

Jim Forman - November 12, 1965

Well, we were discussing the question - you were talking about the shift from voter registration to protest politics. Yeah, well, my contention is that actually the whole desire and the whole motivation around the voter registration project was really a drive toward protest politics because a lot of people in SNCC were talking about the saving importance of the Black Belt counties in particular, so that there was a general orientation that you had to try to get into these areas and to build some kind of political base. But that voter registration was a technique that should be used as an organizing device. And I think that in Mississippi in particular, that you can't just see the freedom vote as the first manifestation of - what you would call, say voter registration toward protest politics, but that it has to be considered in certain evolutionary stages, because even going back to 1961 - well, first, I mean, people started registering voters in McComb in August of 1961, and that got interrupted with the arrests and the jails - and the jailings. But that when people went into Jackson, it mainly was the people who were working in direct action - Lafayette, and Diane Nash, and McKinney, and (Bevel), Kathie Brooks and Paul Brooks. There was the feeling that you had to begin mobilizing people and they ran up against this whole cornerstone of fear, which is very rampant in Mississippi. And people started working on what I call - what was called the poll tax campaign for 1962. I think Mississippi allowed two months for the payment of these poll taxes in certain election years. And 1962 was a congressional election year. And people did search out L.T. Smith and Rev. (Tremell), and those people were really Diane and (Bevel) and Brooks and the other people that were there - because I remember them saying that these two candidates who had agreed to run for Congress - and they felt that running black candidates would be an important step toward motivating the people to register to vote. So that people worked during the spring in limited fashions on those campaigns. Now, Moses entered the picture because he had - came up from McComb to Jackson and wanted to work in those campaigns and worked as submerged campaign director for R.L.T. Smith. And that that was done, you know, with the full awareness of the whole SNCC executive committee and staff at that time, because all of us felt that that was a very important thing, in terms of building some form of organization and working on the question of motivation. I think that the - and following that campaign, after that summer, after the primary in June, '62, people went around and got petitions saying if I were - if you could have voted in this election would you have voted for Jamie Whitten or Rev. Tremell. I mean, which was really in a sense something of a freedom vote, but it wasn't called that, I mean - cause I was a petitioner, I recall
that was the petition

very directly, and that that petition was used even when people opened up Sunflower County, or at least went into Sunflower County, not opened it up. And it was presented on the opening day of Congress, of '63, but it didn't get anywhere at that particular time, maybe we didn't have a lot of signatures, and the kind of support wasn't there. But there are certain natural things that have to be considered, given the fact that people worked in those campaigns in '61. And that was that - the die was sort of cast for people working in elections. I mean that that was the Congressional election at that time, and the next election that came up was the Governor's race, in the fall of '63. Well, by that time, when there had been a greater buildup of forces, in Mississippi, which even made the contemplation of such an action as that as possible, but the (I don't know, I've forgotten how we started talking about this) - but it's true that the limited number of people registered had an effect upon the decision to run people in the Governor's campaign, but the point that I'm trying to stress is that there was a natural sequence, there was a natural line, that it wasn't just the fact that we'd registered so limited people that you decided to run candidates in the governor's race. I mean, as I see it, it's another manifestation of trying to focus public opinion on the situation in Mississippi. And also trying to build motivation across the state, trying to get people sort of involved in the political process.

JM: Then the only sense in which the freedom vote could be a new idea was in the exact tactical form it took.

JF: Yeah, the whole question of going around the state, say with a freedom ballot, I mean - it had to take that tactical form because - I mean, you just didn't have people that were registered to - across the state, to make any kind of significant dint on - in any governor's race. And the idea that freedom vote was to show to the country - you know, just as it was attempted in the Whitten campaign, you know, that if Negroes could vote that they would have voted for this person rather than the racist candidate. And also, I mean, that the thing that was shown on the R.L.T. Smith campaign, that you could get to a lot of people. I mean because you couldn't deny the political candidates access to TV time, even though it had to be paid for in some instances, but, in the R.L.T. Smith campaign, I think there was some free TV time that was even obtained. I mean, but all that has to be looked at in the background of an isolated Mississippi, where you didn't even - where you couldn't even distribute leaflets back in the fall of '61 in Jackson, I mean, there was a little paper put out called the Voice, and if you were passing it out on the streets in Jackson you would be arrested, you see, and so that there was very little way of communicating with people. And one of the things

that developed in the R.L.T. Smith campaign was getting TV time and speaking to people about issues. And of course the campaign for governor only accentuated that, you see, so that it seems to me that the name "Freedom Vote" was a new name, but I just don't see it as any different, because - I mean, even across the South, not just in Mississippi - I mean, all of us were talking about the fact that Negroes were a majority in a lot of the counties, and it has to be remembered also, at that time, that you didn't have the reapportionment cases of the Supreme Court, you didn't have the decision of "one man, one vote" and the redistricting by these state legislatures that in Georgia for instance, the counties - and I still think this is true in many instances - really held the basis of power in these areas, I mean that whole machinery, designed so that the counties, and especially the Black Belt counties, had an inordinate amount of power in the state legislature. So by people working in specific counties, there was obvious recognition that this was a slow long-range process, but that it was a natural area for you to work in. Then you'd go and work in the congressional districts too. As we indicated that the - that at that time a lot of energy was put into - that a lot of people were very concerned about how you break the isolation of Mississippi, and I mean, just in this country in general, the terrors of Mississippi, you know, were not really known, violence was occurring, and except for specific situations, you get some national attention through the press, you know, Mississippi itself had to become a real national concern. And so one of the things that - some of the positive things in terms of the freedom vote was this whole question of external-internal pressure. I mean people in motion in Mississippi, and then, of course, some pressure from the outside which came about, you know, from the Yale and Stanford students coming into the state, primarily because of the fact that they were white and they represented a certain power establishment, I mean that there were lines of relationships vis-a-vis their parents, and their congressional districts, you know, a Congressman from California gets excited when some parents called him from his constituency, you see, about somebody being in Mississippi.

JM: Then the freedom vote would really become the first time that protest politics in this form is (overtly?) seen by the nation.

JF: Yeah, well, that I think is true. Well, I mean, you gotta accentuate it. I mean, I don't want to say by the nation, () I mean by a greater segment of the population.

JM:

JF: I mean, I think that the consequences of the freedom vote were important even inside the state because what happened was that a tremendous amount of resources were poured into the freedom vote, and - there'd always been a shortage of cars, and in the last two or three days before the freedom vote I think we rented about twenty cars. And people saw that it was possible if you had the transportation, I mean, ... to mobilize large segments, you see, and people began to think in terms of statewide operations, after the freedom vote, because they had gone into areas, they'd obtained names, they'd made contacts, and that was very important in terms of the summer of '64. Now it was around that time, of course, that a lot of frustration was setting in, around the slow pace of registration, but also around the violence and intimidation, and killings, and you know, the agony of trying to organize in these areas, and develop concern for the rest of the country. Now there was a lot of talk, I mean there was a lot of talk about building a confrontation between the state government and the federal government, I mean, during the freedom vote or right after the freedom vote. And there were some of us that, I mean, I was in this category, who felt that it was a mistake to think that, say in the summer of '64, that the Democratic government, when it would be embroiled in the race for president, was going to really try to mount some sort of confrontation with troops and things like that, and that out of the discussions around the summer project - or rather that from that project we ought to establish some long-range basis that people should be used in organizing () that would be lasting beyond the summer (). Because just to bring, you see, I mean what happened was that the freedom vote did focus a lot of attention on Mississippi because you had the Yale and the Stanford students down, and it pointed out also that it was very important to get people from a lot of congressional districts around the country involved in Mississippi - that there would be a lot of anxiety and concern on the part of the country and specific individuals because people were coming from congressional districts - but that - and that maybe if a lot of these people got in you had this kind of confrontation, but that concept was soon abandoned. I mentioned that because there was a lot of discussion around the time of the freedom vote about trying to build some sort of confrontation between the state and federal government.

JM: But then, this idea was taken up again with the - the idea of the challenge, and - to the regular Democratic Party of Mississippi, wasn't it?

JF: Well, not in terms of necessarily - of that confrontation in terms of the summer project, but it was in terms of - there's no question about it, that the formation of the Freedom Demo-

cratic Party, and the challenge at Atlantic City - there was a confrontation, as well as there was a confrontation in the congressional challenge. But the objectives would be different, I mean, there was talk around the freedom vote about a confrontation between the state and federal government - you know, sending in troops, this, that, and the other, you know, a lot of that was written about. But you see, even, you know, I mean - given the fact that - well, I was saying, back to this whole question of (), I mean, you know, it was anticipated that - you (build a) little basis in these congressional districts, and that you get your forces stronger, and that you could also move into Jackson, and that that's important, because what happened was that in '61 people found that it was just impossible to even organize and to work in Jackson, because of the repressive police force, you know, and with the Tremell campaign and - which was later than () campaign, Tremell died - you know, people got out of Jackson and were organizing in these districts and building () basis so that you didn't, say at the time of the freedom vote, you didn't spread out from Jackson, but what you had then was a converging back into Jackson. ... You know this is all haphazard and () - I don't know what it means...

When I was in Jackson, see, and all the staff was right there in Jackson, and people were talking about the difficulty of organizing, and I knew I had a lot of opposition against, say, the direct action staff concentrating in Jackson, because it was in Jackson, see, that the White Citizen's Council had the strongest hold, and the police had the dogs, and so forth, and it was the state capital, which meant that the opposition, you know, was the strongest right there in the state capital. Logically you could assume that the kind of control that was had over Jackson did not exist in a lot of these outlying areas. That you could find it easier to organize in these rural areas than it was... in Jackson, see, now, - that was the discussion, I don't know if the discussion itself helped people to move out. What I'm saying is that a lot of this is not calculated, but it seems to me what you have to do () is to look back on it and put it in some sort of framework and to interpret it. But people knew, you know, that at some point you had to go back into Jackson, you know, and of course after that freedom vote there was, you know, well, during the freedom vote rather, () was the whole emphasis on building the Jackson office, because at that time the concept of COFO was getting stronger and stronger. ...

JM: Then, the idea of SNCC really was to build a confrontation but the form it would take was sort of...

JF: Well, it wasn't really spelled out, I mean, you know, () this program called operation MOH - Move On Mississippi. Which was not drawn up until after the McComb thing, and, the whole idea was to get ten to fifteen cities in Mississippi that would move on some form of direct action. But you know, people didn't spread out at first, and they were concentrated in Jackson, and it was very, very difficult to organize people. The idea really was just to build groups of people and independent organizations all over the state and no one could predict the timetable, but it was just assumed that these forces would begin to coalesce, and to make some uniform protest. And we came a year or two earlier than what I had anticipated - () or '64, but - you see, I think you have to look at it in terms of guerrilla warfare, and that to me is the best analogy. You develop a little base, and then you develop another little base, another little base here and some more people there, and - that concept made the freedom vote possible, because there were already initial contacts in a lot of these areas, and that you then move in, you know, into the stronghold, which is what (Johnson is). Rather than working in the enemy stronghold and then trying to fan out and then converge on it.

JM: Now there is talk that by the summer of '63 the white power structure in Mississippi was fairly confident of itself, that it had the movement licked.

JF: I just don't see how anybody can say that, I mean, you know the facts just don't jibe with that. I mean, when you start off with five or six people in the summer of '61, working in McComb, Mississippi which was the first time that - Well, there'd been other voter registration pitches, I think that the NAACP was a threat to Mississippi, but you didn't have that kind of indigenous movement going on, that kind of protest action, that - then in the fall, or in the spring of '62 you get more and more people coalescing around the movement, by virtue of the Hendrie and Lindsay campaigns, you - in the summer of '62 you start with this COFO thing which grows stronger up in the Delta - I mean it's true that people here - had not been concerned with Jackson, and you're opening up more and more counties, and I just can't see, you know, I mean I really don't see how anybody - how the power structure () I just don't see how that talk has any reality to it. ...up in Greenwood, you know, we had established office, and we put a lot of resources in building a

base in the Delta, and that was after it was very difficult for us to get an office after the office got burned down, but we did find one, and you had a good base up in Greenwood, a lot of forces that were coalescing up in the Delta. We had discovered new people, Mrs. () had been discovered at that time, and there was work and activity going around that second congressional district, we'd moved up into Holley Springs, people were at work in the first congressional district, () and the rest of them had moved down into the fifth, and working in Hattiesburg, so that I just don't see - and the Justice Department was filing more and more suits, and they were preparing for their big suits, you know, testing those Mississippi laws. It was a question of time; also, I think that the freedom vote was, you know, I mean all the activities up to the summer of '64 - '63 was designed to speed up the process too. But I really don't subscribe to that, and...

JM: Then what it would be is that, rather than the whites being confident, they were sort of wondering because they were afraid that things were going to break down.

JF: Yeah, and we had had that confrontation up in the Delta, with the Citizen's Council... up in Greenwood, where in '62 you had - you couldn't even work, you couldn't even organize. I think that if anything, that a lot of the segregationists should have known that it wouldn't be long, that it was a question of stalling for time, working on time.

S.V. | JM: The freedom vote would be the first time that large numbers of whites came into Mississippi.

JF: Oh, yeah, that's true, there'd be no question about that, I mean...

JM: Do you think this made a significant difference to the movement?

JF: Yeah, I think so, I mean, I think because this is first of all basically a white culture, and that people exhibit more concern in terms of what happens to a white person in a given situation as compared to what happens to the Negroes. I think that the - that in many ways the political harassments around the speeding, the tickets and so forth we had during the '63 campaign, can be attributed in many ways to the fact that you had certain volunteers, and that mostly when that gubernatorial election and people wanted to play down that role, you see, I mean because there was fear that the federal government might move in in terms of protecting some of these people, and because after all,

some of the students came from some of the powerful centers, and you know, in the country. From another point of view I think that it gave additional strength to the movement because it made more people available to do certain types of jobs. I think that it increased the focus, on what was happening, it helped to provide additional resources, you know, that could get some of the work done that was needed to be done...

JM: Then do you think that all these white students made a difference for - filled in the gap which was left by the voter education project money that had been withdrawn...

JF: Oh, no, I don't think that, I mean I think that SNCC is to be commended for really supporting that freedom vote campaign when, in fact, very few other people did. The - see, I don't think - I don't take the position that the money for the voter education project - I mean, I think there are a lot of reasons that you can talk about that - but that a lot of them were simply administrative, I mean, that here was a project that was designed to register voters, it had poured a considerable amount of money into Mississippi, you know, that it found it very difficult to register voters there, I think that given the upcoming election that people wanted to place the result - the remaining money in the most strategic places in terms of getting some people registered, in these southern cities, I think also that one could argue that the voter registration project had backfired, that in '61 there was a lot of designed emphasis to get students involved in voter registration, even by the administration, you know, and that there was some feeling that this would be less dramatic and it would be less embarrassing to the country. But that just didn't work out, and that didn't work out primarily because of SNCC's decision that it was going to go into these forgotten areas, where a lot of the drags of the societies - not in terms of the people but - a lot of the racism of the society was very, very embedded, and that had to be sort of thrown up to the public eye... that was really a conscious thing, I mean, a lot of those aspects of it.

No, I don't think that they filled a vacuum, necessarily, I mean (JM: But it did part -) Yeah, there's no question about that. And then I think that the staff in Mississippi had been having a long debate about the involvement of whites in the state, there was a problem that they had to ultimately face up to,... I mean actually the involvement of whites at that time really resulted from several things, going back to the Pete Seeger - Theodore Bikel concert in the spring, of '64, that was held in Greenwood, where whites came over for the first time, and nothing happened,

see, and then with Mike Miller and Dick () coming down in the summer of '63, and that they were able to work, and then some other whites came in during the fall, and it was evident by the time that whites could work in the state of Mississippi. So that it was the first time that that large a number of whites had been involved in Mississippi, but it was not the first time that whites had been involved, and that again has to be seen out of that process, that whole development, as I see it. Simply because at the time that a lot of the whites came in, we must have had maybe ten or twelve white staff people that were working in Mississippi at the time of the freedom vote. I don't know, I'd have to count them up, there's Mike Mendy, Casey was over there, maybe it wasn't ten or twelve, but there were at least five or six.

JM: Then, it's been said that each of these new ideas, that they're tried, little by little, and it is very definitely evolutionary process of getting more and more involvement, let's say whites, but it causes a sort of revolution in the power structure every time it -

JP: Oh, yes, that's true, there's no question about that. Then the other thing, see, I just think that you can't forget the fact of the involvement - say of the whites in the freedom vote in the summer of '64, another protest movement, the effect upon the people themselves. We were not unmindful of that, I mean, that if you're talking about building a national movement and if you're talking about getting more and more people involved in the movement, that one of the ways to do that is that you expose them to a lot of protest situations. And I don't know, I mean I can't ever prove it, but I think that there's a relationship between protests that were going on in the Negro communities - certainly the protests - the spirit of protest which I think is in a lot of the northern kids, I mean, from both the negative and the positive point of view. From the positive point of view a lot of the kids get involved, and then when they come back, to talk about protesting things in their own neighborhoods after they've been involved in the Deep South situation, is very very minimal, I mean, that is it doesn't require that much energy, or that much risk. From the negative point of view is that it forces a lot of other people to say, well, if people can do this in Mississippi, why shouldn't we be doing something about our own situations, you know? Or you get people saying, well, why should I run off to Mississippi, we have problems here, and maybe they haven't been doing anything so that begin to talk about doing something in their own areas, you know.