

Marion Barry - December 18, 1965

December 18, an interview with Marion Barry, Jr.

OK JM: Marion, how do you think the decision to go into what I call protest politics, in 1961, was made?

MB: Well, I think there were a number of factors involved. Number one, I don't think any of us had any idea that this would be called what you call it - protest politics. In SNCC, in 1961, some of the Freedom Rides were going on in Mississippi, and a number of us were involved in the freedom rides, some on the rides and some organizing the rides at various places. And I was in Jackson, (with Bevel) and Lafayette and others organizing, local Mississippians on the ride. And parallel to that - again, you have to remember now, these things - been a long time, the fact that Bob Moses, in the spring, of '61, had gone to Mississippi and travelled round the state and talked to people, like Amzie Moore, and Curtis Bryant, in McComb (JM: Steptoe?) Steptoe, well, I'm not sure he talked to Steptoe at first, he might have, I'm not sure he did; he talked to Curtis, they probably went over to the Amite county and talked to Steptoe.

So there were two things goin' on, the freedom rides, which were a little later in the spring, and carrying into the summer, and Bob's (feeling) of trying to get something going in McComb, Mississippi. Now, it's also parallel with the fact that in terms of SNCC, we were moving from one kind of group to another, as we were moving from a basically college co-ordinating group, student coordinating group to the full time workers - who were working, before the spring there were no workers at all, (well, we had one girl, Janice Demarest, I guess, who worked at that time - maybe Ed King, no Ed King (wasn't working by then) so you had about three-four things going in the summer, and in August there was this big debate, you know, between a lot of people in SNCC, particularly, Bob... Chuck McDew (Daw), Charlie Jones, Tim Jenkins, Ella Baker, (Bevel), Diane Nash, myself, Charles (Gerard), few other people. (And the way the thing lined up at that time, was that - if you read, actually you can get a lot of this - a portion of this from (Zinn's) book, from (Howard's) book, he talks a little bit about that summer, he doesn't go into as much detail as to what happened, in the larger sense, but generally he covers that - and) there was a debate between those of us (and I was on the other side at that time) who wanted not to get involved in voter registration because we thought this was an attempt by the administration to kill direct action movements - at least I thought that anyway - (and others that you had talked to later) Charlie Jones I guess, and Tim Jenkins were probably the biggest pushers of the other side, of getting involved in voter registration, Diane and myself were on the other side about direct action. And this went on for three or four days, very intense debates, discussions, and so I guess what was finally decided was that the two would go on - direct action would go on, and voter registration (working out). I think that it's very unlikely from my point of view that anybody had any idea

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 about what would come out of voter registration work in terms of the kind of organizations that finally came out of it - it was really an attempt to use voter registration as an organizing method. And the course was uncharted and unclear, as far as I'm concerned, (I'm almost sure that this was true of everybody involved, I mean) the first thing began in August of 1961 in McComb, and Bob was working down there, Reggie Robertson was there, and John Hardy, and what happened was that you had Bob, and Reggie and John, both of them were working on voter registration, and I left Jackson to go down, supposedly again because of these two differences, to organize direct action campaigns around public accommodations.

And the two went on - I went down and we got some people - Curtis Hayes, and Hollis Watkins, and Brenda Travis, and a couple more people, to sit in at a lunch counter. And I think that this probably helped voter registration in a sense, because we had a mass meeting around that lunch counter thing... we were also involved with - talking about voter registration, about going down; on a number of occasions I went down to the courthouse in Liberty, so it wasn't really that sharp demarcation as I make it. And so this was the kind of thing that happened, and the idea then, it seemed to me, was just to get people to go down and try to register - just what I would call groundbreaking activities, in the sense that it was dangerous to go. No attempt at that time, I don't think, to organize them in any kind of a organizational way, just to say, you know, so and so and so, will you come down and try to register to vote, and Mrs. so and so and so, will you come down and try to register to vote.

② JM: Then this action was really the incipient stage of building up the grass roots organization; and it wasn't done with specific planning as far as the future was concerned.

MB: Well, as far as I know, I mean I'm just speaking from my own perspective, and I'm assuming this is probably true of the other people who were involved. I know I didn't - we didn't see this sitting down as a first-step plan kind of thing, for a number of reasons: one, this whole area was new to everybody in terms of - who was working at that time, where we were going. So it was just a first-stage thing, just getting people involved. I'm sure in the back of everybody's mind was an idea that you got to organize them into something. But we certainly wasn't - weren't as sophisticated in that area as we are now, I mean we hadn't had the experience, we hadn't learned, and I'm not so sure that even now we would've organized them any different. We might would've - might - I don't know, but the idea then was just to go down and register.

And this kind of thing went on, coupled with a few other things in McComb, for the fall of '61. I mean it spread to - John Hardy was up in Walthall County, it spread down to Amite County, next to Pike County, where McComb is; and here and there were a few spotty



attempts up in the Delta. I can't - I think it probably started around Cleveland, where Amzie Moore lives. It's the same kind of basic thing, just - at that time in 1961 it was a movement in itself to get people to go down and register, or attempt to register; a lot of them weren't allowed to.

2 continued And during this period I think what began to develop because of the attempts of people to go down ~~and~~ - was a sort of strengthening at the grass roots level, in a sense. Most of the people who were going down were working people, and sharecroppers, farmers, and maids, and domestics, and that was - there weren't the - you could never get teachers to go down. Very seldom could you even get ministers to go, sometimes. So, I mean (unknowingly) to us this was the beginning, I think it was the beginning of a sort of a grass roots movement, in a sense.

2 And again, it's very unclear - I mean it was very unclear then where we were going. I think, it probably was much more clear to probably Bob Moses than anybody. Because I mean he certainly helped to chart a lot of these courses, in the sense that a lot of the ideas were adopted by the group, and they weren't my ideas, or anybody else's. It just happened that you agree once you hear them, they sound so exciting, you agree with them. So (I think that in terms of Mississippi politics the one person who charted that course would be Bob, and anybody else - sometimes we all agreed with him, sometimes we didn't. But I would attribute most of them to Bob Moses in terms of ideas, to him - I mean there were others who certainly did a lot of the work. Like I think the whole parallel structure thing - I first heard it from him; he was the first person who talked about that. And it was in the winter of '62, I think we first started talking about expanding that whole concept of getting people across the state active in voter registration work. And he just - he began to travel a great deal after the McComb thing.) Of course there were a lot of other things happened in McComb too, in terms of the kids getting kicked out of school, 114 students were expelled because of their activities, or they quit. And that's when (McDew) and Charlie Jones, and (Shaw) and others were there - I wasn't there. And so - there was a couple of voter registration campaigns stopped for a while because everybody was involved with that.

But after that, in the winter, that whole concept of organizing spread to other parts of the state.

JM: Excuse me, you mean the winter of '61 - '62 that this went on, not the winter of '62-'63.

MB: Yeah, I'm talking primarily about the winter of '61-'62. A lot of these facts are sort of buried in my mind, but I'm talking at this point of the slow spread. Because by the summer of 1962, we had people working all over the state at that time.



JM: This would be in Greenwood, and Hattiesburg, and McComb, and Jackson, and (Rochester) and up in the delta, largely though.

162 MB: Yeah, I think that by the summer of '62 we had people working primarily in the Delta and down in southwest Mississippi, in Amite County, Pike County, Walthall County, Greenwood, up in the Delta, (Leflore) County, Washington County, all those places. And again, the activity at that time was just - basically, actually, it was just - the program wasn't very militant or very different from any other program as such, in the sense that - you know, people have had - Negroes have had voter registration campaigns, for the last ten years. Basically the program wasn't that different, the way it was done was different, Mississippi made it different in the sense that this was a militant and radical concept in Mississippi - white people certainly (interfered with) the Negroes just to go down and try to register to vote. So this was a building program, I think, in itself, because it was building new concepts.

② And so this - I was making that point to say that this was the kind of thing that went on for I guess a year and a half, across the state, just nothin' but just getting people to go down and register. In some instances you had, like in Holmes County, that came in later though - you had organizations that were formed or - well, even in McComb you had - we formed something called the McComb Freedom Movement, I think, I can't remember the name of it. (JM: I can dig that out for you, cause I have Tom Hayden's book on McComb...)

③ JM: One thing though - apparently there were a series of meetings that went on from October to December, that clarified more what was to be done in direct political action. Can you talk about that?

MB: This is in the fall of '61, right? Well again, in September, for instance, we had a meeting in Jackson in September... you still had this problem of differences in SNCC about direct action and about political activities. And so if anything was clarified it was clarified in the sense that - the people who were advocates of, say, the voter registration were explained, and then trying to convince us of the validity of that approach. And those of us on the other side were busy trying to explain why we didn't think that approach was a valid thing to use at this time. And so - what actually happened, Charlie Jones was supposed to be the director of voter registration, and Diane Nash was the director of direct action, you know. And they both were supposed to work in Mississippi - Diane had the idea that was called MOM - Move on Mississippi - organizing two or three thousand people in Mississippi that would just raise hell throughout the state, in terms of direct action, public accommodations. And on the other hand I think these debates clarified and sharpened our vision because that way these - what they were calling voter registration people - had to plan out a little bit more where they were going a little bit, because in order to explain or try to argue with us the validity of it they had to think about what that meant - so every



③ meeting, every month we had a meeting - that is, a larger meeting, there were I'm sure a number of smaller meetings between, say, Charlie, or Tim, or Mac (New), and others. But this was going on, so I mean, I don't know, it wasn't - it was different in a sense, where a group of people get together and say, this is what we're going to do, and therefore they go. ~~In~~ that people did this, but they did it because they had to do it, in the sense that - they had to defend their concept in a sense, you see, so that this is a different kind of thing.

Force { But, see, I still don't think that that method - that was just a great deal of long-range planning about what this meant in the context of Mississippi. The only thing I think that came out of that which is the basic thing, that Negroes in the state don't have any power of any kind, they're discriminated against, segregated, they're powerless. And that, you know, by organizing people to register to vote we think that we can get some of this power. And that was the basic concept.

④ JM: Then this would mean that both groups within SNCC were really looking to attack what might be called the white power structure, and what was decided on was to continue both programs rather than to do one or the other.

MB: Right. I mean, I think that there wasn't any basic disagreement among the groups about who you were going to attack, in terms of the white power structure. The disagreement was whether we were going to stay and, you know, use direct action, which we thought was the best thing to use, or whether we were going to use voter registration which some of them thought was - as I said earlier - an attempt by the administration to stop (the momentum) of the movement. And so as a result both continued, during the fall of '61.

Par. Dem ↓ JM: Then this might be called the incipient stages of participatory democracy as it emerges (further) at a later point. That all the meetings were really fully participated in by all members, and no minorities were bound to a majority decision.

MB: Yeah, I think that this is a - this would basically characterize the meetings. Because what happened, as I said, you have basically, two groups with a few people in between both groups, and there was just - you know, these 2-3 day meetings about where each was going, and - It wasn't a battle in a sense, because I mean everybody there liked and respected the opinions of everybody else. We just disagreed on strategy, and we just argued out points of view, and when we got through the direct action people said this is what we're going to be doing for the next month, and the voter registration people said this is what we're going to be doing for the next month, and the money would be, you know, whatever money we had, 'cause we didn't have much, would be given to people just the same, and so it wasn't



an attempt of either side to submerge or, you know, restrict the activities of the other group - we just disagreed, that's all. And actually, as time went on we found that it wasn't as much of a disagreement, that it wasn't as diverse as we thought, that in any other situation the two could work any time without any problems - and later this has been proven to be true, in terms of ~~M~~FDP. Last summer they were involved in direct action in a sense, against - I mean, as a political entity, they were attacking a political system, but they were using direct action to do it. And so it later turned out that it really wasn't much of a problem. In fact, what happened, what later happened, that - I can't - it was October, 1963 - (I'm sort of going ahead myself) But what later happened in the movement in Mississippi that voter registration people adopted the tactics of direct action in voter registration, this is that they lined people up at the courthouses, having Freedom Days (I'm ahead of myself because ~~this~~ ~~ix~~ Freedom Days didn't come until I think October of '63 - maybe the spring of '63, I can't remember the specifics, but...

5 JM: Then really, even though it didn't seem that clear in the winter of '61-62, direct action and political action through voter registration were both necessary elements in the program of attacking the power structure in Mississippi. And both aided in mobilizing the community.

MB: Yeah, as I said earlier, you know, we discovered that there was not that much - that they reinforced each other, really, in the sense that there had been places where we initially started off - I think - well, there were places where we started off with direct action - what we called direct action was primarily action against public accommodations - and it later developed in that same period, a political voter registration program developed. There's one thing I think that happened in Mississippi, I don't know when it happened - it must have been in 1962, summer of '62 - almost everybody in the state agreed that direct action as we knew it, as we had carried it on, couldn't work, and would not work in that state. That the police powers were too great, and too suppressive, and we had seen this on the Freedom Rides, how they had just crushed them almost, in the sense that they put everybody in jail, and they almost broke (CORE), and it cost considerable sums of money. (Now I - this happened in the summer, now I was in Philadelphia raising money in the summer of '62 - (we were) between 11 and 15 thousand dollars in debt. But I remember, and again, maybe somebody (else) will remember the exact date of this, but we did have a meeting in Atlanta, where everybody in SNCC, even those of us who at one point used to be the direct actionists (heh-heh-heh) agreed that in Mississippi that that just could not work. Because during the time of the Freedom Rides in 1962 there always had been some attempts by some Tougaloo students - library sit-ins,



carried on by the NAACP. And again, they had been crushed. You know, they had been - well, the McComb situation, too, was an example of the violence+terror that went on around direct action. And so it was almost a clear unanimity of opinion that Mississippi would be the focus of a complete political program. And I think this is probably - happened right after the summer of '62. I mean I'm almost sure that this was the period in which that decision was made. By that time we had had a whole year of organizing in Mississippi, too. And Bob had gotten a lot of good young people <sup>working</sup> in the state. And we would get people like Jessie Harris, and (Lafayette Surney??) and James Jones, and a whole number of people to - native Mississippians to work in it. And it was decided then that the political program would be the thing that would go on. So there was no conflict, I mean nobody opposed that, as I said earlier.

6 JM: This was really a tactical decision on how to attack the structure, that too much money and too many people were being beaten up, and too much terrorizing by the power structure really eliminated this form of action.

MB: Well, also, I think what <sup>acted there</sup> ~~acted there~~ in a sense too, ~~was~~ we looked at how much you put into a situation and what you get out of it. And a lot of energy, and money, and head-beatings, and the jailings, and everything else that would be put into, say a public accommodations drive - just wasn't worth it, compared to what you could in the long run get out of a political thing. <sup>Now nobody,</sup> even the direct action people recognized that public accommodations wasn't about - that is, the drive wasn't about to solve any of the basic problems. All we were primarily trying to use it as an organizing technique, to get people involved, and then carry them on into sort of a political and economic activity. And it just so happened we just found we couldn't use public accommodations as an organizing tool at all. So we just skipped that <sup>phase</sup> of it and went right on into the political.

JM: There was also some feeling that by specifying - going into political rights guaranteed by the constitution that it would be better possible to raise funds on a national scale. Is this your feeling?

MB: Actually I think that we were - in terms of funds being raised, we could raise as much and certainly even more money on public accommodations activity. Number one, it had been generally accepted by the American public as a right thing, you know, to happen. You shouldn't have any - that discrimination at a lunch counter, and public facility, or park, or swimming pool or library was just as basic in the minds of the American people as the right to vote, generally. And so it happened in terms of money - I would suspect that we missed the boat - we could have raised more money on, probably, on public accommodations as we could have on voter registration. <sup>Although in that period, voter registration was really direct action in a sense, because invariably the same kind of things came out of it,</sup>



we had people jailed, we had people beaten, we had people shot at, and killed, like Herbert Lee down in Liberty, Mississippi. So actually in terms of money I think we would have gotten more, but certainly no less <sup>much less</sup> out of either one. So it wasn't a decision based on what people would accept, that is what the American public would see us as doing and how they would respond to it, and how much money they would give, as it was based primarily on our ability not to be able to do anything except political organizing. Or that the (energy put into) political organizing people would be where it was spent. Because as I said earlier, the public accommodations was only a first step leading to hopefully political and economic organizing. So we just eliminated the first step, and jumped right - in any case, after you get the public accommodations anyway, then you got to get involved in political organizing anyway. That is, we think so - or community organizing, should I say.

JM: From what I understand there was some pressure from the Justice Department - the Kennedy Administration - to go into political action. Is this the case?

MB: I don't know if you'd call it pressure to go into political action or not. Bobby Kennedy I guess, who was attorney general and had made a lot of statements around the country - maybe Negroes ought to turn their attention to voter registration work. And also coupled with this there was a fellow who was an entertainer in New York who was very concerned - Belafonte was his name - was very concerned about this and had offered to raise some 10-15 thousand dollars to put into a voter registration drive in the south. But I don't think there was any direct pressure in the sense of Bobby Kennedy calling anybody up - that's what I know, maybe he did, and said look, I think you all ought to work on voter registration. He might have called Harry, I don't know, but Harry was pushing ~~very~~ hard, and Belafonte, through Tim and Charlie Jones, in terms of money, to carry on a voter registration campaign. And the Justice Department people said, you know, we'll do all we can to - this was later proved not to be true.

JM: This would be in the winter of '61-'62.

MB: This was more or less in the summer - actually, this was probably up near the winter of '62 now, I mean in the fall, we're getting into the fall of '62, as I understand it. I'm trying to remember chronologically, because - this is before COFO, long before COFO. Now, and that's when Belafonte had the money. So it was in that 3 or 4 month period when the beginning of the summer, beginning of the fall - again, you know these things - but the concept is still there, I mean the chronology of it can be checked out. But the idea is that there wasn't any direct pressure on the part of the JD except through the statement that Bobby Kennedy was making around the country, that Negroes ought to get involved with voter registration, and he influenced a lot of people - So again, this is why we looked with suspicion, that is those of us in direct action looked with suspicion on voter registration, because we knew there must have been something wrong when the attorney general of the United States saying, well, now,



the time for demonstrations and sit-ins is seemingly over, you fellows taken care of that, now you ought to get involved in something more meaningful - which is voter registration. And we just looked with a little - in my opinion it was suspect.

JM: And your opinion was validified, wasn't it?

MB: Well, in a sense, because - why don't you try to restate that, because I don't quite understand the...

JM: What I mean is that even though the Justice Department promised to back up the voter registration drive to the hilt, in the way of protection, that they didn't do this in fact.

MB: Oh, well, that's exactly true. We have experience after experience, even during that period where they didn't do what they said they were going to do. Now, on one or two occasions - like they went into Walthall County and got John Hardy out by going to Federal Court and stopping the state prosecution on that case. But there were many instances when they weren't around, and also there were a number of times when they asked us - (now that's us, I don't only mean but asked the people of Mississippi) - not to go into certain counties, because it was too dangerous, and they didn't know if they were able to help them or protect them, and we had - at that time, Burke Marshall was the assistant attorney general in charge of civil rights - in other instances he would say, you know, like - you all shouldn't go into those counties right now because we don't have the machinery, ~~a way~~ to help you ~~right now~~, you know. ( ) not to move so fast.

JM: Well, then, what this was was that they really promised to protect you, but only when they were ready to protect you - they were trying to limit your activities to what they wanted done, not what you wanted done.

MB: That's basically, I mean, they would not - they said to us, well, look now, we're not trying to tell you what to do and where to go. You can go where you want to. But if you want us to protect you, we only have so many men, and so many lawyers, so much time, so much legal power that we have to help you. And if you want ~~to~~ (us to do this), we would suggest that you work with us to make sure we got enough people to be around, and to do things...

JM: Now, in the spring of '62 - this would be, actually February - there was a poll tax campaign started in Mississippi. Can you talk about this?

MB: Was that that early?

JM: This would be really be in preparation to - for the Congressional



elections of 1962. Because in - from January 1 to I think February 1 is the Mississippi regulation that if you're going to vote in the next election you've got to pay your poll tax.

MB: Oh yeah, you're definitely right, it must have been that time. Well, there were two things, two or three things happening - a number of people who we had - you see, you can go down to register in the state, and pass the literacy test, at that time it was very difficult to pass, and you don't have to pay your poll tax at the same time, you can pay 'em before two years - at that time it was two years before the next election.

JM: That being that you have to have poll tax receipts for the previous two years before you vote.

MB: Right. I mean that in '62 in order to vote in '64, you had to pay your poll tax in '62, if I'm not mistaken. I'm almost positive it was a two year thing. Now I think by that time it was clear that very little could be done in the state in terms of Congressional political activity in '62, in terms of actually affecting a real change, now when we had very few people registered to vote. And secondly, there was no prospects of getting that many registered to vote, between '62 - I think the whole thing was that if we can get a number of people to pay their poll taxes, in '62, between '62 and the time they might be registered - even if they wasn't registered to pay the poll taxes. They then could vote and be active in the '64 campaign. That was an attempt during that period to get people - or to get money, in fact, to pay the poll taxes for the people - if they would only just go down and say, you know, it's all right to pay my poll taxes, or sign the receipts that you have to sign, even though they weren't registered in a lot of instances. And the other thing was to get those who were registered to pay the poll taxes. Because a lot of Negroes, even once they had gone down, couldn't afford to pay the poll taxes, or didn't want to pay them because they didn't see any sense in really voting a great deal - it didn't make much difference if you only had 300 Negroes registered in the county of 10,000 whites, you know, people don't get involved. So...

I'm trying to - again, you know, I hadn't thought about these things in a long time, and they are just coming back...

JM: The idea also I think would be involved is that there is generally two racially oriented candidates, if there were two, running in a primary or an election. So that the Negroes felt that there wasn't any sense in voting if these were the only alternatives presented. And consequently from what I understand, the idea was made to put up Negro candidates so that there would be a definite choice presented to rally out the support in the community.



MB: Well, that's definitely true, I - because it was in '62 that Rev. R.L.T. Smith ran for Congress... (JM: in Jackson)...in Jackson. All these things are beginning to come back a little bit now (heh-heh). Yeah, that's exactly right, because what - well, again, back to the poll tax thing, the projection was that by 1964 you would have a number of Negroes running in various campaigns, congressional as well as local campaigns. And that if you paid the poll tax when you, you know, in that period you would be able to participate in it. And I think this was just a little bit before the R.L.T. Smith campaign, got off the ground, I think it started in the spring of '62, that is the active campaigning of Smith for Congress.

JM: Now, Jim Forman said that Bob Moses was the - what he called the submerged campaign director for R.L.T. Smith.

MB: Well, he was. I mean (heh-heh) there's no question about that. He was the one as far as I can remember who even suggested that Rev. Smith run, if I'm not mistaken, I'm almost positive of that. And that he's the one that did a lot of the organizing around that campaign - I mean again, that campaign, everybody knew it was virtually impossible for Rev. Smith to win numerically in that campaign, but the idea was to try to use that stimulus to get Negroes involved in the political process - processes of the state, that district, because that way they encouraged people to go to register, you know, and pay your poll taxes, and get involved in setting up precincts, and having precinct meetings, even as early as 1962. Which is unheard of in the south, particularly in Mississippi, I mean they'd never had any since Reconstruction, Negroes (acted in their) political ways because the white party just excluded them.

JM: Now, (Bill Higgs) was apparently involved in Rev. Smith's campaign also...

MB: Uh, '62 - yeah, Bill was - I guess had just gotten back into the state not too - well, he was active at that time, in the campaign. He wasn't, I mean - yeah, he was active in the campaign. But mostly, most of the activity - well, actually, Rev. Smith ran a great campaign, in that sense, that he really got around, and you know, Bob did a lot of work in setting up speaking engagements, and he talked to a lot of people. And there was a lot of resistance, too, I mean, to the campaign. I don't know about the whites but on the part of some Negroes again, they didn't think, you know, it's just a - you know, why should Negroes be involved in a campaign that they can't win? I mean, they didn't understand the value or the stimulation of having Negroes running, you know, for Congress, you know - and Smith suffered, you know, he had a grocery store in Mississippi, and the grocery store was burned, something happened to him, he had a son who was home, he was shot into. But - this was a new concept. I mean, this concept was new in the sense that



I guess what you would call it maybe - I never thought about it - stimulation politics. Even protest politics in a sense, because you'd look at it two ways, one, you protest the fact that Negroes have no viable candidates except - that is, nobody to vote for except those racist leaders; rather than throw your vote away on them, at least you can protest and vote for some Negro who at least - in some ways expresses some of your views. That's one way, and the second thing would be that it would be using this stimulus to get Negroes involved - I guess you could call it protest politics even then. Or you can - stimulation politics (heh) - but this is a new word, just thought about it today. But the idea was to get Negroes involved in the political process. And this was a big - big step for (our) people. They'd never been involved in a campaign in their lives. Never! They didn't know what I you know, how you even do a campaign. And this is very helpful, in that - that respect, back in '62, I just thought about that, it was a - a very interesting period at which we were in.

JM: Now, also at this time Rev. Trammel, up in the Delta, had run for, I think in the primary had run for the Congressional seat.

MB: Yeah, that was -

JM: Rev. Lindsay took over after Rev. - died.

MB: Yeah, that was - I think that was - yeah, that was the campaign up in the Delta, with Rev. Lindsay running after Rev. Trammel died. Again, the same kind of philosophy was working, in both of those campaigns - wasn't that (third?) campaign, I'm trying to remember, wasn't it? (JM: Not that I know of.) No, one was - there was a campaign in the second, and the third, that's right, congressional districts. Right. Again, the politics were - they were the same, you know, trying to stimulate Negroes into getting involved, and education in political processes, and getting them to protest, you know, the fact that you - (Amie Whitten, who wants) to vote for him. (Heh, heh) So, these two campaigns, I think it was the beginning of a whole new political concept in Mississippi, I mean the concept wasn't new to the country in terms of Negroes running to get a seat somewhere, but in Mississippi this was a radical and certainly militant position to take. That you had Negroes running even though they couldn't win, numerically. But there was a sign of emerging Negro concern, and I guess political awareness of what was going on in that state.

JM: Can you discuss the history of the voter education project in Mississippi?

MB: Well, okay, again, in terms of chronology I might be off in terms of specific dates, but the series of events and where they occurred I think is pretty good (heh). Well, the voter education - okay, there (was a great deal of) discussion, it must have been the



summer of '62 in New York, on the part of several people from the foundations, and civil rights people - including SNCC - I went to one of those meetings, Tim Jenkins went to one. And, so what was finally decided was that there were several foundations that wanted to give up to, I guess \$300 thousand a year for voter registration work, and they wanted to channel it through a tax-exempt operation because they couldn't give it directly to any of the organizations.

JM: This is why it was channeled through the Southern Regional Council which sponsored the VEP.

MB: Exactly. What - well, there were several things (bantered) around, like for instance there was some possibility that the NAACP legal defense fund could certainly fit the category of receiving the money, but again, you got problems because they would have to administer it. And they wanted a neutral, supposedly a neutral operation, and -

JM: Now, when you say a neutral operation, what I understand, this isn't what happened. That the VEP was set up so that all people working in voter registration in all groups in Mississippi would draw equally on the money. But from what I understand this was not the case.

MB: Well, you see the Voter Education Project was supposed to cover the entire south. This was the whole concept. And that groups would - well, the Southern Regional Council would be a kind of - in the sense that groups would apply, and they would mainly administrate it, they did - (Lytle Wiley Brack) was named the administrator, for the Voter Education Project. And the groups - that is, civil rights groups, or either local groups - could apply directly to SRC or to the VEP, get money, carry their voter registration drives, you know, and it was ostensibly done under the guise of a research project. They wanted to see what methods worked, what didn't, how could you register voters and how you couldn't. And so the foundations threw this money in, and we applied immediately and got some money for southwest Georgia and Mississippi.

JM: This "we" being SNCC.

MB: SNCC, yeah. (he-he) When I talk, I mean I just keep saying SNCC, but it's understood. You see, the problems that we were doing at that period mostly were the registration work in the south. That is, not the south. In Mississippi and in Georgia, we were doin' a little bit, somewhere, I - but anyway, we were doin' most of that work - that's where the effort was. And at the end of a six-month period, probably right after Christmas (of '62) - I forgot, you were doin' research, so I gotta be specific, I should know that, I'm a scientist myself, I should know... Anyway, in '62, and it turned out that we were the ones who - number one,



were the most active in those areas, that is - NAA got money, SCLC got money, CORE got a little bit of money, they weren't too active in the South, and we got money. And it turned out that after the six-month period we were looking to see what was going on. And it developed that after six months we had done - first of all, we'd supplied them with the data they wanted, we weren't registering a lot of voters! But we certainly had sent in things, you know, how we were trying to do it, and we had put the energy into it, and this wasn't necessarily true of all the other organizations. So, we were told that there was a political problem - it would look awfully bad, for instance, for SNCC to be getting \$30 thousand, and the NAA getting 15, and SCLC getting 15, and CORE getting 10, you see, because at that time we were a young, radical supposedly, militant organization, and the foundation people wouldn't understand why is it that the NAA wouldn't - you know, been in this area for years - couldn't get the money. Now they were giving us money in Mississippi in the fall - they were giving us, I think they were giving us maybe \$1,000 a month - some amount to operate those projects in the fall. This is - we were operating a lot of projects. And the question came up - we applied for some more money for Mississippi, SNCC did, we were doing the bulk of the work in Mississippi. The NAA applied for a little bit, but - so that the people were hard put to know where to get the money, say, we gave it all to SNCC, then the people would raise hell, why don't you give the NAA some, and quite frankly we were told that the people in the VEP said that ~~would~~ we would do the job better. And wanted to give us the money, but they just - so what they said, OK, find some statewide organization that takes care of everybody, and we'll put the money into that. And this was when COFO was born, generally.

JM: This would be the Council of Federated Organizations?

MB: Yeah, this was the Council of Federated Organizations. And Bob again was instrumental in getting that thing together - it was, as we understand it, had been around in early 1954 when Governor White, who was the Governor of Mississippi, called together some Negro leaders - in quotes - to sell them on the idea that the Supreme Court decision was unconstitutional, illegal, and everything else, and that they shouldn't push for that, and get their endorsement of his program to keep separate but equal things going. And I think he called in, as I remember, about a hundred Negro leaders - Negro, again, I put this in quotes, that's what he called 'em - and only one endorsed his program. The other 99 sort of left in a huff, you know, and they formed COFO and they tried to use it as a vehicle - but it died. So COFO was again brought back, Bob did that, and he would know more about how that happened than I would.

And so, COFO then became the umbrella in Mississippi, I think they re-



ceiving about \$2 thousand a month to operate. And we had also applied for some money in Georgia, something like - I think about \$5 thousand 6-month grant. And we had also asked for some money for Virginia, I think, but - the whole essence of it, I think, that SNCC was asking for it, and rightly, should receive about twice as much money as most of the other groups, because we were doing most of the full-time work.

That was one question. And the other question was - we weren't registering voters. And the question was, whether or not money should be put in places like Birmingham, or Atlanta, Richmond, Virginia, or Memphis, Tennessee, where you could actually say, after a six-month period, we registered 25 thousand voters. And there was a big debate. We argued that voter registration in terms of actual numbers was just part of the whole picture. You have - you know, ( ) Mississippi, where you know you're not going to register but a few voters, it's still important to have political activity going on, and we shouldn't be deprived of the money to do it.

JM: Now this would mean, then, that if you could break down the power structure in Mississippi, then it would be much easier to do it in the rest of the south.

MB: Well, our position was that - if you've got this money you can have voter registration drives in all those other places any time you want to. Not any time you want to, but it's certainly much easier to have drives in Atlanta, Georgia, it's just a matter of getting people. So this money - a lot of this money should be put into developing new ways of organizing people in states like Mississippi. Of course this was also true of Alabama, and the rural part of Georgia and Virginia, and that whole black belt. You wouldn't raise a lot of people but you could develop political savvy there, in some instances, an awareness and drive and consciousness.

\* And this was the whole fight we had with VEP. The other thing you had was that they were very concerned - well, we - I'll just give you a simple example. We (had) to fight with them to say that a mass meeting was part of voter registration! I mean, there were a number of times when we would have mass meetings in Mississippi or in Arkansas, and they would say well, how can you justify having a mass meeting as part of your registration project? This is again, you know, something they had never heard of.

JM: Well, isn't this really in the sense that at a mass meeting people can get a sense of what they're doing, and also in getting together in numbers they could overcome a lot of their fears that they would have singly.

MB: Well, this is the position that we argued, very strongly. A mass meeting was as vital a part of voter registration as knocking on doors



and taking people down to the courthouse. And finally, after much pushing, we got that view accepted, that we could have mass meetings and still be justifiable under the VEP grant. I think they were afraid probably, that all these mass meetings would not only come voter registration active, but all these other kinds of activities, because when you get people together to talk about their problems, you just can't say that (voting is one of the problems), they're gonna start talking about their housing conditions, their school conditions, and every other kind of conditions, well, I think it would even be unfair to expect people to sit and just talk about this one thing. And I would never encourage that kind of a meeting. But we finally got that view accepted, that you could have voter registration work at mass meetings.

The other thing we had to push very hard for in VEP was to say that Freedom Days w/ lining up at the courthouse was again an instrumental part of voter registration. And the other thing connected with that was that we'd also say when people got arrested for voter registration work, this was still within the rim of voter registration - so they might have been marching to the courthouse, or standing in line at the courthouse, or picketing the courthouse, this was still voter registration activity. And you know, you can understand how the foundations, and the people would get concerned and upset, because they - you know, this was disturbing the status quo too much! So therefore they don't want you to do too much of that. I think they would - (now I'm ready, take it off).

Well, again, this ties in with the argument whether you really want to get a number of people - a mass of people on the books or do you really want to develop a political power., among people who don't have it. And I'm afraid that the VEP people - the VEP people didn't understand this. And secondly I think that you had some biased-ness in the VEP in the sense that, again in the country people just expected the same groups, the older groups to do the work, because they thought they could do it, and it turned out they couldn't do it always, and they were confronted with the problem how can you justify saying, we gave these little - radical - SNCC people \$30 thousand, and gave NAA - again, this goes back to - and they just - so therefore, they forced on us - I won't say forced, but they said this, and I guess we wanted - we needed every penny we could get - And also the idea of a state-wide umbrella was still workable, and a good kind of operation if you could carry it off. So therefore you did have in COFO - Council of Federated Organizations - from the very beginning, the four major civil rights groups, although SNCC workers (*made up*) the bulk of the organization, but we had some - in fact, COFO was another argument we had, I mean, there were some - we had some very heated debate about COFO, a lot of us were very dissatisfied with the - well, we thought (we were being used) by some of the other organizations, you know, in COFO. But the VEP grants I think did a lot to - in terms of giving us money to at least operate, I mean it just, it was a fact. And they didn't influence policy that much, I mean we just fought 'em down the



line, until in Mississippi they stopped the grants, because we just wouldn't do some of the things they wanted us to do. I mean, particularly around the political organizing, like the Freedom Vote and those kind of things. They didn't want us to do that, because they said that it violated - you know, the whole thing was partisan, politics, that you were involved in politics, you weren't just strictly registering voters, which was out of the (preview) of their grant.

The same was true in Georgia. I mean, our grant in Georgia was terminated because, well, Gerard insisted upon having mass meetings, and running candidates, and having campaigns, you know. And we'd argue very strongly that things like the congressional election (raised) '62 was very vital to voter registration, that was not partisan politics, that was - you know, stimulation, and it was necessary in order to get people to register. And they just - at that point they didn't understand, what that meant, and that's why we had so much difficulty in getting the money from them.

JM: Now, when did they cut off the funds to Mississippi?

MB: I don't know the specific time, I suspect - I think it was probably after the fall of '63. I mean, again other people, Bob, others would know specifically. And I would know if I just thought about it, if I had the stuff here, but I don't know, I think it must have been the fall of '63.

JM: In any case, wasn't it during the summer of '63 that a sort of policy decision was made that if the VEP didn't go along with the idea of political direct action, that it was more important to do this ~~xxx~~ and give up the funds?

MB: No question about it. They would have this ballot, these ballots all the time, and usually we could win most of them, enough of them to satisfy (keep getting them). And from the very beginning there ~~was~~ a lot of concern, a lot of people that if you got VEP money they were going to control the operations. I know people who thought this, and when it got to the point that, you know, the choice, either doing this or not getting the money, that people made the choice of continuing the basic political organizing and not giving in to the money.

You see, the problem, you know, is the constant battle, when things are new to people, like a lot of concepts we were trying to promote in Mississippi, were certainly new to Mississippi, in the sense that even new to the movement, this whole area of organizing congressional campaigns, and organizing Freedom Votes, or Freedom Elections, of running (~~mock~~) candidates, things like this, this was totally new and unheard of in that context and generally in the country. And a lot of the problem was that people who were giving the money didn't understand this in terms of voter registration.

*The value of*



You see, our position, even back then, is even strengthened now. That there's no need to have voter registration without education and organization. Otherwise, you just register people and they just fly right into the big pot of generally corrupt politics - you know, what are you gonna spend your energies on that for?

JM: They can be manipulated by the power structure so that all the effort to register them becomes a negative effort. Is that correct?

MB: Well, more or less, if you, you know, spend your energy and your time and sometimes losing your life or getting in jail, whatever happens to you - registering people in Mississippi, some tangible benefits from that - you're gonna register people other people will use, then to me it's a negative kind of operation. So what has to happen, what did happen in Mississippi, was that along with registration, after we broke the ice, we had to talk about education and organization, about independent political organization. And the idea of the parallel - again, these parallel ideas, I first heard from Bob Moses about the (market) election, the Freedom Vote, and the Freedom Registration, which preceded the FDP, which COFO carried on in '63 - all were ideas of trying to get people involved in politics, in a meaningful way. I mean, knowing very well that they - frinstance, the whole idea of something like the freedom vote and the market - it started in two levels. There was a (inside) election in the fall of '63, ( ) and (Jimmy Rand) and some other people. The thing we had to suffer was why should we go through this effort when we know it's not really going to officially influence the political parties, in the sense that the people you ran, or your people weren't going to be counted, your votes weren't going to be counted. The people began to see the value, in two or three ways, one - because people couldn't participate in the regular politics of the state, they participated in their own politics, some of them, they started to get involved... and secondly, it gave the white power structure a chance to see dissatisfaction and the kind of feeling that existed in the Negro community, - you know, and it was fantastic, you'd get 80 thousand people who had never been active in politics in their life, you know, coming out to get active, and you know, this is fantastic - I think this is fantastic, I mean, I'm a little prejudiced in this way, but in a state where you had such suppression, and oppression, this is a fantastic development!

JM: This means that contrary to the belief that there was apathy in the Negro community, it was really a question of fear, and that the people really did want to participate, and that when the idea was raised that they could definitely do it, they came to it very strongly.

MB: There's no question about that, the people wanted freedom in that state, in a real sense, you know, freedom to be able to decide,



what happens when they have to decide, well, to be involved in the politics of the state, and any other affairs of the state. And that what the country didn't understand, and even some people in the state didn't understand, the value of conducting these parallel kind of elections. And I think if it hadn't of been for those campaigns it would have been very difficult to have the FDP where it is now, I really think a lot of people sort of got their start in that area, in their own politics, where they didn't have to fight with the outside politics yet, and they learned a lot how to deal with the outside political world by having developed in their own world, for lack of a better analogy, and that their policies were different. I mean, the FDP people, some of the same people involved in the freedom campaigns, learned a lot about how you have to operate without the pressures of the outside political world yet. So when they got to things, you know, like the challenge and other things, they had sort of cut their teeth, in a way (heh).

JM: Now, can you talk about how, specifically, in the summer of '63, it was decided upon to have freedom registration and a freedom ballot campaign?

MB: Actually it was, I remember, in January or February of '63. Again, Bob Moses brought it to a SNCC executive committee, a well written out proposal for beginning in the spring to get ready for a state-wide freedom vote campaign in the fall. And when it came that idea was so exciting to everybody there, including myself, that it was - well, there were two things, one is that it was discussed very thoroughly because it was a new concept to a lot of us, in a sense. And it was in that period, January-February, that he brought that proposal and asked, you know, for support from the total organization, see, I mean - part of our operations were in Mississippi, but there were a number of other things going on throughout the south, I mean, in Georgia, in southwest Georgia there were getting ready with that Albany campaign that developed down there, when Dr. King and others came in after we had been there for couple years, (heh) and there were other kind of campaigns, going on across the south, and when he brought this - this thing was for Mississippi, it was debated and discussed, and the Mississippi people had already discussed it somewhat, I mean they were ~~very~~ - that is the SNCC people - were very enthusiastic about it.

JM: Now, this was specifically an idea of conducting a freedom registration and a freedom campaign, not the sort of operation that had been going on in the past, of running candidates on the established tickets. This would be - not taking people down to register at the courthouse, but registering them, the people themselves, through the organization so that you knew what was going on rather than - and you gained contact with a greater number of people than you could have through direct voter registration work.



MB: Well, this concept was, you set up your own registration blanks and your own rules for registering, and your own laws. The whole concept was that clearly the state laws were illegal and unconstitutional, and anything else you want to say about them, and that they if anyone questioned, question there. So the concept was that first of all, their requirement would be very simple, you know, your name, your address, county you live in, and your age, and I think 18 was the age at which you could participate... But you would keep your own books, you would have your own registrars, in effect, and that you would conduct your own elections so it would be just like any other election except you were the ones who would - who were conducting it, and the difference was, it wasn't a part... it wasn't like running a congressional candidate who ran an official campaign, for a congressional seat. Or it wasn't like running for governor on the official white Democratic party line, it was running your own candidates, when Aaron Henry ran for governor in '63 it was your own governor and your own candidate and your own registration and your own books and your own polling places, your own everything, in effect, what you did.

JM: This was to show, more specifically, that people were being suppressed in their right to vote, and by demonstrating the numbers of people you could get out, you could convince the Federal Government that something definitely had to be done about this suppression of civil rights.

MB: Well, I think that was very clear, you know, that - well, what had happened before then is that the governor and the other white people, racists in the state, had said, well, you know, Negroes can register here, now problem - which they were lying... they're not interested in registering, which, again, they were lying... we got no problems here. And so, what - I think what shook up the state politicians was that - even with - you know, they tried everything they could to stop the - you know, like when Bob - well, COFO at some point adopted as their program, right after he came back from SNCC, you know, in terms of the program. And so the state-wide kind of thing had happened. And the politicians, the white politicians were very, I think, upset by this, because even with their harassment, and there were a number of people put in jail and harassed, and - some people fired cause they'd been getting involved, that you still had this parallel political activity going on. And it was successful in the sense that people were coming from every where, old people, young people, to get involved and to register, with the freedom campaign, the freedom thing. I think that during that period most of the official kind of registration things were not as active as they once were, what happened was sort of a parallel thing, when people freedom registered you also tried to get them to go right on down to the courthouse to register, and in a lot of instances this was very successful, because you had freedom registrars, people who were going around from door to door, for freedom registering people, they were also talking to them about,



you know, this is politics, you got to get involved at, and do both. And in a lot of instances people did both. They went and registered in a lot of instances. So again, this is - and it demonstrates to the country, I'm not so sure how much you can impress the federal government (Heh) too much, I'm sure that they saw the thing (

)... I'm not - well, I don't know, maybe - I think the Justice Department did step up its activity a little bit in the state, of trying to bring suits, force registrars to register Negroes, but it was more to get the people involved than to convince the Federal Government that things were bad, although it did that too. But the idea was to get people involved in political organization, and political organizing, and in independent political politics.

JM: Now, also, would I be correct in saying that there were some people who were willing to freedom register but were too scared to go down to the courthouse, because they would get beaten and put in jail, and they'd lose their jobs. But would participate on the level of freedom registering and belonging to an independent group at this point.

MB: No question about that. There were two factors involved... And I think that certainly, you know, the threat of physical danger, and losing their jobs, or being jailed, was a fact - but I think another factor was just almost equally important, that the state had told Negroes for many years that they weren't qualified to participate in the political activities of the state or the county, that is, that they couldn't pass the literacy tests, or that they had to pass the literacy tests in order to participate. Now the COFO people said that you are qualified, that all they need to do is fill out a form, or somebody fill it out for you, with your name, and your address, and the county, and how long you been here. Now I think that has a psychological - a tremendous psychological effect on the people, to think that - well, I am qualified, I can get involved, and therefore - out side of the physical dangers - they felt comfortable psychologically, that they were a part of a process, that they were qualified, to be involved in it, which I think is an important factor in this whole concept of political activity. Because the people had been told so long that you're not qualified to participate.

JM: Well, then, practically, what this decision meant to go into freedom register people and have a freedom election, was that what the state had been telling them was untrue and they finally found out that, yes, they were involved, they could be involved, and that the only thing that is holding them back at this point was just the suppression and the fear, and that through this sort of process there was an ability to get off the ground and get something going.

MB: I think that's very good analysis of what actually happened. I mean what it did, it made it clear for them who the enemy was, more than - I mean they knew that the white man was the enemy, but it also, I think made them very aware why he was the enemy in this



sense, and why they were telling them that they couldn't, that they weren't qualified. And they began to see, look, I can vote for Aaron Henry, or I can freedom register, getting a sense of participation and of being, which made them even more firmly convinced that they had to destroy that power structure out there, somewhere or another. And this was a release of energy, I think, that had been stored up in those people for many years, and this gave them a release of energy, which propelled them forward I think at a much greater rate than they would have been propelled otherwise, if they hadn't of seen the fact that they can go out, they were qualified, and they'd broken down this whole concept of their not being qualified.

JM: And that tactically, the freedom registration and the freedom vote really pushed the movement to a new plateau -

MB: I'm convinced that it did, I - well, I think there were a lot of factors. One was this whole history of two years of protest and activity in the state, coupled with the whole concept of the freedom vote. I think it released a lot of energy that later was used to push things at a much more accelerated rate, than it would have ordinarily.

JM: Then you think that the process preceding the freedom vote was very much a part and very important in even reaching the decision where a freedom registration and a freedom vote could be employed.

MB: Absolutely. I mean a state like Mississippi, I'm just convinced that without that early period of activity that went on around the state, which was very different to a lot of people and very new to a lot of people, I don't think you could have had - you know, the amount of activity - Number one, people had been rebuffed, time and time again, I suspect that at the beginning of 1961 there were a lot of Negroes who thought that, well, the white people are bad, but really, they're not that bad, but - and eventually they'd get involved in a system in which they were - white people were in. But after being rebuffed, after hundreds of people had been jailed, and denied the right to register to vote, after having been beaten, or after having seen, say, people like Herbert Lee, killed, and other people, shot, that they would then - understood very clearly that there was no possibility at that point of getting involved in the white power structure. And that made them more determined that they had to find a way to use themselves to do it, so with that activity, and I think that - in Mississippi, now - I don't think every other state has to go through that period, cause I think they've learned a lot, but in Mississippi that period was certainly necessary, I think, to develop a determination, and a want, and secondly, to get people experience in fighting this whole system, that gave them the experience to go on from, say, the freedom vote,



to where we are now. And so I would say very definitely, that that was a good period in the sense that it was a helpful time and a necessary thing, I think.

JM: And that it provided the roots for what came in '64, the MFDP.

MB: Absolutely. I mean, a lot of people think that you know, all of a sudden you had MFDP, it sprung up, in which it was good. But that didn't happen, I mean, that - as you now know, this - will know, I hope, from reading this (heh), your paper, that - there was a long history of organizing, and of turmoil, and of push, that preceded this, and that that was absolutely necessary... now, maybe I'm wrong, why I think it is, anyway.