

Julian Bond Oral History Project
“The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-68”
American University

Charlie Cobb (15-JBOHP)
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Code: Gregg Ivers [GI] Charlie Cobb [CC]

GI: Today is Tuesday, April 8th, 2019, and we are at the African American Civil War Museum in Washington, D.C. to conduct an interview with Mr. Charlie Cobb for the Julian Bond Oral History Project, sponsored in part of the School of Public Affairs at American University. My name is Gregg Ivers. I am a Professor of Government at American University and Director of the Julian Bond Oral History Project. Mr. Cobb served as a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee from 1962-1967. He will talk about his time in the civil rights movement, some of his notable books and other published work and his relationship with and impressions of Julian Bond.

Mr. Cobb, thank you so much for coming down here this morning to the African-American Civil War Museum to have this conversation. I really appreciate your time.

CC: Happy to do it. And please call me Charlie.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

GI: Why don't we start by having you tell us a little bit about your background, the influences you might have had growing up and how that brought you into the Southern freedom movement?

CC: Well, sure. I mean there are several different strands with respect to that. I was born in Washington, D.C. and most of my family is still here in Washington, D.C. I spent my formative years – middle school years and high school years – in Springfield, Massachusetts. My father was a Congregational, now United Church of Christ, minister and that takes care of the geography. But there are lots of other kinds of influences acting on me, some from the family. We grew up with stories of Mississippi, which is where my grandmother was from, and my grandmother was the publicist for Mary Church Terrell, who had organized the Colored Women's Clubs here in Washington, D.C. My grandmother

had come to Washington, D.C. as a very young married woman at the beginning of the 20th century, so we had the stories. Her sister-in-law, Hattie, who was obviously the sister of her husband, was really the one who told us the stories of slavery – “the farm” as she called it. I didn't realize until many years later that she was talking about Mississippi. It was just that she never really gave a geographic specificity. It's much later I find that out. But the stories of slavery or stories that we come from – that's an important influence.

I come from a politically active family. My father's father, my grandfather, whom I didn't know, died young but was active in the beginning days of the NAACP here in Washington, D.C. My father was active in civil rights. His brother, my Uncle Jimmy (James) Kopp helped organize the whole National Alliance of Postal Workers. He was a lawyer and became their lawyer.

GI: What years are we talking about?

CC: All that would have been in the 1930s. Maybe even the late '20s. So we go back! There's all of that. I come from a family that almost without exception -- me being the primary exception -- completed higher education. My mother was the Chair of Romance Languages at Howard University. My grandmother was a librarian at Moorland-Spingarn [Research Center] at Howard University. My cousin and his father were lawyers. So there's that. One of the things that meant being in a politically engaged family was that there was material around to read and we were expected to read it. I mean the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Chicago Daily Defender* and the *Washington Afro American* were delivered to our house. We were made to read them. We kept up, even not understanding a lot of that.

We don't get television until the Montgomery bus boycott. I think that year was the first year we had a television in our house. When we're watching the images of that boycott, these people walking instead of taking the bus, and it's being explained to us what's going on and probably had a greater impact on us than say, Little Rock, which involved people our own age but we didn't see it. The main conversation I remember from the '50s was a 1954 Supreme Court decision [smiles] that was generating both excitement, concern and conversation.¹ And so all of these [events] are playing a role in shaping my views. Most notably I suppose, the murder of Emmett Till. And you've talked to enough people you may have heard that we frequently refer to ourselves as the "Emmett Till Generation."

GI: So Emmett Till's murder is the inspiration . . .

CC: Well, I don't know whether inspiration is the right word but certainly the impact of his murder is felt here. Emmett Till is killed when he's fourteen years old. I think I was fourteen at the same time when Emmett was. A lot of us were on either side of fourteen, fifteen or even thirteen when Emmett Till was killed. The way it reached us was not by a television but by a *Jet* magazine, or “The *Jet*” as it was called back then. The double truck photograph of Emmett Till in this coffin literally stopped us guys. I remember these

¹. Mr. Cobb is referring to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which declared state-mandated racial segregation public education unconstitutional.

discussions taking place among guys, my friends, my male friends. I don't know to what extent it had that kind of impact among women, although Joyce Ladner has said it did. That stopped us in our tracks. I can still remember standing on the street corners with five or six of us looking at this picture, knowing somewhere in our guts, even if we didn't know what we were gonna do, there was going to end with our generation.

I suppose the story is well-known. He is accused of whistling at this woman who is the clerk and wife of the owner of this grocery store, and ultimately kidnapped and really butchered and thrown into the Tallahatchie River. It wasn't a coherent political conversation. It was, there's right and there's wrong and we knew this was wrong and had crossed some kind of line. We had all heard stories about Mississippi before Emmett Till. Among adults, when you heard them talking, it was the worst place not just on earth but in the universe for black folks. That was already in our heads. Maybe because of our age it stopped us in our tracks. Without question in my mind, probably of all the things that unfolded in the 50s, the Supreme Court decision, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Civil Rights Acts later on, Little Rock, all the things that unfolded in the 50s, this was the most important.

In other words, during our high school and middle school years, Emmett Till and his murder probably had the biggest impact and is the biggest factor in the shaping of our consciousness and awareness.

THE PATH TO ACTIVISM

GI: Was there anyone outside your family or any of these events that you described that encouraged you to become active? Or was it just something that you decided to do?

CC: Well, I'm getting into activism gradually beginning in high school. I was in high school when the sit ins erupted in 1960 in Greensboro. And now we have one television! We're still getting the newspapers, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Amsterdam News*, the *Washington Afro-American* and the *Chicago Defender*, and they're covering those sit ins. Again, it's sort of like, in a more positive way, almost same similar kind of reaction to what we had towards Emmett Till. Now we're looking at people our own age, even if they were in college. We're looking at members of our generation taking on defiantly racism and segregation. They were college students for the most part. I would find out later that there were also protests initiated by high school students. That's what was coming through to us and [how we] watched the sit ins initially. Certainly, the Nashville student protests were well covered. The Atlanta student protests were well covered. Those two I remember.

I had this conversation with Chuck [McDew], and I seem to recall hearing something about the Orangeburg [S.C.] protest but they weren't as vivid in my mind as the Nashville protests and the Atlanta protests. We saw that they were college students. If you were black and in the twelfth grade, as I was, and even considering college, the odds were overwhelming that you'd be going to an historically black college or university, an HBCU as they're now called. And with a handful of exceptions, those schools are going to be in the South and therefore you were going to be confronted with precisely what you're seeing the students in Nashville or Atlanta are aware of are protesting. The question that's coming through is, "What are you going to do when you confront that?"

That's why I tell people these cities were so important because they shaped a certain kind of consciousness. The idea of political engagement – that didn't exist before the sit ins. Civil rights, when I was in the twelfth grade, was something grownups did. Yeah, your parents may have signed you up to become a youth member of the NAACP or something like that, but the civil rights struggle, Little Rock notwithstanding, was something that grownups did, not people your own age. Because of those sit ins, my first political active engagement therefore becomes picketing the Woolworths up North in support of what the Southern students were doing in 1960.

ARRIVING AT HOWARD UNIVERSITY

GI: I understand you come to Howard in 1961.

CC: Yes, 1961.

GI: Why Howard and not another HBCU?

CC: Well, it's complicated, my landing at college. It's a little complicated. It's a little unusual. I mean, I have family ties to Howard. Uncles, cousins who went to law school. My mother and my father and my grandmother all went there. I was expected to go to college, and I was not enthusiastic about going to college in the first place, which is what makes me a little different in that sense. If you look at the SNCC people and I think it's true for the CORE people too, that a lot of the key people in CORE and SNCC were the first generation to get to college. In my case, I had family members that go all the way back to Fisk University when it was Fisk Normal School.

Once you get out of slavery every generation in my family has sent its children to school. In that sense, it was such an ordinary part of my family life that I didn't feel any special obligation to go to college. I was reading things like Kerouac, Beat literature and poetry, and that seemed much more interesting than sitting in a classroom, which I had been doing for the previous twelve years. I [also] didn't have any clear, fixed idea of what I want to be. It wasn't like I had always wanted to be a doctor since I was a kid, or I wanted to be a lawyer or something concrete that might have been an incentive for college. I was pretty much ready to hit the road. It was my mother who talked to me talked me into going to college. Her argument was that, if I went to college, I could become a part of the Peace Corps later on, which did interest me. Her position was that I should therefore give it a try, which I did. I went to Howard in '61, that fall semester.

It's funny. I hadn't connected yet, even though on one level I understood the people protesting like Diane Nash or Julian Bond or Jim Bevel or people I would come to know well later, even though they were ahead of me in the education system. I recognized there was something important in what they were doing. I had connected my going to college with my taking a step into activism. It wasn't until I got to the Howard University campus that I found myself taking those steps that would lead me into protest activism in Virginia and Maryland and ultimately into SNCC.

GI: Did you join the Nonviolent Action Group?

CC: I didn't. I did not join the Nonviolent Action Group. What happened was when I got to campus the *Howard Hilltop*, the school newspaper – and remember this is the fall of 1961 – when I got to campus the *Howard Hilltop*, edited by Michael Thelwell, who was a key NAG activist, had a front page story on the Howard students who had participated in the Freedom Rides that summer. I was sitting on the campus reading this article and I think they had a picture of Stokely [Carmichael] on the cover or somebody on the cover from Howard.

I'm reading this story about Howard University students participating in them. As I'm reading it someone gives me a leaflet saying there's going to be a protest in Maryland that weekend, and a bus would be leaving from in front of the library – the Founder's Library – to carry people who wanted to participate in that protest. And I think it was the combination of reading that story, thinking about it and being actually handed a leaflet that led me to a decision that I would take another step. I said, the way to learn more about this – and I'm still not thinking about engaging in protests – is to get on the bus and meet some of these people. I get on the bus that weekend. I meet some people and we're talking and they're really explaining to me what this is all about because I don't know anything.

The bus goes to Baltimore, which again was a segregated city, even though it's a Northern city. I'm hanging out now with this group of Howard students. While we're in the church, the person leading the orientation, Juanita Jackson Mitchell, who came from a prominent Baltimore family both in terms of civil rights and in terms of money, wants to test some other places besides wherever they were planning to test in Baltimore. The group I'm with decides to do that. And it's going to be in Annapolis. I stick with this group [laughs]. I go to Annapolis with them. I'm now in a group that's planning to engage in some action and no longer meeting in a church in Baltimore, something qualitatively different even they're planning action. I have to make a decision. I decide if they are going to picket, I would go to picket with them.

The place they chose was Antoinette's Pizza Shop, a place frequented by Navy Midshipmen, except they decided – again, I'm not in their discussions really – they decide instead of picketing they would walk into the restaurant, sit down and order. If they were refused service, they would refuse to leave. I didn't realize this until they actually walked into the restaurant and I walked in with them. Sure enough, they are asked to leave, and they refused to leave. The police are called. When the police come, they not only refused to leave, they go limp, a tactic I had never seen before. Just make their bodies dead weight. So they have to be dragged out. I remember I recognized what they were doing right away and grabbed hold of the biggest person at the table and held on while we were dragged out. As a consequence, I land in jail [laughs].

GI: Is this your first time?

CC: Yeah [laughs]. This is all the same afternoon. It's one Saturday afternoon. This is half a day [laughs]. I wound up in the Anne Arundel County Jail. Everyone there was much more of a veteran activist than I was – at least the ones I got to know. The ones I got to know later on were also upper-classmen, and I'm a freshman at Howard University [laughs]. What was I? Seventeen or eighteen years old? Now I began to hear about the broader movement that's unfolding in the South. I hear about Robert Williams in Monroe, North Carolina.² I hear about SNCC. I hear about Bob Moses in McComb, Mississippi.³ This is all brand-new information to me and I'm asking about it.

I heard about Albany, Georgia. Bill Hansen was in jail with us, who was one of the few white SNCC field secretaries, and he had just come back from Albany, Georgia. I hear about the Freedom Rides because a couple of people have been on the Freedom Rides. All of that in this time. It wasn't a lot of time in the jail. It was just four days maybe, five days maximum. But I'm getting this panoramic portrayal all orally while in jail of this broader movement of which I knew nothing. Coming back, I still never went to a meeting. I was just a guy on campus. I had joined protests several times after that without ever going to a NAG meeting.

It's funny. The first NAG people I've met, setting aside Michael Thelwell for a while, weren't directly related to civil rights at all. I was going into the administration building to pay a bill. My parents had sent me a check to pay for something and wanted me to bring it to them. And when I reached the university's administration building. Two guys were sitting on the steps holding signs that said, "End ROTC." I stopped and asked them what ROTC meant. I didn't know what it was. We didn't have that where I went to [high] school. It turns out these guys both were deeply involved with NAG and very much involved with SNCC. They were also a part of this "Ban the Bomb" movement and very anti-war. They were talking to me about that within that context. They also began to talk to me about SNCC and NAG because I was telling them that I had participated in protests in Maryland. But I didn't know anything about this peace movement, the "Ban the Bomb" movement. They were talking *to* me. We sustained a conversation for years after that. This was my freshman year, so I had to orient myself to college.

GI: You have a lot going on right now . . .

CC: Oh, yeah [laughs]. I remember, since we're talking about Julian Bond, I wrote Julian Bond a letter. I used to tease Julian because I never got an answer [laughs]! What interested me was Monroe, North Carolina and Robert Williams because I wasn't sure about this nonviolence, but Robert Williams interested me in the sense that he had organized [armed] self-defense. I wrote Julian a letter introducing myself as a Howard student and asking whether SNCC was doing anything there and if they were, I would be interested in volunteering – some letter like that. Julian didn't remember getting it and he probably

². Robert Williams served as the president of the Monroe, North Carolina NAACP from 1956-1961, successfully leading efforts to integrate public facilities there. But he is perhaps best remembered for being among the very first mainstream civil rights leaders to advocate armed self-defense against white terrorism, making him an outlier in a movement that placed nonviolence at its core philosophy.

³. Bob Moses was interviewed for this project (10-JBOHP).

didn't. I don't even know if he got it. I knew his name had come up when I asked, "Well, how do you reach SNCC?" He was the communications director and his name came up in that context. I just wrote something like, "Julian Bond, whatever the address was, Atlanta, Georgia." I used to tease Julian for years after that. "You never answered my letter! When am I going to get an answer for my letter?" He would just laugh about it.

Of course, by the time I became involved with SNCC, I understood why I never got an answer to that letter. In any case, the demonstrations in Washington, Maryland and Virginia weren't just SNCC demonstrations. They represented a kind of coordinating body. CORE was very prominent in [those demonstrations], the Civic Interest Group of Baltimore, NAG, some other organizations. Because I had been involved in the sit ins, CORE invited me to a workshop for student activists in Houston, Texas, and they gave me some money for a bus ticket because they didn't fly you to these things in 1961 [laughs]. I decided this would be an opportunity to see the whole South. Washington, D.C., Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and so forth. Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and on into Texas. I could see the whole South.

I had planned to get off the bus in Atlanta, Georgia, and physically introduce myself to SNCC. The only name I knew of in SNCC was Julian's, but I knew that SNCC's headquarters were in Atlanta. However, the bus didn't get to Atlanta until midnight or something like that, so there was no prospect of getting off the bus and making my way to SNCC, so I stayed on the bus. The bus arrived in Mississippi in the morning. I knew the students were sitting in Mississippi. I called the NAACP because they were in the phone book, and asked them how to get from the bus station to the headquarters of the students who were sitting in. They very kindly gave me directions from the bus station. There's another story that's fairly involved about why it was I never made it to that workshop for student activists in Texas, some of which I tell in one of my books.

LANDING IN MISSISSIPPI

GI: So you just end up in Mississippi almost by chance?

CC: By chance, really, yes. I got off the bus. I really don't know who it was at the NAACP that gave me the directions. I made my way to their headquarters on Lynch Street [in Jackson, Mississippi]. I walked into their headquarters and introduced myself. The people who were there were Dorie Ladner, Lawrence Guyot, Jesse Harris and Colianna [sp?] Dell. Those four people were there. I explained how I've been involved in the sit in movement as a Howard University student and I was now on the way to Texas for this workshop. People like me, students. Then Lawrence Guyot, who was a big guy got up from his seat. He kind of hovers over me with complete and total disdain. At the same time, as I wrote about it somewhere, he was both challenging and bullying. People who know Lawrence Guyot know what I mean when I give that description of him. He kind of stared at me and said, "You're going to Texas for a workshop on civil rights? What's the point of doing that when you're standing right here in Mississippi?" This was a brand-new idea to me. Jesse Harris, who was one of the student leaders – actually, he was not a student – I think he was out of high school. Jesse chimed in he said something like "Yeah, man, you're in the war zone here! [laughs]"

And we have this conversation. I decided to just stay overnight and learn some more about these people. And see, because Emmett Till's murder had completely defined my thinking about Mississippi, the idea that students were protesting in Mississippi was a radical new idea for me. I felt it was one thing for me to be sitting in in Maryland, but something qualitatively different for students in Mississippi, this place where Emmett Till was killed, to be protesting. I wanted to know more. That was my early reporter's instinct, perhaps, but I wanted to know more about them, so I decided to stay overnight. They had a Freedom House that you could stay in. That was another kind of headquarters – more for eating and sleeping.

GI: What town are you in?

CC: Jackson, Mississippi. And I stayed overnight. SNCC was just beginning its Delta Project. Sam Block had already gone over to the Delta, gone on over to Greenwood from Cleveland, Mississippi where he was from. Lavon Brown, who was from McComb, Mississippi, where Bob had begun working in Mississippi, he had also gone up into Greenwood to begin this project around voter registration. This project was being encouraged by Amzie Moore, the NAACP president from Cleveland [Mississippi]. But I stayed another day. While I was there, the phone rang, and it was Sam saying this mob was breaking down the door to their headquarters and that they had called the FBI. The FBI said if anything happened – they couldn't do anything – but if anything happens to call them back. And then the phone went dead.

Well, my attitude now was this is how you slowly get involved with the movement. I had just been talking to Guyot, so I didn't feel I could get on a bus and go to Texas without knowing what happened to Guyot. Bob was going up to begin a project in Sunflower County, bringing two students, Landy McNair and Charles McLaurin, so I decided to go up with them. I had made two decisions. One, to go up with them to find out what had happened to these guys. As it turned out they had jumped out of a window and scurried across some roofs, slid down a television antennae and kind of disappeared into the black community. They had gotten away.

And the other decision I made was to join Landy and McLaurin in Sunflower County because I said, "Well, it's summertime I don't have to be in school – this is in July of '62, I guess it was. I don't have to be in school until the fall September. I don't have to be at this workshop for activists in Texas." I felt no guilt about using CORE's money to do something different, something Dave Dennis [of CORE] teases me about [laughs].⁴

ORGANIZING IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

I essentially wind up going up into the Delta and landing in Sunflower County – Ruleville, with McLaurin and Lavon and me as the third. Actually, we got there that same night we

⁴. Dave Dennis was interviewed for this project (02-JBOHP).

drove up, but the town had a curfew for black people. Bob decided it was not worth either the risk to ourselves, or the risks to anybody who might greet us to attempt to stay, to be out on the road or street in violation of the curfew. We went on to Cleveland, Mississippi, which is only a few miles away, to Amzie Moore's home, and then Amzie brought us back to Ruleville the following day.

The work in its simplest form was to encourage people black people to get registered to vote. The Delta cotton country of Mississippi is two-thirds black and only a fraction of that population was registered to vote or at least in part because they considered it too dangerous. In a deeper sense what we were doing was organizing communities to take control of their lives that involve much more than and working with people on things like literacy tests of the voter registration form or talking to people about the importance of the vote. Everybody really understood how important it was to vote. But you were up against this paralyzing fear. You could lose your job and lives house and lots of things. If you're going to ask people to do that, you have to figure out how to build a relationship with people that enables them to trust you. Anybody can come here saying, "I'm going to do this, etc." And then when the going gets tough, they're nowhere to be seen. You have to overcome that fundamental suspicion.

People in the Delta are like rural people everywhere. While they may not have a great deal of reading and writing literacy, they have excellent people literacy and they know when you're giving them a bunch of BS. They are very slow to respond, older people. Kids, younger people, are a whole different story. But when you're talking about adults old enough to register to vote, they're going to be slow and cautious. You have to figure out how to solve that. A lot of the work was talking to people inside the black community. There are lots of ways to do that.

Here I am a guy, a guy from D.C. and Massachusetts, so they are naturally curious. "Do you know the president? You're from Washington, D.C." These are the kind of questions that came up. "What's it like up North?" Because we're not in some Southern city. We're in Ruleville. Ruleville had eleven hundred people, this little town in Sunflower County. There are questions that revolve around curiosity.

Then there are a wide range of questions that also include, "How did you get here?" You're asking them, "Why won't you think about registering to vote?" And they say, "Son, that's white folks' business." I don't know how many times I heard something like that from people. What you do find is that in all these communities – and I suspect it may be applicable today even in urban areas where black people are mostly concentrated now. Inside these communities are natural leaders. You could make your way to them or people would steer you to them. Much of the work is getting them to legitimize you being there in their communities. It's important to make clear if you're organizing that you're not there to take over their communities. You're not there to tell them what to do. You're not there to tell them what's right and what's wrong or what's correct and what's incorrect to these leaders.

When Amzie Moore brought us to Ruleville – McLaurin, Landy and myself – it was a Sunday and he took us to the Mount Galilee Missionary Baptist Church, stood us up and told the congregation that he had brought some “Freedom Riders.” That gave us a kind of credibility, partly because Amzie was so highly so highly respected and partly because everybody knew the Freedom Riders or “Nonviolence” as they called us in SNCC. SNCC didn't much exists in people's consciousness. But the Freedom Rides – that did! And the nonviolence, I think that's because of King, did.

And then Amzie handed us over to a seventy-six-year-old man and his wife who we [later] stayed with. Here's a man who, as it turned out, couldn't even read or write. But he was highly respected, a man of great probity. He had registered to vote in the early 1950s when the Regional Council of Negro Leadership existed and had been encouraging voter registration as part of a post-World War II thrust. There actually were a handful of black people in Sunflower County that had registered to vote. I tell his story in my gun book. He took us in. Again, just the simple fact that he took us in gave us legitimacy in the community and enabled the organizing. It didn't mean, though, that people were going to just go out and try and register to vote because we would stay with “Mr. Joe,” as we called him.

But our presence had a kind of legitimacy there that it wouldn't have had if we were staying in some other town and then periodically coming in to Ruleville to try and get people to register to vote. It took us about a month to get the first group, actually it was the second group – McLaurin had brought down three people – but the first *significant* group, eighteen people to try and register to vote in Sunflower County. Mrs. [Fannie Lou] Hamer was among them. We had rented a bus, an old school bus that was used to carry day workers to the cotton fields, to bring people to the county courthouse in Indianola, which is twenty-some odd miles away. I think it's twenty-six miles away from Ruleville and also the birthplace of the White Citizens Council.⁵

FANNIE LOU HAMER

After a mass meeting the night before, all these eighteen people agreed to go the next day. We got on the bus with them and drove on down to Indianola to the courthouse. Mrs. Hamer was the first person. And the thing about it is that everybody was scared. Mrs. Hamer really first comes to our attention because on the way down she's singing all these church songs. What she's doing is just reinforcing the people and trying to ease their fear. Black people in the South especially fled into the arms of Christianity for so-called salvation in some way. This is the story of the spirituals of the nineteenth century. That's what Mrs. Hamer was doing. You could see that. And it taught me, anyway, what was really important.

⁵. The White Citizens Council was formed in 1954 in Greenwood, Mississippi, to prevent the implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education*. By the late 1950s, White Citizens Councils existed in all the former Confederate states, and expanded their opposition to voter registration, the desegregation of public accommodations and all other efforts to implement federal legislation and judicial decisions. White Citizens Councils also enforced economic retaliation against African Americans suspected of civil rights activism and sponsored legislation prohibiting any form of racial integration. White Citizens Councils also published articles and books and funded films and other materials for use in schools promoting segregation. At the height of their power and influence, White Citizens Councils counted almost 75,000 members.

People like Mrs. Hamer can do what you cannot do. There's nothing I had that I could offer the people. I couldn't offer them protection and I couldn't even offer them attention by anybody important. As Bob [Moses] says, "Mississippi to the bone." Only she could do that.

Mrs. Hamer is the first person to go into the courthouse to try to register to vote. Very quickly, the courthouse – the circuit clerk's office where you had to go to register – is shut down. It's closed. By this time, whites started to gather in front of the courthouse. The group from Ruleville is now on the steps on the portico in front of the courthouse. They're surrounded by these white people, both coming from outside the courthouse and inside. And they've got these pistols, they're muttering and using all these awful names. You don't know what is going to happen.

People got back on the bus. This took a long time because it's getting almost to the end of the day. And then some officer from the sheriff's office arrests the bus driver. He says he's driving a bus of the wrong color because it's a school bus! Poor guy [laughs]. All he was trying to do was make a few bucks. I don't think he went down there to register. Now he's arrested. Now what to do? Now everybody really is physically scared. Mrs. Hamer starts to sing again and this time she's singing movement songs – "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around," "Oh, Freedom," stuff like that.

Again, through the sheer power and intensity of her voice she's able to shore up the people on the bus because again, we SNCC people, we've got absolutely nothing to offer people. Not protection, not attention – nothing to offer people. What happens is they form a little committee, as I remember, because the bus driver is still sitting in the police car in front of the courthouse. They formed a little group to go ask the police what it would take to enable him to drive the bus back to Ruleville because people don't have any way to get home. He says, "Well, there's a fine."

I think the fine was a hundred dollars. Well, there isn't a hundred dollars! All the money on that bus didn't equal a hundred dollars! We're talking 1962 rural Mississippi. That's a significant amount of money! They do take up a collection. I think there were forty-six dollars was the amount that was collected, including the amount of money the SNCC people were able to put into the pot. They go back, this group, to this policeman and say, "Look, we have forty-six dollars. That's all we can pay. And if it is not enough, you might as well just arrest us all." If you think about it, that's an amazing thing to take place on a Mississippi road as dusk is coming in. You're a target because you attempted to exercise some civil rights that's been denied you for seventy-five or a hundred years. It was an enormously courageous thing to do. The policeman took the forty-six dollars and left. The bus driver got us home. I tell people all the time that I don't think these forty-six dollars ever made it into the coffers of Sunflower County government [laughs]. But he was able to drive everybody back to Ruleville.

RETALIATION – MISSISSIPPI STYLE

Of course, following this there was a lot of reprisal. The story of Mrs. Hamer is pretty well known, getting kicked off the plantation, beaten in jail, and so forth. There was one guy whose son eventually becomes involved with the movement, Lafayette Cerney, who had a dry-cleaning business or a laundry, I think. They shut him down for inappropriate license. It's a small town and there are a few little small businesses, black-owned businesses. You have to have, even in these little segregated towns, a few basic services, like a barber shop, a beautician, things like that.

Then there was a shooting. I write about it a lot in the "gun book."⁶ The Sisson family was an important supporter of the movement. They lived just down the street from the road because no road in the black community was paved from the McDonald's, where we were staying. The night riders came through and they shot up our house and the Sisson house. They wounded two girls, one of whom was the Sisson's granddaughter, who were just stopping in to say hello all before returning to college where they were enrolled, severely wounding one. I wasn't in the McDonald's house [when this happened], but in this little town, in the still of a Mississippi night, you can hear the shots. And you know where they came from.

I went racing back across town because I could see the shots had come from what was called the "sanctified quarters," which is one of two black quarters in the town for blacks. I was told the girls had been taken to the county hospital. I went there and began asking questions and the mayor ordered me arrested for interfering with their investigation by asking a lot of silly questions, he said. He hands me over, interestingly enough, to the town constable, who is the brother of the man who killed Emmett Till.⁷ The Milams had moved from Greenwood, from Tallahatchie County, where they were when Emmett Till was killed, to Ruleville after the trial. The brother, who may or may not have been involved in the killing of Till, was the constable of Ruleville. They handed me over to him, who sits me next to this big old dog. It's all about intimidation. That's all this is about.

I get thrown into this jail. It is scary because if you've ever seen these little jails in Mississippi towns, the cells open right out onto the street so anybody can stick a pistol in there and shoot you or do anything they want. Or you can talk to people from your cell because they're standing outside the cell. I spent the night there before I'm released. It was all about doing whatever they can to intimidate you. I sort of knew that, or I had to believe that! You never can tell. As I wrote in my book, they had confiscated Mr. Joe's rifle as a result of my arrest. The mayor was arguing it was all a plot by Charlie Cobb, Bob Moses, Charles McLaurin and Landy McNair to generate false publicity for their disruptive activities. There was a little piece in the local paper quoting the mayor. They had confiscated Mr. Joe's shotgun, a little .22 shotgun. He was now worried. Mr. Joe was poor,

⁶. Mr. Cobb is referring to his book, *This Nonviolent Stuff Will Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016). He discusses this book later in the interview.

⁷. J.W. Milam, along with Roy Bryant, the owner of the grocery store where the alleged incident between Emmett Till and Carolyn Bryant took place in Money, Mississippi, later confessed, after their acquittal in less than one hour by an all-white jury, to journalist William Bradford Huie that they had abducted and murdered Emmett Till. The article was published in the January 1956 edition of *Look* magazine, then a popular magazine that featured photo essays and interviews.

he was seventy-six years old, and he had three young guys staying in his house with his wife eating their food. He put food on the table by going out and shooting something, like a squirrel or a rabbit. He also kept varmints out of his garden with his gun.

Without the gun, it was a serious proposition. I tell the gun control people this story all the time. I said, "You have a right to your gun." He wanted to know if I was certain about that. We had a history book that had the U.S. Constitution in it. I went and got it, turned into the Constitution, the Second Amendment and read the Second Amendment out loud and McLaurin said, "You see, Mr. Joe, that's where it says so! Right in the United States Constitution!" Mr. Joe told me to fold over the page I had been reading to him from. He took the book from me. I forgot about it. Really. Then a little while later Mr. Joe is not around and we asked his wife Rebecca, "Where's Mr. Joe?" She says, "He went to get his gun. You all said it was all right."

Now we're getting nervous because there's enough weight that we're carrying in terms of economic reprisals. These two girls have been [badly hurt]. The last thing we need to have happen is for Mr. Joe to get hurt or killed doing something he thought we had assured it was all right for him to do. I didn't want to have to explain that to Rebecca McDonald. We were about to go down there after him. When he pulled up, he had, oh, a really raggedy truck [laughs]! It was loud and raggedy and recognizable. He pulled up in his truck. And, of course, we asked what had happened.

He said, "I went to get my gun." And we said, "Did you get it?" He said, "Yeah. The mayor said I didn't have a right to this gun but I had your book and I opened it up to the book page you had read to me and told to the mayor this book says I do and the mayor gave me my gun back." I remember him stepping out of his truck, holding a .22 shotgun over his head, with a big smile on his face and goes in the house. Mr. Joe couldn't read or write. If the mayor had asked him to read it, he couldn't have done it. He just took our word for it and that's with the organizing is. You organize people not so much to risk their lives but to assert themselves in new ways, in ways they hadn't thought about.

McLaurin told me at one point, he said, "Mr. Joe never challenged a white man about anything in all of his seventy-six years but because we said it was okay, he was prepared to challenge this white man." That's what you were doing as an organizer. It's slower, it's not traumatic, it's not like a massive protest. It's not covered by the press. It's literally putting one foot in front of the other and stepping forward talking to somebody. Of course, the town, in the black community, just completely shut down to the idea of voter registration after those two girls were shot. It took a long time to rebuild faith that voter registration was something to try again. It wasn't that they doubted the value. But they're constantly weighing risk versus gain. It's very slow. And that's what the organizing was. This is the same story at all these little towns in all these counties right across the Black Belt, whether it's Southwest Georgia, Central Alabama, the Arkansas Delta or the Mississippi Delta. It's the same story. Northern Louisiana is that story. The violence varies. But that's the story.

JULIAN BOND RUNS FOR THE GEORGIA STATE LEGISLATURE

GI: What led to the decision to draft Julian Bond as a candidate to run for the Georgia legislature in 1965?

CC: First, it wasn't a decision made by all of SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. I'll explain that a little later. It all relates to what, in many ways, we consider the betrayal in Atlantic City. A number of us probably in SNCC rather naively thought once we demonstrated the facts on the ground, the facts of the situation in Mississippi, that recognizing the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had to happen. As I say it was probably a naive viewpoint, but I think a number of people thought that. Not everybody, though. Therefore, coming out of Atlantic City there was this very strong feeling of bitterness and betrayal on the part of our liberal so-called friends. The people who stabbed the MFDP in the back were, one, the black establishment; two, the [organized] labor establishment; three, the liberal Democratic Party establishment. Those were the people stabbing the MFDP or the people who had expressed support initially for this challenge. What we learned from that is that you may be right, but most people will only go so far with you. Then there's always a reason they can't go all the way with you, which is what we experienced in Atlantic City.

So this triggered what I like to call go the, "Where Do We Go From Here Discussions?" within the context of our feelings of bitterness and betrayal. Now, SNCC was not of a single mind about this. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which had been organized in Mississippi by SNCC and CORE field secretaries, decided to go with Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey, notwithstanding what happened in Atlantic City. It wasn't a decision that many in SNCC agreed with, but, as Guyot pointed out, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party is the Mississippians' party. It's their party to decide what they want to do. And you can't, as an organizer, be encouraging people to find their voice, to make decisions about the factors in their own lives that they think of as important and then turn around and say, "Well, I don't agree with what you are saying so I'm not going to work with you. You're on your own." You can't.

I suppose you *can* do that [laughs]. It has been done many times in human history. But Guyot was right. MFDP was the Mississippians' party. There was another idea again that gained strength in the aftermath of Atlantic City – the idea of an independent black political party. Stokeley was very much interested in that and that's why he didn't fight the MFDP or Guyot on this idea. He went to Alabama. Ultimately, we would get the Lowndes County Freedom Organization or the first Black Panther Party. So that's one.

Then there were events that we didn't have any control over at all that also encouraged us to experiment with electoral politics. Georgia is a primary example of that, where the state, under court order, redistricts and creates thirteen new legislative districts that are predominately black, which means that a black person will occupy a seat representing those districts. This is something new in some ways. Certainly, in Ivanhoe Donaldson's thinking there was – and Ivanhoe was the real primary force for the Julian Bond campaign. Ivanhoe, probably more than many of us, was interested in electoral politics, as his later life shows. Ivanhoe persuaded Julian to run.

GI: How did he persuade him?

CC: I wasn't present. I don't know. I know Ivanhoe well enough to have a sense of how Ivanhoe would have pressed Julian. " Julian, you've got to do this, man. You have the prestige. You're part of SNCC and if we organize we can win it." I never asked or pressed Julian on the question of exactly how enthusiastic he was about gaining electoral office at that point. He later did make a career . . .

GI: He had never talked to you about this or expressed any interest in . . .

CC: No, no. Julian was a poet and actually Julian's ambition as a very young man was to be a stand-up comedian. I never talked to Julian about his political ambitions in those days. As far as I could see, Ivanhoe had as much to do with that as any thoughts Julian might have had. I can imagine Ivanhoe pressing Julian, "Man, you got gotta do it. You can win. You're known, your family is known." All the arguments that Ivanhoe would make he would make with me because I wasn't that interested in electoral politics either. We were at a SNCC staff meeting, I think, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, so might it might have been at a Mississippi staff meeting somewhere. Ivanhoe told me, "We need to run Julian for one of these offices," something like that. "You need to come over to Atlanta and help put this together." We have that conversation in Holly Springs, Mississippi. I assume we had a similar conversation with Judy Richardson. I don't remember whether Julian was in Atlanta then or came there from somewhere else. But Ivanhoe was really the driver of that Bond campaign in '65.

I was intellectually interested. Atlanta is a city. Everything I had done in the South had been in the rural South. Even then it was clear to me if we figured out how to organize effectively in the cities, that had all kinds of implications for places like Chicago and New York, Los Angeles, these big urban areas, where now blacks by the middle 1960s were in the final stages of their last migration – the one from the South to the North the one that had begun [shortly before] World War I. This was the '60s and you could see it in Mississippi. By 1965, the Mississippi I was looking at in the rural Delta was noticeably different than the one I had come to just three years earlier. Mechanization was clearly underway. I don't know if Frank [Smith] talked to you about organizing the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union.⁸ Frank had a big hand in that. One of the weaknesses of trying to organize labor unions on cotton plantations is that human labor is really not needed. They had perfected the mechanization of everything from irrigation to cotton picking by the mid-1960s. That's an important piece of this last migration to the North. Part of my thinking for the Bond campaign is that we may learn something about urban organizing because Atlanta is clearly a city. That really tilted the balance, swinging me to be willing to work with Ivanhoe on a campaign despite my substantial disinterest, which may just be suspicion of electoral politics.

That's what we did. We pretty much worked in Atlanta the way we worked in the rural South. It's knocking on doors. "Do you know Julian Bond is running?" Handing out leaflets. I think once or twice I pretended to be Julian [laughs].

⁸. Frank Smith was among the very first SNCC paid field secretaries to be sent to Mississippi to organize there. He was interviewed for this project (14-JBOHP).

GI: What kind of reception did you get?

CC: It was a good reception. In some respects, it was easier. One, we weren't up against the kind of violence we were up against in Mississippi or Alabama. This was the first time this has happened, so it's a new level of excitement that really doesn't exist now. I'm talking to some of the young people today who were working on the [2018] midterm elections because one of the questions I have for some parts, in Florida, for instance, where I live [now], is why the turnout was so low.

GI: How was turnout for Julian's election?

CC: I don't remember specifically but I think it was pretty good especially considering we didn't have the transportation machinery to get people out. We really were dependent on people.

GI: So this was shoe leather, knocking . . . ?

CC: Yeah, knocking . . .

GI: Any trouble finding volunteers, lining people up to help?

CC: No. It probably helped that it was Julian.

GI: How so?

CC: Because he was known. Ask the Kennedys [laughs]!

GI: Do you think Julian was a natural politician?

CC: Well, yeah. He is naturally congenial. He's easy with people. If you want to compare him to somebody today – Hillary Clinton, for example, is not. Yeah, he's easy and comfortable. He's not going to complain about being with poor people in their homes or drinking coffee with them. He is easy with people, and that counts for a lot. He wasn't coming from a weird way. I think this has to do with his association with SNCC. He really wasn't seen as coming from the black bourgeoisie establishment, his dad notwithstanding, his mom notwithstanding.

GI: What was the reaction of the local black establishment to Julian running?

CC: They were cool towards it.

GI: In what sense?

CC: I think it was "we'll tolerate it because it's the Bond family?" They're not going to fight the Bond family.

GI: Was there any expectation that he would win?

CC: I don't know. I always thought he was going to win. I thought the knocking on doors, face-to-face with ordinary people, trumped establishment credentials. I think the establishment was surprised that he won. It's interesting. This always happens. The establishment was very surprised when Marion [Barry] won here the first time in D.C. He was not expected to win for the same reason. He won for the same reason. I should say there was opposition in SNCC to us doing this because that's selling out to the Democratic Party. It's becoming a part of the establishment. SNCC is not supposed to do that! I can remember going into the office a couple of times at least maybe more than that and I had on a jacket and tie.

GI: That'd go over well?

CC: No, it did go over well [laughs] because I was going somewhere on behalf with Julian to do something. I had to explain to people, "Look, the whole idea is to win here." I wore a jacket and tie on a couple of occasions in Atlantic City, too. Again, this is part of the overflow of what happened in Atlantic City. And now here's Charlie and Ivanhoe in their coats and ties, at least occasionally [laughs].

GI: This is a remarkable transition for you. You go from wandering on a bus to becoming part of a historic legislative campaign. Did you ever stop for a moment and ask yourself, "How did I end up here?"

CC: Not really. The progression in my head is clear. I don't worry about it too much. It's the way life turned out, given the first step, the second step, the third step. Some of it is personal. I really got involved with the Julian Bond campaign in the final analysis because Ivanhoe asked me to do it and we had been working in Mississippi to get it for all of that time. Who knows? If somebody else had asked me I might not have done it. That's the way it turned out.

GI: After Julian wins obviously there's the controversy over his seating after he refuses to disavow SNCC's statement opposing the Vietnam War.

CC: Yes.

GI: Can you tell us anything about how that all went down?

CC: Well, by now, the Vietnam War is really heating up. Julian really didn't have a hand in [drafting the statement]. We drafted it – we being a whole group of us – after Sammy Younge had been murdered in Tuskegee, Alabama, for trying to use the white bathroom at a gas station. The Freedom School students in McComb, Mississippi, in their newsletter, had also raised the question of Vietnam. Why should we go? Why should our fathers go to Vietnam? We don't have freedom here or something like that. And I think it's I think their statement is available somewhere. The third factor, of course, is that we guys were draft-

age – some of us. I received a draft letter – I can't remember whether it was before the Julian Bond campaign or after the Julian Bond campaign – but I was drafted somewhere and told to report for duty some place. They decided they didn't want me [laughs].

So there's that going on. It might have been a decision of SNCC's executive committee, I don't remember, that SNCC should issue a public and formal statement on the war. I'm pretty sure it's Sammy Younge's murder that triggered that decision. So we wrote it. The powers that be in the Georgia state legislature were outraged, and refused to seat Julian because, even though he had stepped down as SNCC's communications director by then, he refused to disavow the statement and they refused to allow him a seat. That was the nub of the issue. We had to run another election and he won again. He probably got more votes [the second time]. I never looked up the numbers. Now that I'm talking to you, I'm wondering whether the numbers were larger or smaller the second time around.

There was a lot of outrage in the black community in Atlanta. Whatever they may have thought about Julian, they were outraged that the white people were doing this to a young black guy who had been out there fighting for civil rights. There was that kind of outrage in the black community.

GI: What do you think was a bigger motivation for the legislative establishment, was it race or was it Vietnam or was it a combination of all of the above?

CC: It's almost certainly was a combination. It's easier to do because of race. But I don't think it was solely because of race. We know this from just watching the McCarthy era in this country. Ultimately, I don't know. We see something like this today with the Trump and his people, this kind of mean-spirited stupidity. You know it makes no sense when you give it any kind of rational thought. If Julian had declared himself a Communist with the support of Communist China, they still would have had to seat him [laughs]. In the final analysis, this kind of stupid hysteria, they weren't used to people speaking out against the wars that our boys were fighting for America.

GI: How did that decision come together to challenge this in court?

CC: I don't know. I wasn't involved with that.

GI: Is there anything else about that race that's helpful for us to know?

CC: I think it's important to stress that the work in that race has extreme relevance today insofar as the young people who form the movement for Black Lives [Matter] etc. are thinking about organizing. I look at my first interactions in any serious way with them, which would be around 2015 to now. There's been a sort of growing appreciation for the necessity of organizing as distinct from protesting. This is not to disparage protest, which is always necessary. But there's growing interest in organizing in the "how-tos" of organizing and they are beginning to think that there are some useful things from the '60s that they could draw on. I tell them I think they have a harder mission today. I can tell them anything they want to know about organizing in Sunflower County [or] Tallahatchie County [in

Mississippi]. If you ask me about the West Side of Chicago or South Central Los Angeles, I don't know how helpful I'll be when you drill down to specifics. I think it's as far as learning how to talk to people, which is what we had to do up in the Delta or in Central Alabama, I think that idea is still relevant, encouraging people to build structures that they control and that can serve their needs, such as the MFDP or the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, today. The Bond campaign, insofar as electoral politics is concerned, is still valuable. It's interesting. I had a conversation with one of Stacey Abrams' people to make that point.⁹ This early work from fifty years ago is relevant to what they're trying to do now. It's not an exact fit. It can't be in the year 2019.

I still think there are important lessons in the Bond campaign in terms of what it accomplished and how [the race] shaped Julian.

GI: How did it shape him?

CC: It plugged him in. He never left politics after that. I don't know for sure what course he was on. It kind of reversed the course he seemed to be on.

GI: From professor to politician?

CC: Yeah, or poet to politician perhaps [laughs]. Or comedian. Because he does go on to serve a considerable amount of time in the legislature and was ambitious enough to run for the Congress, although he lost, ironically, to John Lewis. He was on a political course and I don't think I would have imagined, for lots of reasons, in 1965, Julian heading the NAACP.

GI: Why do you say that?

CC: Just because of our view of the NAACP and what it was under Roy Wilkins and Gloster Current. That whole crowd, who hated us, seemed so entrenched.

GI: They hated you why?

CC: They felt we were traversing their territory. They felt that we were costing them money because we were constantly getting arrested. They felt we were taking attention from the more important work that they were doing. I think Roy Wilkins just didn't like us [laughs] for whatever reasons. I tried to pull that out of Roger Wilkins once many years ago. I don't know. I never understood Roy Wilkins. I never understood him or the director of branches of that time, Gloster Current. If you've read Jim Foreman's book, "The Making of Black Revolutionaries," there is somewhere in there a memo that records a meeting that took place immediately after the MFDP challenge in Atlantic City. It's a meeting with Roy Wilkins. It was it was put together by the National Council of Churches. Roy Wilkins,

⁹. Stacey Abrams, an African American woman, ran for Governor of Georgia in 2018 against Brian Kemp, a white man. She lost the race by less than two percentage points, 50.2% to 48.8%. Had she won, her victory would have been historic, becoming the first African American woman to win a governor's race in American history.

Gloster Current, I think Courtland [Cox] was there.¹⁰ The SNCC people were there and some other people. The whole agenda was how to lessen SNCC's influence in Mississippi. That's what the meeting was about. What comes through when you hear the NAACP people is that they don't like SNCC and they don't like us involving the underbrush. There needs to be a "top-level" decision, not this decision-making by the "underbrush" – this is what Current called us. The national headquarters were so radically different from their local branches. Some of it I understood. Ruby Hurley, who was the Southern Director [of the NAACP], felt that SNCC, and to a lesser extent CORE, were pulling people who really should be a part of the NAACP youth branches.

It would have been hard for me in 1965 to imagine Julian leading the NAACP, let alone Derrick Johnson, who is president of the NAACP now and who was deeply influenced by SNCC and Hollis Watkins in particular. I think Julian's instincts weren't initially to seek political office. I never felt, until he got into the campaigning, that's really what he wanted.

THE LEGACY OF JULIAN BOND

GI: How do you see Julian Bond's legacy during the 1960s and his contribution to the Southern freedom movement?

CC: Well, I think there's more than one strand to follow if we're going to look at Julian's legacy. One is a lot of the information that reached the public in the 1960s and is used by scholars now has to do with how Julian organized the communications department of SNCC and how he used words and photographs that helped define a particular era of SNCC. It shows, in particular, if you're talking about social activism, that a national headquarters doesn't have to be disconnected from its grass roots work and its field work. Throughout his life Julian put the conversation about race front and center and made it impossible to ignore. This is valuable because not everybody can do that. Whether you're talking about Julian Bond the state legislator or Julian Bond the SNCC communications director, Julian Bond the leader of the NAACP, Julian Bond as co-founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center or Julian Bond the college professor, when you think about it that's an enormous contribution for one person.

It's not that the movement revolved around Julian. This is one person, though, who managed to use his life in such a way that crucial issues of both race and class, I would argue, could not be ignored. That is a great legacy. Because it's a legacy that other people can pick up on and figure out how to do something similar, how to use their lives in a similar way. That's what I think. I don't think of Julian in terms of monuments and all that or even great written works. Julian wrote surprisingly little for someone like him. There are two people who wrote surprisingly little to me. One is Julian and the other is Ella Baker, which is, in a sense is unfortunate, but I don't think it detracts from his legacy. What we get from Julian, the written word is not necessary. It'd be nice but it's no more than what we get and still use from Miss Baker - the written word.

¹⁰. Courtland Cox was interviewed for this project (04-JBOHP)

GI: I've heard some people describe Julian Bond as one of the first crossover figures into white audiences. He could he could speak to white audiences about the topics you've suggested but leave them not as uncomfortable as, let's say, somebody else. Is that something you'd agree with?

CC: I think I would agree with that, yes. I don't know whether he's the first, but he certainly can do that. I've seen him do that. I certainly would agree with that, yeah.

CODA: THE TRADITION OF SELF DEFENSE

GI: You've written a book fairly recently. Why don't you tell us about it?

CC: Sure. *This Nonviolent Stuff Will Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*. Many people refer to it as "the gun book," but really, it's a little bit of a mischaracterization. It's really a book about the long tradition of grassroots community organizing in the South. I use guns as a device to push knowledge of that tradition forward. After all, self-defense, which is really what I write about when I write about the use of guns here, is not some phenomenon that emerged in the 1960s. Right from the beginning, whether we were talking about slave revolts, whether we're talking about the union leagues that followed the Civil War or whether you were talking about the black soldiers of World Wars I and II, self-defense is a very old tradition and it's always been attached to the organizing tradition. The two go hand in hand. That's part of what I try to show in this book. This title, *This Nonviolent Stuff Will Get You Killed*, comes from one of the critical local figures in Mississippi. And the only way he can be understood is in terms of his role in organizing in Holmes County, Mississippi. That's Hartman Turnbow. The title is an abbreviated title.

Originally, Martin Luther King was touring Mississippi in 1964 and he was introduced to Mr Turnbow. Mr. Turnbow looked at him – he's never been a man known to bite his tongue – and he said, "Reverend King, this non-violence stuff ain't no good! It's going to get you killed one day." When he drove the nightriders away from his home he said, when the SNCC people came up the next day, he said, "I wasn't being 'non-nonviolent.' I was just protecting my family." It's that dynamic that I try to portray. I try and portray it in terms of its meaning to a group of young people, like we were in SNCC and CORE, because there is a whole chapter on CORE. It's not just a book on SNCC. I try and set this culture within the context of young organizers feeling their way into arenas of social struggle. Their varying degrees of experience with guns.

Hollis Watkins' experience is very different than Charlie Cobb's experience. Prathia Hall, a SNCC field secretary, a firm believer in non-violence. Annie Pearl Avery from Birmingham, on the other hand, has a very, very different view about this. All of these people exist and what connects them is grassroots community organizing and the local people they're working with. There are different kinds of experiences. I don't know if Reverend King ever knew that in Tuscaloosa Alabama there was a highly organized armed group protecting that SCLC chapter there. They are not as well-known as the Deacons of Defense because they chose not to be well known. They never had a name. They were largely made up of

Korean veterans, war veterans, and they explicitly formed to protect Martin Luther King's SCLC in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. The Deacons explicitly formed to protect CORE, but they consciously chose to be known. Robert Williams, in North Carolina, chose to be known. There were different experiences with organized, armed self-defense, and they all were embedded in some effort at community organizing. The Southern experience that I think the greatest understanding is the organizing tradition. You can't understand what unfolded in the South unless you look at how people organized themselves, with and without guns.

This book attempts to tell what I felt was a significant part of that story by introducing people who nobody ever heard of, unless they were in the movement themselves. So if I say to a college audience that C.O. Chinn is somebody you need to know, they don't know who C.O. Chin is and other people like that. There are a number of them that I try and introduce in this book. And their central message to civil rights organizers can be boiled down to one sentence: We're not going to let these white people kill you. That was their central message.

Some of them didn't even go try and register to vote and certainly didn't try and sit in somewhere. But that was their message. We feel duty-bound to keep you alive. I try and tell that story, but that's not a gun story. That's the story of the commitment of local people to grass roots community organizers in SNCC and CORE and the commitment of grass roots organizers in SNCC and CORE to local people. That's the story of this book.

GI: Why do you think that story has been underplayed over the years in all the work about the civil rights movement?

CC: It's not dramatic, one. A lot of what rose to importance in the civil rights struggle was because of the choices of television and to a lesser extent newspapers. I have a whole paper I did on this on the news media and the civil rights movement. So that's what's important. Think about Martin Luther King's March on Washington speech in 1963. All of the radical elements in that speech had been stricken! His critique of economic relationships in this country had been stricken. So that's what defines that. When you talk about guns and self-defense it's not the Martin Luther King's or the Roy Wilkins and all of them. It's people like Mr. Turnbow, whose title this book comes from. Other people like Mrs. [Fannie Lou] Hamer's husband, Pap. It's E.W. Steptoe. There's a there's a whole range of people that are not in the canon.

It may be changing now with a new generation of historians and academics, but generally, in the past anyway, approaching history from the inside out or the bottom up has not been the way that the history is approached. The only way you can make your way to the kind of people I talk about in this book is to look at history from the bottom up or, as we often say in SNCC, from the inside out. We have SNCC Digital Gateway, www.snccdigital.org, which is a major website that attempts to approach history in this fashion. And you get a different perspective when you at history that way. Mrs. Hamer is perhaps the best known of these rural people, yet audiences are always shocked when I [tell] one of my favorite Fannie Lou Hamer quotes. She told us once, "I keep a shotgun in every corner of my bedroom and the first cracker that tries to throw some dynamite up on my porch won't write his momma

again." As Bob [Moses] says, "Mississippi to the bone." This is all a part of it. It's a story that should be told and it's not the same story, as say, the Black Panther Party story.

GI: What's different about it?

CC: It's the rural component. Violence in the South, for the most part, except on protests marches and sit ins and things like that, if you're talking about the kind of rural violence that took place in say, Ruleville, Mississippi, after that first group try to register vote, is not coming from the police. The police will ignore it. The police will protect the people during that time. But it's vigilante violence. That requires a different response than the kind of police violence that the movement for Black Lives [Matter] -- young people today -- are up against today. Another name that's not nearly well enough known, a true hero of Mississippi, was killed when night riders firebombed his house. Herbert Lee gunned down at the cotton gin, not by the police, but by a member of the state legislature.

The nature of violence and the way it's organized in the South is different. In Mims, Florida, Harry T. and Harriet Moore were killed in 1951 when Klansmen put dynamite underneath their bedroom on Christmas Eve and blew them up. Harry Moore was the leader of the NAACP in Florida and his wife was a progressive schoolteacher. This is a different kind of violence. I think you have to distinguish between both the kind of violence that unfolds today with respect to police, which is much more akin to what the Panthers were up against in the late '60s and '70s than the kind of violence people in the Deep South were up against. Of course, there are people who would disagree with me on that analysis but that's my thought on self-defense. In some ways, it's easier if you're just dealing with some mob of white people wearing hoods or trying to burn a cross on your lawn or toss some dynamite on your porch. That's really just a different dynamic.

Even white people, Southerners, I mean, in the twentieth century anyway, they understand self-defense and will defer to that right. They didn't do that in the nineteenth century. After World War II, they deferred to these men and women who shot back. They weren't prepared to die for white supremacy. It's not in the playbook [laughs].

GI: Thank you so much.

CC: Sure. Thank you.