people here to lobby. I must confess I've never spent any time in Washington. I was anxious to come up there and since I've been here, I have learned an awful lot I think about the tone of politics at the scene of the place in which the decisions get made.

Q: Encouraging things or discouraging...?

A: Well, Washington is a whore and one can.....strike back..

Q: Is that right? Why should that be?

A: Well, I guess I'm kind of middle class. I don't know it's public media, I don't know it's a perfectly good English for the screw. Well anyway Washington is a whore and one can become very easily seduced into thinking that what politics is all about is the give and take between a relatively small group of people with a lot of power who are alternately stabbing each other in the back and, you know, exchanging favors. And this kind of thing is very corrupting and I think one after exposure to politics from the Washington angle, people got to know the - go back to the field and work with people again.

Q: What do you think of the students that come down? Have you been working much with students this summer.

A: I'm not sure. I guess every one of the projects haven't really gotten started except the Jackson thing. Well, I came up before the students came down really and I had been working students before I came up here. And I think that there has that many people including myself feel a certain reluctance in opening up to students. Somehow the road that I traveled for instance has been a very long one in terms of where I was last summer and where I am now and a very exhausting one. And I feel somehow unable really to open up and I'm not in any position to really give. It's partly because I'm convinced that there's very little that I can give by talking to people at this point. The only way that people can come to understand what Mississippi is and what the movement is is to go down there and live and learn. And even then there's a chance that one won't, but it seems to me that that's the

only way and it's very difficult to talk. And I know there are a lot of kids who come here have worked with SDS and these kids have already gotten some picture of what it is that's being done. But I guess I'm guilty of the kind of intellectual laziness or emotional laziness as well.

Q: Well, I sort of agree with you though I'm years behind you in experience. I think that experience is not always verbal. Do you feel that the students you were with last summer - you know is there some correlation between having that kind of experience and staying and not having it and coming back?

A: Well, this is like you say except that my experience is that the people who stay are most often the people who have radical politics and that those kids who come down and leave at the end of six or eight weeks in Mississippi go back pretty much as they came down. Which is I guess pretty much convinced that with a few structural changes here and there that things are pretty good in the good old U.S. of A. And that what they've added to their lives is a stock of anecdotes about what they saw and what they did in Mississippi. But that, you know, it's the radicals who stay.

Q: Does this discourage you in a way, you know speaking in terms of - well do you feel that the civil rights movement in the South will or will not be too much in terms of carrying it back North if the radicals do stay?

A: Well I think that the impact of the movement is going to be increasingly be national - in the sense that the problem of race in this country is deepening in our own eyes. It's becoming a problem of poor people, of dispossessed people, of people who have no say in the way their lives are lead. And I think the problem of poverty really is the key that's going to lead to a rethinking of movement issues in national terms.

Q: How do you think about say Mississippi as in a way a school?

A: Yeah, I think that that's very apt - that someone somewhere had recently said that. It was recently observed somewhere that the Southern movement is developing a whole new professional group - a group of community organizers. And I think that within a short time most of the white people who are organizing in the South will probably no longer be needed, and then the question of what they do with the experience that they have is very much to the point. I think

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that if those people are interested in building radical politics they are going to have to go out and start working with white people.

Q: Do you see any elements of this is the - talk about the peace movement and the civil rights movement and the labor movement?

A: Well, as far as the peace movement goes, I think probably the people who are involved in the peace movement are generally going to be sympathetic to the goals of the civil rights movement, but they direct their energies elsewhere. The problem I think has to be looked at in terms of reaching those people in this country who are not involved in any kind of dissident organizing effort. And as far as a coalition of civil rights and labor is concerned, certainly there's very little chance I think in building a bridge between organizations. There may be some program-- atically of tying people in labor with movements, of various movements - civil rights, peace, and so on. But it certainly can't be through the union establishment. I mean unions are one of the kinds of institutions that would be our most pernicious in our society that I feel - let me say that - that I feel is pernicious.

Q: Where do you see economic reforms coming from?

A: Well, this is a problem that puzzles me at the present time. I'm very much absorbed with this very question. We don't have economic power. And it seems to be by definition we don't have economic power. The people with whom I work and the people with whom I want to work - all the people who don't have economic power. And that the set of institutions which in this country exist I think primarily for the perpetuation of a certain kind of economic organization so that your question of political and economic power is very much the same sort of question. But where people, or how people can politically effect the structure of economic power in this country, I don't really see my way clear to answer that. I don't really know. That's a very big question.

Q: Earlier in discussing the role of Mississippi as a school, you indicated that the impact would be in terms of the what you might call professionals down there. What about the people who are touched only secondarily by the movement, like the students who go and come, the people who are - work with the FDP for a while and come to this lobby?

A: Well, that's a question that I find hard to answer because I don't know how much of what I think is really important in the movement - can be absorbed in six to eight weeks. And what one can bring back - see one can bring back to one's community like I said before a stock of stories and anecdotes which will suggest to people that Mississippi is a pretty horrible place to live and let's money or food or clothing down there. But to the extent that the Mississippi experience doesn't raise serious questions in the student's own mind as to the country as a whole and Mississippi is by no means, you know, another nation. To an extent those serious questions aren't raised in the student's mind. And he's not going back to his community questioning its institutions and its way of doing business as usual. And to that extent I think that a Mississippi summer is a diversion, you know, a little.... and not a - is not a what it potentially might be.

Q: Empirically do you give any estimate - you know, you made a certain division - the radicals and those that are - are any of those that go back, do you feel that they've got the thing out of the summer experience that is most important to this kind of...?

A: Um, I suspect in general not. Now it may be different this summer because there are students coming this summer as I said before who worked in other organizations with other groups and were involved in the Vietnam thing. And these people already come equipped with a frame of reference with which to interpret the Mississippi experience. But that it takes an awfully long time for the people to really begin to understand what's going on Mississippi.

Q: And that kind of time, in what ways do you see that it has to be spent? That is, what kinds of experience can enable one to go further and make the Mississippi experience worth something more? Is it radical politics or...?

A: At that point I can't say except that that's no longer a political question. I think that's very much a question of human beings relating to one another. And that the impact of radical politics in Mississippi or anywhere else is ultimately the way in which you talk to people, the way in which you relate to people, the sorts of things you can see growing in another human being's soul. And that's the final - I mean that's the ultimate, you know, kind of test. I mean it's not political by any means. It's just human.

Q: Do you think that students should continue to be used in Mississippi?

A: No, I don't think I do. I suspect that Mississippi is at the point now where all the possible organizers it could use, it has in its own communities. And I think that there are enough people in Mississippi who would work with the COMFO and with FDP over the last year or so to satisfy the needs of the state. Now the question I guess arises then why are students going down? And I think here the question is self-confidence comes in. I think that many Mississippi are still not convinced that they can do what white students from the North can do. And I mean to some extent that's true. There are certain skills that students possess, certain skills that they can exercise without thinking. They are very difficult for Mississippi Negroes, you know, to start with. Something as natural as getting up and chairing a meeting which is a very difficult thing for a person to do who's never done that before, who's never seen that done before. So the question of self-confidence I think is pivotal here. But I do believe that within a very short time Mississippi will have a favorable balance of organizers and can start exporting organizers. On this point I feel very strongly because I'm convinced that there are now people in the Negro community that are in Mississippi with very little formal schooling who know more about politics in this country than anyone - black or white - most everywhere in this country, anyplace else in this country. Negroes in Mississippi are becoming very very sophisticated at this business - more knowledgable about how things are done in this country, and I hope to see Mississippi send its people to Chicago, to Detroit, to New York. Also to work with Negro communities and to work with whites too. I think it's possible and desirable.

Q: I remember reading an article just a couple of days ago in Dissent about a group of McComb Negroes who went out to Harlem and the Harlem Negroes I guess are coming back? Do you know anything about....?

A: No, I do know that a group of kids from McCome went up to Harlem and visited Harlem - put on a play that they had written and produced. And came back to Mississippi realizing that the alternative leaving the South and going to the North to find a better way of life was one that is pretty much closed. But they're probably better off to stay and fight.

Q: I think it was sort of an interesting thing that in this article that the Harlem kids were the ones that really wanted to fight, and the McCome Negroes were very non-violent.

A: Oh, I didn't mean fight physically.

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Q: For the struggle.

A: Yeah.

Q: How do you think - what do you think of the future of non-violence? in the movement?

A: Well, frankly I think the issue of non-violence in the movement is pretty much irrelevant. That is I don't think that people are going to be moved by appeals to non-violence. I think in the South increasingly you find Negroes thinking in terms of self-defense and certainly in the North you're not going to appeal to anybody except the white folks by preaching non-violence. That's just a, you know, that's just a fact of life. And I for one have strong feelings about what this means. It seems to me that this is a very healthy sign that Negroes in the South are thinking in terms of self-defense, are beginning to express their anger and beginning to direct it against the legitimate objects of that anger. I mean it seems to me that non-violence was one more way of preventing Negroes from expressing their feelings about white people. And that's a very big problem from childhood on. Kids are taught that they ought not to express their feelings about white people, particularly if they're angry. And what happens to those feelings, I guess, you know psychoanalysts tell us that they either turn it against themselves or turn it against some other person or persons who are not, you know, potentially dangerous. And what this means is that the Negro is ...with himself in his community because he can't express that anger that he feels. And I think in terms of psychic health one of the best things to tell people in the South is that people are saying we're just not going to take it anymore, and we're going to express our anger. And we know that we're angry at the white man and we're going to express it toward the white man. I think that's very healthy.

Q: I haven't discussed this with very many people but you know, I'm from Stanford, you know, this kind of thing. It's really bad that non-violence is losing out, you know, that this is just too dangerous a thing to work with.

A: Well, I don't know. In terms of the philosophy, I think that non-violence is losing out - as a tactic I still think that people pretty much on non-violence. And this is a necessity. I mean when I go down to the Neshoba County Court House and there are 40 or 50 white policeman and several hundred white folks standing around in the courthouse and somebody pokes me in the ribs, I'm certainly not going to haul off and hit him. I mean it's crazy. But someone comes and drives by my house and puts a shotgun shot through my

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window I mean, you know, just don't tell me not to shoot back.

Q: Well, if we could go back just a little bit to the issue of students and their continued participation, do you see anything else that students can work in to get that kind of experience that?

A: Well, I think that one of the important goals of this lobby would suggest to students coming here that the problem with Mississippi is the problem of America, and that in their own communities there's lots of work to be done - a lot of unfinished business. The Vietnam issue is one, certainly the most prominent issue at this point. Another, I think, is going to work with white people as SDS is doing in the various ERAP projects around the country. Still others are agitating for university reform in one's own school. And not just, you know, women's hours and that sort of thing, but to begin to ask such questions as who determines what courses are taught and why students don't have some say in what courses are taught. And why is it that most of the universities in this country have become, you know, small pentagons. All of these issues which are really profound. And I think that these are things that students can meaningfully work on in their communities. And, you know, become inside agitators for a while.