

II. Al Lowenstein - 11/7/65

JM: My first question is, what do you think brought about the reasons for entering into the freedom vote in 1963?

AL: No other form of protest was available that had any chance of success. The NAACP poured in an immense amount of money for bond money for people who were arrested in demonstrations, and there was no more money for bond. All the other forms of protest were ineffective in Mississippi because the totality of police authority was used to prevent any challenge to the established order. So things that might work in other communities - picketing and mass marching, or registration programs - simply had no applicability to the Mississippi situation.

JM: Well, then, what if any success did the voter registration drives that SNCC and the voter education project tried did come off?

AL: Well, the success is not a very clear word. They had no success if by success is meant registering voters. In over a period of years there'd been - great sacrifices had been made, and there was success in building up certain community spirit in towns like Greenwood, but in terms of registering voters, in fact the voter education project money was being cut off because they weren't getting any voters registered in Mississippi; and the contention of the voter education project people was that they were only going to give money to get voters registered.

JM: Then do you feel that there was any state-wide organization of protest in confrontation with the power structure until the freedom vote came?

AL: Well, there was an organization, it was COFO, which would set up to receive the voter education project money; and there was a state NAA and there was the presence of SNCC, and some CORE people who were - groups of people were in Mississippi, but if by confronting the power structure you mean were they making any kind of a dent in the closed society, I would say that it was miniscule.

JM: Then, for what reasons was the decision to launch a freedom vote campaign decided on?

AL: Well, you mean why was that particular tactic employed? (Yes.) Well, I think maybe the genesis of it was one day when we were racking our brains in July of '63 to figure out what might be done



to revive the challenge to the white rule, and the white primary was coming up. And I felt it was inconceivable to allow the white primary to go on without some indication of dissatisfaction on the part of the Negroes, because the white contention was that the Negroes were content. And only outside agitators were not content. So I thought about the South African blacks who on the day of the elections called a day of mourning. I think that was really the first thought that we might have a day of mourning. And then it seemed silly because in South Africa you have a day of mourning because the blacks by law aren't allowed to vote, but in Mississippi they are supposed to be allowed to vote, so instead of having a day of mourning it would make better sense to have a day of voting. Well, you can tell that raises a whole host of problems, because the very concept of voting was the impossible one, and those in that atmosphere, to get carried out. And so then after the idea of having a day of voting to go along with the primary was hatched, we played with a lot of possible implementations of this idea; and at the beginning there was a number of alternative approaches that were considered and even tried. One of the first people I spoke to about this was Charles Evers, who was very enthusiastic about it, as were Ed King and some of the SNCC people, so from the beginning it was conceived as a COFO idea, not as something limited to any one civil rights group. [Now, I can illustrate the kinds of ideas that were tentatively played with by telling about one that's more or less representative. A Harvard Law student who was down there in one of those summer projects, watching television or something, had been researching Mississippi statutes, and he found a statute which provided that people who had not been allowed to register for reasons that were invalid, could vote and their ballots would be kept apart until such time as it could be adjudicated whether they had the right to vote or not, whether their denial of registration was legal. Of course this has been intended to apply to individuals who were white and who might have been the victim of some local feud or prejudice. But in Greenwood it was actually used in the first primary in that summer to get Negroes in that community where they were well organized by SNCC to go down and cast votes that were not counted, as a measure of their concern in the primary. But that missed the point, really, although it was an interesting gimmick; the votes of course weren't tallied ultimately, but the point was that in most towns the Negro community wasn't prepared to go down and try to vote. And my feeling had been that you had to give Negroes a separate ballot to vote on, where they wouldn't have to take this enormous risk. I suppose the idea of giving Negroes a separate ballot might be said to be the specific origin of the freedom vote idea.]



JM: Now, when this was done, what was envisioned as its use in the future - the purpose of it?

AL: Well, the purpose was to call attention around the country to the fact that Mississippi Negroes were not in fact satisfied with the political and other conditions in Mississippi. But nobody at that time thought beyond that - I don't think that anyone had any clear idea that this would lead to either a political party or movement that would be a formidable force within the Democratic Party. We all had hopes that it would blow - go into something big that would really catch fire, but in that kind of situation you aim at the next step, and the next step then was to get organized the state-wide protest vote, that would not take too many Negro Mississippians out on too great a limb for the value that would be received from it, which would be a limited value of calling attention to this dissatisfaction, and making the white community understand that there was not a sort of a total victory that could be justified to preserve the posture of total resistance to integration that had become fashionable to have white politicians talk about.

JM: Then at this time this was seen as a specific way of conducting the white community on a political level, and on a national level, which would really completely destroy what hadn't been possible before this - through the ballot box, because the voters weren't being registered. That this protest instrument was essentially to focus attention on the community in Mississippi and the inequalities that existed.

AL: Yes.

JM: Now, at this point, what would be the specific ways that were foreseen for people to participate further than just registering for the freedom vote?

AL: Well, I keep saying, we're not foreseeing very much. We're trying to get - forge a new kind of weapon, namely, a way to vote without risking your life and your job, and so to record a feeling without paying too high a price to expect most people to pay. And I think everybody knew that when the freedom vote started, that it would have to be developed afterwards into further channels. But I can't tell you what was going on in the minds of other people, but certainly there were no organized discussions about what to do about the freedom vote when it was finished, other than that we clearly planned to continue this form of protest, if it was successful, until Negroes were allowed to register. I suppose the nearest there was to any discussion about the future were the kinds of arguments that would occur as to whether we should attempt to expand the freedom vote into towns where there was no permanent civil rights organization, whether this was irresponsible because it would expose people to retributions after the vote was over without having the presence of civil rights workers to lend some form of organization



and perhaps even protection. So there was that kind of consideration about the consequences in the post-vote period. But - well, I suppose it's also true that there was a glimmer in the minds of some of us of the idea of following the challenge for governor with challenges for Congress and the Senate - certainly for the Democratic Convention. But there wasn't any plan of any kind beyond the election. My God, we had our hands full surviving that summer and fall from day to day, and just to handle the complexities of that operation was a pretty exhausting affair.

JM: The idea that this was a decision made by the leadership, not by the local people, or by even the staff workers in general - (What was?) The decision to have the freedom vote -

AL: No, I don't say that; I think that after our original discussions in July, with Charlie Evers and Moses, King, and Dave Dennis, I believe Tim Jenkins was down there then, and Aaron, about a week after we talked to Jackson I talked to him and he was real enthusiastic about it, and all those discussions were followed then by a lot of discussions with people, both civil rights workers and natives of Mississippi, and there was some effort made to consult all the various elements that were necessary to put it together; but the final decision to do it was made by the COFO convention that was held in Jackson, which nominated Aaron Henry for Governor. He was nominated at a convention, so in that sense the decision was made by the COFO constituency, including all its components at a state convention in Jackson at a Masonic Temple.

JM: Do you feel that the balloting in the freedom vote had an important effect upon the structuring of the civil rights movement in the state of Mississippi? And why?

AL: Well, that's such a sweeping question - obviously the - nothing was the same after as before, and therefore it had an immense effect on the structuring. I'm not sure what you mean.

JM: Well, that the people in the movement felt that this was at least one of the most efficacious ways to confront the power structure, and that they intended to use this way or some similar way to confront the power structure in the future.

AL: Well, everybody had their own interpretations, I guess. But it was clear that the response to the freedom vote was as important as the freedom vote itself in determining direction, because what in fact happened was that the white establishment panicked and, confronted with what was even - what was at most an illegal, or at least a non-countable vote, from the point of view of a legal



structure. And presumably they might have ignored it and said that it didn't mean anything; but they didn't do that, they reacted with an enormous repression of everybody involved in it. Now the key thing about this is that the repression would have probably gone pretty well unnoticed if it had been limited to Mississippi Negroes who had been repressed anyway and to a few civil rights workers who had been bearing an enormous brunt of oppression through all that period, particularly the SNCC people. But what made it different was that in the freedom vote we had these outside people involved, and when the oppression was broadened to include them, most of them being white middle-class people from institutions of national visibility, it began to produce ripples outside Mississippi. Now, I should underscore that I don't welcome this discrepancy in American thinking that makes the oppression of Mississippi Negroes and even the killing of Mississippi Negroes so much less national visibility than the repression of other - of white people from the outside world. But I'm stating just the fact now, that welcoming it or not, it was that fact that made necessary the outside intervention in Mississippi that - in Mississippi we could have gone on for years and not had any real progress, but the moment that people came in from outside, and the whites reacted the way they did, it would have been a lot smarter if they could have ignored the outside people, and ignored the freedom vote, yell fraud and whatnot afterwards, and say it was just a bunch of agitators, and they might have had somebody believe them, but what they did do instead was to move with such a heavy hand to suppress this, that it was clear to any objective person that they were terrified that Negroes, given the chance to vote, would in fact - did in fact care very much, and the charges that had been made of a police state in Mississippi were not exaggerated. In fact they were probably understated. And those two things together were what started to wake the country up, it was the fact that Negroes in Mississippi did care, and began to make clear that they cared, and that outside people when they were there were treated with such contempt and hostility and were oppressed by the law as well as by being harrassed by private citizens, that the conscience of the country had to take notice of this.

JM: Now, This would be called essentially a non-violent way of approaching the power structure, but it was a non-violent way that has engendered violence on the part of the whites. Do you feel this has, as a revolutionary phenomenon, any relation to the position that takes about violence as part of a way of overthrowing the structure, even though non-violence was the method used in Mississippi?

AL: It sounds cold-blooded to say this, but *fewer* lives were lost



in Mississippi, as tragic as it is that any were lost, than one might have expected if one were to diagnose the price of bringing profound social change to a closed, totalitarian situation. And if you preclude taking steps which might incur a violent response from the arsenal of social change, you've pretty denuded that arsenal.

the people who don't want social change are then in a position to prevent anything from being done, simply by reacting violently. So I think that we knew that there would be violence if we tried to bring about social change, and we certainly lived with that knowledge in our own lives, but we didn't solicit violence in any way, we certainly didn't goad the whites into being violent, that was their own decision. I would much have preferred to have not had to endure the violence that there was, and I'm sure everybody would have felt that way. But once the whites reacted violently, it was apparent that everybody knew that that's what they were doing, and just as the police dogs in Birmingham being seen around the country on television, had a good effect, so did the repression in Mississippi, once word got out about it.

JM: Then you feel that there is a parallel, even though non-violent action was used, to confront the power structure, between non-violence used as a method in Mississippi and the violence used to confront colonial power structures in Africa?

AL: What?

JM: This feeling that the same effect is caused - violence on the part of the whites and a questioning of their - solidity of their structure.

AL: Well, like I say, anytime you try to bring about social change you take a risk that the people who are against this change will react violently. But that's their decision.

JM: I'm not sure where to go from here. Do you have anything that we haven't discussed that you think might be vital?

AL: It would be easier to add to that if I knew what the stress of the paper was, ...

JM: Well, it's my contention that it was achieving no success for a confrontation where things were getting done, and changed, that it was necessary to move into a larger sort of confrontation. Now, if this is the case, was it - was the freedom vote just something that was hit upon, or was it something that was premeditated as to the effects it might have?



*Importation Aug 27 & after*

AL: Well, I tried to say that it was hit upon in that the initial idea that led me to think of the method that was ultimately used, was hit upon because nothing else was working, and I was just thinking about what you do when all else fails, and South Africa was just a very natural analogy to Mississippi at that time. So it was hit upon, yes, it was hit upon, if that's what you mean, it was changed in form; I don't know who first got the idea of moving it from the primary to the general election, but it was Bob Moses that first made that proposal to me, and I thought it made a lot of sense, it originally was supposed to be in the primary, but why shouldn't it be in the general election, not only Democrats are involved in that kind of protest, ... In the second primary the NAA did a kind of freedom vote in which they made the mistake of - what I thought was the mistake of limiting the candidates to the ones who were on the Democratic ballot in the runoff, namely, Paul Johnson and Culliman. And they reported that on a vote of that choice - I believe the figures they had were 28,000 for Culliman and 1,000 for Johnson, something of that kind, ... But, while sure, there was some good and some validity in doing that, even that much of a choice, my feeling was that it was not much of a choice, and that one had to have a candidate to vote for who stood for what one wanted, at least in general ways, and the NAA didn't dissent from that, eventually it was done that way, that it grew into a state convention of COFO and the nomination of Aaron, and then adding Ed King a couple of days later to the ticket, which was an important thing also because it meant that we had not a Negro party but an interracial Democratic party in the image of the national Democratic Party, in its goals to the national party because we weren't backed by a conservative southern wing in our own midst, obviously.]

JM: Rather than a - in terms of what was on the minds of SNCC workers, a confrontation with the power structure, there was the more general feeling of getting the voice of protests among the Negro community, changing the nationally believed sentiment that the Negroes didn't want to vote in Mississippi, and consequently getting national concern for the situation, which would possibly bring on a change of... Then, as far as Aaron Henry was concerned and Charlie Evers, it was really a next step rather than a grand plan.

AL: Well, you're - I think it was the next step for everybody. There wasn't any grand plan because everybody was beaten. And what you did was you figured out some way to begin to revive the movement, and I - I don't mean to say that everybody didn't have their own private ideas of what might not eventually happen, and



- in the long run, but, we were sticking a toe in a fetid pond, and one didn't know whether the toe would fall off or - you just made that step, and then you walked from there. And as I've said before, I think the significant - the significance of the freedom vote would have been much less if we hadn't had the intervention of the outside people following the white repression. So that one thing led to another: if the whites hadn't reacted by repressing, I don't think anyone can say what would have been done. We were trying it as we went along. When the whites repressed - well, you had to have some kind of way of making it visible what they were doing, and out of this necessity came the idea of recruiting people to come in and illuminate the situation. Which then led to what was before that a very vague idea, that might never have had any substance or even any major dimension of planning at all, which was this summer project. The whole idea of the outside intervention carried beyond a week or two of the campaign, into a whole push. And, I can't see that anyone today would doubt that this concept of outside intervention, and in that sense of a massive confrontation, by the country, of what these recalcitrant were doing, was instrumental in producing the civil rights acts and the other concerns that are now reflected in national attitudes toward Mississippi and Alabama, particularly, and also Louisiana and some parts of Georgia. Now, the great weapon is the outside intervention. That's the great thing that breaks the deadlock - that breaks the defeat. And that outside intervention in size and in quantity, had its embryo in the freedom vote of that fall. And that's, I think, why it's hard to say that there was a master plan, because each step was taken as it came along. The outside intervention in response to the repression; the outside intervention leading to the idea of - when we discovered how many people we could get to come down there, you must understand that wasn't known either. No one knew if we'd get two or a thousand when we started out. I didn't think that we would get very many to come down there, when I first tried Yale and Stanford, I think I was - probably we'd be lucky if we got a dozen to come right away, and it turns out we touched on a nerve that was ready to be touched on, and that produced a new thinking about what was possible to do after that, and what was desirable to do. Now then there were lots of , and that's not the story you're writing about in this paper, the problem of organizing - and agreeing to a summer project. But I do think that to receive the impact of the freedom vote and its significance you have to realize that - it not only began organizing Mississippi Negroes, which was of great significance, and giving them a sense of courage, and contact with the outside world through the arrival of outside volunteers, it also really was the genesis of the summer project. That was, the idea had glimmered in and out before, but not until then ~~that~~ was it clear that people could be pro-



cured in numbers, and that the impact of people coming was sufficiently great to merit both the risks they would be taking and the deflection from other plans that might otherwise have been tried.

JM: Then time that the freedom vote was hit upon, in July '63, you seem to feel that the movement was at kind of a standstill, and could this reason be that - just because all these other methods had failed - the methods of voter registration, and organizing the communities on that level, and because of the retaliation. This would be your position at that point?

AL: Yes, I don't think anyone would quarrel with that; there would be different interpretations as to why it was at that point of defeat. Some would say that it was the NAA which had stopped the massive protest in Jackson after Medgar was killed, and this in fact produced the discouragement. Others would say that the tactics at that time had been ill-advised, and couldn't succeed, and that cost a fortune of money. But that's again a separate story. What had produced the situation in July of '63 that made the white leadership convinced that it had broken the movement, and what in fact had produced the kind of collapse of the movement that was present in Jackson and Mississippi with very few exceptions that summer, is a complicated question, but that in fact had happened, and there wasn't anybody in Mississippi that summer that was very optimistic that something would bring about change very quickly. But people were willing to try things that they might not have tried if other things had been effective. I don't think that the idea of the freedom ballot - I'm sure that if I'd gone with that idea to the early civil rights leaders in the midst of a successful program for social change, that it would have been received with a good deal less alacrity, because there wouldn't have been a need for something different and untried and dramatic. And I think the same is true about the outside intervention - obviously an outside intervention of that size would have been inappropriate in many other states, where there were still civil rights problems. It was suited to Mississippi at that time for the reasons peculiar to Mississippi, which reasons you're familiar with. But it was really the fact that the government of Mississippi and the governments of the local communities were the agents of oppression in Mississippi. And therefore you were dealing with the necessity of overthrowing the police power of the state, that made necessary some federal action - federal action was not going to happen unless the country got aroused, so you had to arouse the country. And the coalition that made possible the great victories that the freedom vote led to, the - that coalition needed the civil

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rights workers who took the brunt of a lot of the viciousness, needed the college students, needed the Council of Churches, it's so enormously helpful, and - well, needed, the doctors, the lawyers, everybody that went down. It needed the whole conscience of the country, and it needed the Negroes of Mississippi aroused to feel that there was hope for change, because by then they'd begun to think there wasn't any, so why take further risks? All these things were essential. And they grew out of the freedom vote, because that gave a way to people without throwing their lives away, even without throwing too many of their jobs away, were able with some protection to make a protest of some force, that would call attention to their plight. And then when the whites reacted the way they reacted, it illuminated what Mississippi was, in a way that nothing else did. If the whites had been more self-controlled and smarter, well, the thing could have failed.

JM: So you think that the whites were not self-controlled and smarter in their efforts had anything to do with the fear that was in their minds that this might indeed bring a change that they didn't desire.

AL: Sure. That's why they acted the way they did. And this - the whole tactic was in fact designed to put them on the horns of that dilemma. Either they allowed social change to begin, or they illuminated the way they were preventing it from beginning. And they chose to do the latter. Had they allowed it to begin, had Coleman been Governor, for instance, it's very possible that in the long run the social change would have been slower. It would have been much more difficult to arouse the country; Mississippi would not have become an epithet, he could have used his police and the sheriffs to protect people in their civil rights to the extent that murders and mass arrests on the basis of trumped-up charges and so on would have been minimized instead of maximized. I think that - although we will never know - that that response would have probably preserved for a longer period of time Mississippi's right to run her own affairs the way she wanted to run them, or the way the whites wanted to run them. The majority of the population. And in that sense the demagogues had helped us, just as Eric Lowe at the United Nations helped South Africa's enemies, because taking what is I suppose a more honest position, at least a more forthright one, they served to make the case much more clear than if there'd been a muddy and sort of fuzzed-up position taken. So in one sense the nomination and election of Paul Johnson speeded up the social change in Mississippi.

JM: Then it is your very strong feeling that the question of the closed society in Mississippi not only in the Negroes but in the whites a feeling of fear.



AL: No. No, no, no. The only whites in Mississippi who were afraid in any sense that would merit an accurate use of the word were the few whites who were upset about the way the state was behaving. And they were a very small number of whites. There were some that had courage to overcome their fear and join in... Hazel and Ed King and a handful of others. There were a much larger number of people centered in Jackson and Greenville and on the Gulf Coast, and other communities like Tupelo and so on, who were basically discouraged and unhappy about the way the state was behaving, and thought it would lead to no good, and were terrified at being discovered to have these thoughts. But I don't think that that would be true of the majority of the white population - the majority of the white population by a long sight was content to do whatever would preserve white supremacy. And the fear was limited to the Negro community and to those few whites who wouldn't go along with the majority. And that

JM: And that the whites who were dominant in Mississippi were confident that their ways were going to win, or...

AL: Well, in the summer of '63, the general attitude among the whites that were there, now remember, a lot of whites left Mississippi because they knew that the thing was at a dead end, and a lot of whites were unable to ascertain facts because the press was so moderate in its partiality and even the television stations were not impartial, so that so that a lot of other whites were not, they simply weren't able to have access to what in fact the situation was. But most whites in Mississippi in 1963 - I think it was Allan Thompson who said that the niggers were - we got the niggers licked, we don't need any bi-racial committees or words to that effect - a lot of people talked about the fact that Reconstruction had lasted seventeen years, and then the Yanks had gone home and Mississippi had run its own affairs for another century, and - the court decision was in '54, and that was nine years before, and in another eight years they'd let us alone - I think there was a lot of feeling that - it's hard to know exactly how widespread it was, because a lot of it might have been whistling - Dixie, so to speak, it was people saying things that they knew they had to say in order not to sound as if they were weakening, but I would say that a majority of white opinion was that the niggers were licked, that - some of them would have said it differently, would have said that the great majority of the Negroes were content, and didn't really want to change it, and that the outside agitators were going to be driven away, and that everything would be all right again. People can kid themselves into believe what they want to, and certainly that was one reason why there was this massive hatred directed to civil rights workers, which was much more vituperative and



violent than directed at local Negroes in general, and it was that some people really thought that local Negroes would be content if only these outsiders would stop meddling and get out. So I'd say, yes, I think it's true that the majority of the whites in the summer of '63 thought that they'd won, and they reflected this, thought that they could win if they just held firm, - certainly otherwise the behaviour of the student body at Oxford at the time of Meredith is incomprehensible - and when Meredith graduated and - reverted to the fact that there were no integrated facilities in Mississippi, and there'd never be integration, a lot of people wore buttons saying "Never". So I'd say that you could make a good case that, even allowing for private doubts on the part of a large number of people, and the fact that a lot of people had left the state, the feeling that integration would come to public schools in Mississippi and that Negroes would vote and have elected officials, would all seem like something just out of this world, and maybe some other century, but certainly not in the lifetime or the community leadership then. However in two years they've had a change - and that's the consequence of the programs that were carried out. Then you had 600 businessmen saying we can't live forever with violence, and the Chamber of Commerce and Senator Stennis, and eventually Paul Johnson attempting to refurbish his own image and the image of Mississippi by reversing all the things he'd said earlier, and professing not to have really meant them or said them, they're all there, he said them all.

JM: So is it true that by 1963 that there had been significant void created in Mississippi, in whites and in Negroes, of the ages of 18-31, let's say, so that there was a question of - or necessity of outside civil rights workers coming in to furnish leadership?

AL: Certainly.

JM: Then with the position of the whites in Mississippi by the summer of '63 being one of confidence, do you think this explains the reason why - (Defiance would be more accurate - that the defiance had an undertone that said, if we remain defiant we'll succeed.) And then this would explain the reason why there is an undue amount of overt violence toward the freedom vote when it started going.

AL: Yes, that was why, it was because they received this as if to the defeat of the civil rights movement. It was the threat to their society, is exactly what it was. And the response was not a surprising response, I didn't mean to imply earlier that there was a surprise when they reacted the way they did at all, we all expected they would. But what I'm saying is



that it was a lack of control, and a lack of wisdom on their part to respond that way, even though we expected they would respond that way.

JM: And so many - an effort like took place in the Albany movement - that would have been much more efficacious to slowing down the civil rights movement.

AL: Well, the Albany movement is a very complicated question in itself, and - I would be reluctant to analogize it. I think that Martin Luther King was an enormous help in Mississippi, and was an essential part of the coalition that made possible what happened there,...

JM: But, how much was his presence counted during this period - was he - did he appear that or just the fact that SCLC was a part of COFO significant?

AL: Both.