(This interview with Marion Barry took place in Washington D.C. on April 7, 1972 at 2 pm. Barry was born on March 6, 1936)

Barry: During 1964 I was in Chicago. We were meeting with support groups trying to get the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's challenge and support going because it was going to come before the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City in August. Then I went to Los Angeles. I worked up and down the coast. I went to Sacramento and met with the governor about support. At that time it must have been Governor Brown. In fact, he had a daughter who was working for SNCC in Mississippi. So he was sort of linked in, whether he liked it or not, to it. And we met with some legislators and some state senators and representatives and delegates to the convention. So they went on record supporting the challenge and instructing their delegates to vote to unseat the Mississippi white Democrats. And I went up to Salem, Oregon and Seattle, Washington. I just did the whole coast thing for the challenge. And I came back to Atlantic City from Los Angeles.

Carson: What happened in Atlantic City?

Barry: Basically, I wasn't in on all that was going on in Atlantic City, but from talking to people who were right involved, like Bob Moses and others, the challenge that picked up a great deal of support, much more than people had expected it to in terms of the Democratic party bosses who sort of try to run the party, was that they were confronted with a real dilemma. How do you not alienate the South by expelling the Mississippi so-called Democrats? At the same time how do you make the Democratic party not look that bad in the eyes of black people. Knowing what I know now, I can see what was going on, but at that time I couldn't see all that. Now I know a great deal more about the country and I know a great deal more about politics. But at that time when a lot of that was going on, a lot of us didn't know all those ramifications. Joe Rauh was very interested mainly in

trying to get a compromise where I think two people would be seated on the floor and some other jive like that and the regulars would be seated too. There would be some votes for the Mississippi Democrats and the white people. And there would be some votes for the Freedom Democrats. The MFDP people rejected that, which I think was appropriate and proper to do. Basically what happened, a lot of backroom stuff was going on and people trying to compromise.

Carson: What was your assessment of the effect that had on the attitudes of people in SNCC?

Barry: Well, I don't know. I think that a large number of people in SNCC were pissed off, that's the first thing. Secondly, I think it helped them to better understand the nature of the Democratic party, and both parties in this country. I think it helped them lay the groundwork for the feeling of a more independent party or direction that would have been laid if the Democratic party had accommodated the MFDP. I think people have been separating for that like they are now to some extent. If you check around the country now, and I know enough people who used to work for SNCC, you'll find a large number of us, if we're involved in the Democratic party, it's not really in the same sense. It's either to the left or people are involved in independent or reform politics. There are a lot of ex-SNCC people doing that. I think the challenge and the whole thing had a lot to do with them seeing what needed to be done. That's my view, shit anyway.

Carson: SNCC started out of the sit-in movement, and yet over a period of a year or two, it became political in the sense of getting involved in voter registration and moving in that direction. What can you remember about what was happening during that period, and how did that change come about? Who and what kind of influences led the organization in that direction?

Barry: It was in early '61 we were meeting. We met in two conferences a year, I guess, in terms of large conferences. The Coordinating Committtee itself, which was composed of

twenty-five or thirty people from around the country, met at least once a month. I remember the meeting that I think had a lot to do with the direction. I was at the meeting held at a place called Mount Eagle, Tennessee, which was where Highlander Folk School was outside of Chattanooga. At that time Charles Jones and Chuck McDew, primarily, these are the ones I remember, at this particular time had been in touch with Harry Belafonte and some people in New York, Bobby Kennedy, some other people and foundations who wanted to put some money into voter registration in the South. Then there was Diane Nash, Jim Bevel, and myself who probably were arguing against that position. We were arguing against getting involved in voter registration because we thought it was sort of a by-off or by-out. At that point we were very suspect. I thought personally that voter registration was too passive. We had been doing a lot of nonviolent direct action kind of things. By that time most of the lunch counters in the South had been desegregated. That's where the big thrust was. There was some mopping up to do in the little towns and little places. As I recall there were still a lot of us interested in those kind of activities. We debated it about three days, back and forth and back and forth. Until what finally came out of it was that Diane Nash was sort of the coordinator for direct action. Charlie Jones was the coordinator for voter registration kind of thing. It was like both things were going on at the same time. Those people who wanted to do direct action could go do that. Those who wanted to do voter registration could go get involved with that. That's when I think the whole thing started happening. Then Bob Moses went to Mississippi, Amite County and Sunflower County and other places up in the Delta with Amzie Moore and he said that we ought to be involved in Mississippi in voter registration. And that's how I think the thing started going. Some staff people went over to Mississippi and started working. There were some arrests and it got hot and heavy. So gradually the shift started moving in terms of the whole organization from direct action in terms of sit-ins, it was still going on

because as late as '63 I remember we went in Atlanta and we had a sit-in at the Toddhouses. There was a whole big arrest thing and Dick Gregory was down there. We were having a conference and we sat in the streets and that kind of stuff. So, I think that's my analysis when it started happening. Then as we got involved with voter registration, it really became much more dangerous and much rougher than sitting in lunch counters. The organization tried to move in that direction. Plus they were moving in the area of trying to help people with economics in terms of cooperatives and stuff like that. That was being pushed too at that time. So I think that's how it started.

Carson: Now after the summer project in Zinn's book and in other books written about that there seems to have been a relapse. After the challenge failed, after many of the things happened, there was kind of a reassessment of everything. Now were you involved after that summer?

Barry: Well, after that summer in September I went to New York. I was the director of the New York office, which was our largest fund raising office because during the summer that office raised almost $600,000 for the organization. I think we raised a little over a million dollars that year to operate on and to run the organization. Ivanhoe Donaldson was in out of New York, but I think he was in Atlanta, Virginia, he was all around. I mean Ivanhoe was all over the damn place. He was working in New York too, in terms of some fund raising, but he wasn't working directly in the New York office. I was working there and we had about nine or ten other full-time staff people working - about fifteen.

Carson: What seemed to be the changes in policy during that period?

Barry: Well, part of what was happening was that, that was right after the three people got killed, and a lot of the projects in the South, a number of the college students because they were brighter and because they had more understanding of what was going on, invariably moved to the front in terms of leadership. If you were to go back

and examine the projects city by city you would discover that generally speaking you had a black cat, a woman that was like the Project director, say Hattiesburg or Vicksburg or Greenwood or Greenville, but most of the work and most of the real decision and most of the push was with white people, with white students, and white people who had come down. So a number of us were very disturbed and concerned about that. So then after the summer I would say out of the thousand people that went down over a period of time, more than a thousand, but at any one time there were probably about a thousand people that we knew about plus about another two or three hundred just wandering around that nobody knew about that was all over the state. They were wandering everywhere. And it was good in terms of the visibility it put on the state and opened it up. But after the summer I would say about anywhere from one-third to fifty percent of these who had been there wanted to stay. And that created some problems for a number of reasons. I think the majority of the people that wanted to stay were white women. And there was a lot of shit going on with that, that was upsetting some of the blacks in town because most of the white women were relating to the black men, so naturally most of the black women in the town got upset because all these black men for the first time I guess had an opportunity to relate to a white woman. There was a lot of harrassment around it but basically as long as it was in the black community nobody did anything about it. White women could relate to black men and they could go walk on the streets together. The cops didn't like that but as long as you just stayed over there with the Negroes, fuckin' around downtown. So that caused some problems, so we were reassessing that, what it is we could do to...plus psychologically people were drained. That was a big push. All that summer there was a lot of voter registration stuff going on, killings, a lot of jailings, people getting beat, a lot of pressure was on, and the country was up. I think this was right before the '64 Civil Rights Act, I guess that's when

it was. So anyway, that was happening and King was over somewhere in Georgia or Alabama, I don't know where he was. It was just sort of a down time, down period. But the big problem was reassessing the role of white people, and the whole thing. The same thing was true with our staff. The SNCC staff had grown to about, at its peak during the summer I think we were paying either subsistence or something, almost 150 to 200 people. We had a big staff, people all over the country, everybody was working for SNCC. It was like a massive army. Those who didn't work ain't got paid for volunteers, you see. When we first started the SNCC staff was predominantly black, 95% black. I mean, I remember Bob Zellner and Dorothy Zellner were among our first, in fact we had a what you call our white field secretary. They would go to white campuses in the South and try to deal with white people and black field secretaries would be dealing with blacks. So when we started, our staff was 95% and increasingly got to be 80% blacks until it got down to I think during the height of it in '64, I was looking at some of the names the other day, I would say it was about 50%, or maybe 60% white. And so we were concerned about that too, and how it that is you deal with the whole white black thing. And it caused some very serious problems. The problems manifested themselves I think then it looked like they were black and white problems, but they were really philosophical because we had some ferocious battles. They weren't physical, but ideological battles. In fact, we met in Atlanta at the end of the Summer Project in October or November where all the staff came together for a whole week and it was rough. It was either in Atlanta or Jonestland, Miss. At that time we had what we called the structure and non-structure people. That is, there were some people who said we need to tighten up the structure. We have some very definite lines of direction and lines of authority and responsibility, as well as some problematic thrusts because at that time people were just wandering all over. Some people were wandering in and out of the organization. Some worked, some didn't work, you know, that kind of thing.

Then other people who said well we ought to do just what we want to do. Let's be free, and be this and be that. Most of the people who were saying let's not have much structure were white people, but it wasn't really white, it was like most of them were from the North. The Blacks who were supporters of that were from the North. Those Blacks who were from the South, like myself and others, basically opposed that position. So, we hassled it out, back and forth, back and forth. Those from the South were for the structure, for some type of direction, some type of discipline, that is if you worked for the organization, you ought to have some basic things you have to do. Because what happened, during the summer a lot of white people had brought into the organization a different kind of life style. They worked the day, half the day if they wanted to work. Drugs started to be introduced I think at that point, particularly a lot of marijuana, not hard drugs or anything like that. So the organization had a lot of vitality still. We could mobilize and move from Atlanta to Jackson in a day. We had cars coming from everywhere, people coming in. But things were moving in sort of a different little way, then they had been. It was like an army, we were very effective. So that went on and I think that was the beginning of the differences philosophically. We voted certain things that gave us structure. Jim Forman was very active in that struggle, trying to get some organization together. Jim Forman, Ivanhoe was involved in that, John Lewis, a whole bunch of people, I don't know all their names now. Most of the black staff people were involved with what we called the structure people and the non-structure people. Or we called the non-structure people the freedom high people. We had some very tough arguments. That was in '64, then the organization started moving on to some other things. I came here in '65, the head of the Washington office. I think it must have been April.

Carson: Now just in terms of (Newfield) and his book, he gives us a description of what happened in terms of the May '66 meeting which Stokely Carmichael became chairman.

And according to his thing, the vote was originally on whether to attend Johnson's civil rights conference in June. Lewis wanted to attend and the organization basically didn't want to attend. And this was one of the crucial issues.

Barry: Basically as I recall, John Lewis had been attending some preliminary meetings. They called in so-called leaders, I think they called them the big six, people from SNCC, SCLC, Randolph, Martin, and Wilkins and all these people. And they had been attending the meetings. So they had these conferences before the conferences. They tried to make sure everybody put us in there, so it wouldn't be brought out in the conference in a negative way. The majority of the people at the meeting did not want SNCC to be officially listed as a sponsor or participant in the conference. In fact, there was a vote that we wouldn't attend the conference. I think most of us supported that. These jive conferences had been going on all the time. Now that was separate from the vote. The vote for the chairmanship and everything didn't have anything to do with that. That was something else. Every year, once a year, the chairman is elected. It just so happened that John had been chairman from '63 to '66, because he had taken over from McDew. So it was time for the annual election, anyway. Elections were going to be held in April in Nashville, [illegible]. We move around and do that. And that was something separate. That issue came up earlier in the day. That was all out of the way. And at night was when the nominations were made for the chairmanship. So Stokely won. I wasn't even there when the election took place. I was in the bed sleeping because we had been meeting all morning and it was a marathon kind of a meeting.

Carson: Was there an ideological split over some issues?

Barry: I don't think that's what led to the shift in leadership. My own personal feeling is that Stokely had been working in Lowndes County with the Panther party. Well it was the Lowndes County organization and the panther was their symbol. So Stokely had been pushing that we ought to be moving toward independent political organizations, as the ideological direction. He was very visible in the organization. He was moving around

in terms of other states, having seminars and helping people organize political things. I think it was probably a natural evolution. Quite frankly, what I think had happened with John was that unfortunately he had, because of the demands on the organization, being the chairman of the organization, I think it was necessary for him to spend a lot of his time outside of the field, that is, in New York trying to raise money. All these fund raisers they wanted the chairman to come. All these funny little meetings he had to go to. I think what had happened was that that had sort of taken him away from a large number of the staff people who didn't have a chance to relate to him and be around him and to see him produce. Because everybody in the organization had the utmost respect for him, in terms of his commitment, in terms of what had happened to them because just a year before he had almost been beaten to death in Selma on the Selma Bridge. And everybody knew that. They knew that John was strong, dynamic. So I just think the time had come. I left I wasn't there. and they were debating the questions, about leadership and other stuff. And I had been up the night before all night meeting on something and we met all afternoon that day and I went to bed about 2:00 or 1:30 or something like that. So I woke up the next morning and they said the election had been held and Stokely was the new chairman. So we went on and met. We met the next two days as I recall. I was at the Washington office at that time.

Carson: There's when you got involved in Washington politics.

Barry: In 1966 right before that meeting we had a boycott with the bus system. I organized that. I suggested we do it and have people organize around it. We were successful in that. Then we had a boycott about home rule and some other stuff like that, so we were very active at that time doing that.

Carson: In terms of the people who came from the North and people who were more or less indigenous, the ones who came out of Atlanta, out of Nashville, in terms of

beginning SNCC, was there ever a conflict along these lines?

Barry: Very little, very little. I think that the students in the North were a little bit more politically sophisticated than we were in the South. I think that Northern politics had educated them to the point that they understood things a lot better than we did in terms of just the theoretical parts of what was going on. And you could see that. The students who came from Howard were beginning to move in a different direction ideologically, which was good, I think. The local people, Cox, Stokely, Charlie Cobb, Bob Moses were the main thrusts. Rap was working at that time too, I think. It was good that those kind of movements were happening. Then you had the Black Power thing.

Carson: I'd like now to get your assessment of what were the long-range effects of SNCC on black politics first on black consciousness, on black political development. What do you see as what happened?

Barry: Well I think that during the early '60's there's no question. I think that SNCC in terms of this revolutionary zeal at that time was nonviolent demonstrations, but at that time was in the vanguard, was unheard of, I think it's passé now to be talking about that kind of stuff, but at that time it was a forward thrust. It got a large number of students involved in action that would not have been involved before. I think it's having this effect now because the students who were involved in direct action in the '60's are now involved in political things in their community. I mean if you go to a community and look around, and find who's young and who's under thirty-five, that's doing the thing politically whether or not it's establishment politics, whether or not it's anti-establishment politics, whether or not it's underground politics. I would venture to say that 60% of those persons had had some dealings in the movements of the '60's with SNCC or SCLC, either on a college campus or in a town, you know, where they were living when things went down at the time it went down. So I think that was healthy because you would not have had leadership in these

communities that we wouldn't have had, I don't think, in the same proportion, but we were baptized in fire earlier than we would have been if ever. So I think that was one good thing. Secondly, I think that there's some concrete things in terms of breaking down a large number of the barriers that gave people some hope that things could be done if you pushed hard enough and if you worked hard on it and that kind of thing. And then the latter part of what I think was very crucial was the fact that the whole black awareness I think was enhanced about a thousand percent.

Carson: That seems to be there from the beginning, I mean in Rap's book he talks about how at the very beginning there was the racial consciousness theme and a conflict between white and black from the beginning.

Barry: Well, it wasn't that strong, but it was simmering and it was expressed very vividly when Stokely did it on the march at that time. There had been a lot of talk before that about black people and you had to have it because the kind of organizing that was going on at that time. But the last thing I think has had the greatest effect on the country in terms of awakening the simmering feelings of blackness that black people had but who had not expressed it. I think that's an everlasting effect. We can see it all over. All the black studies programs, all the Afro-American clubs, all the this, and all the black black black forever black, you know, kind of thing. So I think that was very significant.

Carson: Now you mentioned a lot of the people involved in SNCC are now exercising political leadership in various areas. I'm trying to reach as many people as possible and talk with them. I've already contacted Donaldson here and Lester McKinnie. Could you name some other people that were at one time involved? Where are for example Nash and Bevel now?

Barry: Bevel is in Memphis right now. I saw some friends of mine last week at the Black Educational Conference.

He's in Memphis. I don't know where Diane is. She's just suddenly disappeared. I don't know what happened.

Carson: What happened to Moses? Where is he?

Barry: He disappeared, I think. Nobody has heard hide nor hair...I have not seen Bob Moses in four years, at least since '67, probably.

Carson: Is Stokely in Africa?

Barry: Yeah, he's in Africa. You have people out on the coast like D'Army Baylor. He was in Berkeley. He was involved with Southern University and he was involved with SNCC, not staff wise. . I just don't know where everybody is. I think the person who might know better than I do would be John Lewis because he keeps track of all this. John would probably because he's involved with the voter education projects so he has his fingers around on where people are and I don't. I don't know who's in New York, for instance, doing things. I just have not had the energy to think about all that, & worry about where people are.

Carson: Now just in terms of when you ended your association with SNCC. Was it a break or did it just kind of gradually...

Barry: Just drifted away. In 1967...It was increasingly hard, Washington was a very hard political town, very hard. In this town SNCC had been stereotyped about certain things. After the Black Power movement we supported all that and we pushed hard. But I was interested in some new kinds of things, like economic development and also some job training, businesses, that kind of thing, housing programs. I just thought I probably ought to start fresh without the stereotypes to get that done. I just resigned and gradually just started working for the organization. It was a very hard decision, a very difficult decision to make because once you have been there that long and once you have worked with people and once you've suffered together, it's kind of hard to do that. It wasn't a dramatic kind of break and all that kind of stuff. It was just a matter of resigning. Lester worked in an office. I helped him out when I could now and then. And that's the

way it was. I went to New York, to Stokely's wedding. I think that was after I resigned from SNCC. I think he got married the latter part of '67.

Carson: You weren't around when the whole Black Panther...

Barry: Not beyond that, no.