

John Lewis

Q. You were talking about Albany, what it did. I've written something I can't read here. It was a defeat for both SNCC and SCLC in a sense. Oh, I know what you had just said. You just said that in a way they tackled too much.

A. Yes. In the city of Albany I think there was an attempt on the part of both SNCC and SCLC . . . For one reason they had the whole community involved. They went out in a sense to make Albany an open city; to remove the barriers of segregation and racial discrimination in all aspects of the city of Albany, rather than attacking particular and specific places, selecting particular spots in the city, or particular streets and corners, where, even with the selective buying campaign—or economic boycott or withdrawal—or even if they would hold a demonstration. And I think the cleverness of a police chief like [Laurie] Pritchett . . .

Q. How was he clever?

A. Well, he did things very cool. He knew that if there was violence or retaliation on the part of policemen—if they would rough up demonstrators, if they would beat up people, that this would tend to increase the participation of the Negro community and would give a greater sympathy to the movement in Albany, from people not only in Albany, not only from white people but from people throughout the country and throughout the State of Georgia. And Pritchett had this whole thing that he would meet non-violence with non-violence, and it's a very interesting point.

Q. Especially for a policeman.

A. That's right.

Q. Do you want to add anything about Albany?

A. No.

Q. The next thing you mentioned was the challenge at the convention. Now, what did SNCC expect to happen, actually, at the convention?

A. I think that SNCC, as an organization, expected that the Mississippi delegation would at least be recognized; recognized and seated as the official

delegation, representing the Democratic party of the State of Mississippi; because the SNCC people had worked very hard leading up to the Democratic convention. They worked during the spring. They lobbied and talked and pressured members of the platform committee, pressured state delegations, all over the country, got some of the freshmen committee people with the delegation from Michigan, from Minnesota, from Wisconsin, from Oregon, and certain members from New York and Pennsylvania and Massachusetts and other areas.

Q. What happened at the convention? What prevented that from happening?

A. Well, the issue was never really brought to the floor. The platform committee went through many changes and delayed the decision and the White House put a lot of pressure on people saying that there must be a compromise, that it must not be brought to the floor. If it had been brought to the floor, the Mississippi people were convinced, and their supporters—people like [Representatives] Edith Green and [William] Fitts Ryan and other people—felt that if that issue had been brought to the floor the Mississippi people would have been seated. But the President . . .

Q. You mean the FDP people?

A. The FDP people would have been seated. But President Johnson and other people put pressure on the so-called liberal establishment, on people in the Civil Rights movement like Roy Wilkins and James Farmer and Martin Luther King and Bayard Rustin and Joe Rauh.

Q. Why did Johnson do that?

A. I don't know why, but I think because of his relationship with Senator Eastland and his relationship with Senator Stennis. And he kept saying that if this thing is brought to the floor . . . He was telling members of the platform committee that he won't get a good man for the vice-presidency, that they had to make a choice between keeping this thing off the floor and getting Humphrey.

Q. The platform committee or the credentials committee?

A. It was the credentials committee. Right. If they wanted Humphrey as the nominee for the vice-presidency, then they had to keep this thing off the floor. And a lot of the members of the credentials committee told some of the SNCC people who were lobbying there that they had gotten calls from the White House, from different staff people, saying that if you do such and such a thing, your husband won't get this job or get this appointment—that type of thing. There was a lot of pressure on both sides. And then I think the challenge of Congress was another landmark in both CORE and SNCC,

and then we just could not be satisfied, and SNCC played an important . . .

Q. How come SNCC went on to do that after what happened at the convention?

A. Because I think they felt that there were possibilities in that and they had to try these different methods. I mean, there were some people in SNCC at the time that you had to take through different changes and different steps, knowing that they would not work, but they must experience that.

Q. What effect did these two challenges have—the convention and the congressional challenge?

A. On SNCC?

Q. Yes.

A. I think some people no doubt gave up. SNCC gave up, lost faith.

Q. In?

A. In the possibility of bringing about change through the so-called democratic process.

Q. Did you give up then?

A. No. I don't think I've given up now. I don't think so. I've said on many occasions that in spite of what happened and all of that I don't consider myself bitter. I might be angry and I get angry about a few things, but I made up my mind as an individual, a long time ago . . . I don't know how you make up your mind to say this, but I said that I will not become bitter; I will not become so frustrated and let hate and bitterness engulf me, control me. Because I recognized the fact, when I got involved in the movement in 1960, that the struggle was going to be a long, hard, tedious struggle and you're going to have to pace yourself, and I didn't expect that in two years or three years of sitting-in and demonstrating and getting people to register to vote, that there are going to be radical changes all at once. I didn't expect that. I am disappointed though that things did not move as fast as they should have.

Q. Yeah. Anything about the challenges you want to add? . . . The last thing you mentioned was the summer project.

A. The Summer Project.

Q. How was the decision to undertake the Summer Project made?

A. Well, it was made by SNCC but primarily by the whole of SNCC, and primarily under the influence of Bob Moses. For some time, in the fall of '63 (and my copy of those things, it's home in Alabama), there was a great debate in SNCC, and Moses led the debate; that SNCC should move its

office out of Atlanta and move to Mississippi. Everything should go. Some of us opposed it strongly, and fought against it like I don't know what.

Q. What were Bob's reasons for wanting it moved?

A. He said that if we want to work in Mississippi, and this was where we were going to put in a great deal of effort . . . this is where the staff should be; the national staff should be there.

Q. Was this temporarily, for the summer?

A. No, this was on a permanent basis; we should move the press, everything, there, and that's where Jim and I should spend most of our time . . . and that we should stay in Mississippi rather than staying in Atlanta. Then people started debating if Mississippi was a safe place to go; it was bad for communication and bad for transportation and you couldn't keep your records there and your organization could be bombed and everything could be destroyed and blanked out. And Moses insisted that we do it, and in the end he started laying groundwork in his own mind about the Summer Project

Q. Why was he so eager to have the office moved? It seems like those arguments are reasonable ones, about it being unsafe.

A. Well, because he felt that by being in Mississippi the Mississippi project would receive greater attention from SNCC because it was there. Mississippi would become the home of SNCC.

Q. Why did he want the Mississippi project to have so much attention?

A. Because he felt that it would need that attention in order for the project to be effective and to be carried out you needed the communications setup; you needed a guy like Julian Bond to handle press and Dottie Zellner. You needed people like that there; you needed the WATS line in Mississippi. You needed the press that we had at that time. You needed a darkroom, and all of this equipment. You needed to be in Mississippi, he felt.

Q. Yeah. Was there something of a power struggle there? Did he want more power?

A. No, I don't think so. That never came across to me. I don't think so. I think Bob saw Mississippi as, in a sense, his territory at that particular time, and he was in charge of it. But he had a lot of problems with Mississippi Negroes who happened to be on SNCC's staff, who at that particular time didn't want any white people to come into the state. And SNCC finally decided that it would want to support the Mississippi summer project and...

Q. Why did these local leaders not want any more white people?

A. Well, I guess they had had some experience with a few people in '60—thirty, I think—and they . . . In a sense, they just didn't want anybody to come down. Because they felt that people were sort of taking over from them who would be typing, you know. And you can see that; you can understand that. Some little Negro girl who dropped out of high school who had been typing maybe forty-five words or twenty-five words or thirty words a minute, and here's some white girl down from . . .

Q. Smith College.

A. Smith College, from some good college, who can type maybe seventy-five or more. I don't know. And, you know, instead of taking two or three days to get out a newsletter, a paper, these kids were turning things out in a few minutes or half a day or so. And I think kids felt like they were being moved; they would be displaced and what they considered theirs would no longer be theirs. I think they had that fear.

Q. Weren't they sort of right?

A. Oh, yes. That was right. And that's what happened. There's no question about it. And I think that may be one of the bad points about it.

Q. Did Bob really persuade these people that the Summer Project was okay, or . . . ?

A. Oh, yes, he did.

Q. He went over their opposition?

A. I think he persuaded some of them, and then for some it went over their opposition. Some worked with it in spite of their opposition, and some just tended to withdraw from that whole area; just worked in their own little world. But I think the good things that came out of the Mississippi Summer Project of '64 overshadowed the bad things . . . I recall during the spring of '64 some of us traveled all across this country (I've spent a lot of time in the Midwest and the Far West) recruiting people for the Mississippi Summer Project. Speaking or telling people to come, and all that type of thing. Well, we brought the country into Mississippi. There's no question about it. It was a marvelous idea. You had all these young people who also happened to be white, because young white people were able to come. They didn't have to spend the summer working hard to get back to their college, but a lot of Negroes had to spend the summer working in order to return to school in September. You had these young people getting involved in the type of thing that Kennedy was saying about the Peace Corps, but this was local, at home, the domestic scene. And a lot of the people, I think, a lot of the young whites, and a lot of the young Northern Negroes were educated in

the process on what was going on. They taught people a different thing. And I think it gave the Negro people in Mississippi . . .

Q. What did it teach them?

A. It taught some people how to read and how to write. They taught courses in Negro history. They taught people about their political structure in Mississippi. Even what the qualifications were for being able to register and vote, things like that . . . See, I think, perhaps more than anything it's a gauge of Negro people in Mississippi. A deeper feeling that you're not alone. Because people are concerned about what's going on. It gave them a sense of strength, and a sense of a source of happiness, a sense of confidence that you're not alone and you're not struggling alone. There are people throughout this country who are with you. And it was saying to the Negroes of Mississippi, "All white people are not alike."

Q. After the summer was over, did this lead the people of Mississippi on to do new and more exciting things?

A. And to doing things on their own. And I think Fannie Lou Hamer was the best representative of it . . . I don't know if you've seen this book or not—*Strangers at the Gate*, by Tracy Sugarman. She wrote this . . . There were people who wanted change, but they hadn't dared to try to come out and do something, to try to change the way things were. But after the 1964 project, when all of the young people came down for the summer, an exciting and remarkable summer, Negro people in the Delta began moving; people who had never before tried, though they had always been anxious to do something, began moving.

Q. The whole Freedom High movement that we were talking about before?

A. Came after.

Q. Was developed after?

A. Came after the Summer Project. Right. And she talked about how she felt it was the Kingdom of God and all of that that took place in Mississippi, and I think she's a good representative. If you can you really should try to talk to Fannie Lou.

Q. Were the events of the summer, and the kinds of developments that occurred in the summer related to the Freedom High thing, which occurred right after?

A. I think so.

Q. How?

A. I think a lot of people, after they went to the Democratic convention in Atlantic City . . . they didn't get that many people to register in Mississippi during the summer of '64.

Q. Not many?

A. No, not many people registered. Many people, many, many people tried, but very few people were successful in being registered. I think a lot of people were tired and weary. I really think so. I don't know too much about it because I left the country right after the Democratic convention; I went away for two and a half months to Africa. But I think there was a sense of monumental fatigue, after the '64 Summer Project, and after the Atlantic City convention. And people felt that they had to try something else; they had to try something different. They had to do something different. A lot of people just didn't do anything. That's when SNCC went through that whole period of saying there shouldn't be an organization. I was away the first time, the first week in November. You may recall in November . . .

Q. There shouldn't be an organization?

A. There shouldn't be a structure. There shouldn't be a chairman. Somebody proposed that in October and November 1964. The latter part of October 1964. There shouldn't be an executive committee and there shouldn't be an executive secretary. You should have a revolving type committee. Moses supported some of this stuff. And some other people. Let people just be free to do anything. There shouldn't be a bookkeeper. We'd just have a revolving committee, and the people who wanted to do this could get together and discuss this and that, and a lot of people felt SNCC should become one of these "soul" type sessions, where people just get together and talk out problems, and that type of thing. And that was really the essence, I guess, of Freedom High.

Q. We've sort of already discussed that. Do you remember the Holly Springs meeting?

A. The Central Committee meeting at Holly Springs?

Q. Yeah.

A. Yeah. I remember that meeting. I think it was at the end of '65.

Q. What happened there? The spring of '65. Was it people from Atlanta went out to Mississippi?

A. Yes.

Q. Were you there?

A. It was a Central Committee meeting. When the Central Committee met at Hollis's [Watkins] house, I did go there.

Q. Yeah?

A. I think that was when there were attempts to read the lists of names of people that were on the payroll.

Q. Yes, that's right.

A. And what people were doing. They sent letters to different people, saying you had to say what you'd been doing over a certain period of time, or you'd be dropped from the staff.

Q. Before the Holly Springs meeting?

A. No, that was after Holly Springs. But the decision was made at Holly Springs to do that kind of thing.

Q. Uh huh . . .

A. I don't recall very well what took place, but I knew that was one of the...

Q. Who were some of the people who were sent letters asking for accountings?

A. I would say a large . . . over half of the staff. I just don't know their names. I can't think of one particular person right now.

Q. Was anybody actually dropped?

A. I don't think so. Not at that particular time. I don't think anyone was really dropped from the staff. I really don't recall.

Q. Hmmnn. Over half the staff of Mississippi were sent that letter. That was in connection with trying to make sure the people were really doing something?

A. Yes. Maybe someone made a speech once at a staff meeting and stated to people that "you must shape up or ship out." Maybe I saw that at the Holly Springs meeting, a few people became bitter about that "you must shape up or ship out" or something like that. What they were really saying . . .

Q. Who was doing these things? Saying "shape up or ship out"?

A. I took the position that people had to start working, and I think a lot of people supported that. Ruby Doris [Smith] Robinson, for example, supported it. On the other hand, I remember [Ralph] Featherstone at that meeting, and I think Ivanhoe [Donaldson] was there. Cleveland Sellers was there. And I think Cleve supported that position also, but he got in a lot of trouble trying to implement it, I think. That "shaping up and shipping out" idea. But I don't know what happened. I think a lot of people straightened up; people sort of shipped out. People sort of shipped out on their own, before they were shipped out.

Q. I see. So, did a lot of the Freedom High group, after that, leave SNCC entirely?

A. Oh, yes. I would say the majority. Like, in New York alone, I don't see that many people, but that's the whole ex-SNCC right here. Right in New York. Probably there are more people living in the city of New York who were on SNCC's staff than are on SNCC's staff now.

Q. Yeah . . .

A. Have you talked to Howard Zinn at all?

Q. Yes, I have. I have to talk to him some more too. Was this at all connected with disappointment in the way whites worked out in working among Negroes?

A. I don't think so. See, I think in SNCC it didn't appear, because SNCC people go through what they may call their "black nationalist" thing, and then get out of it. Because I know one person who went through it, she was all caught up in it, very early, but no one else was on this "black nationalist" kick. And now she tells the people in the Atlanta Project, she just wants to come out of it . . . and she's one who'd been fighting for continuity. But I don't know what happened to her . . . that was Ruby Doris back in the early days. She went through this whole period of . . . and she became . . . her closest friend, I guess, happened to be white. But then later . . .

Q. What happened? Then she became friendly with the whites?

A. Yes, she became very close and very friendly with whites, you see, and she tried to convert others, who . . . In the summer of '66, right after the national meeting, who were really going all the way, like keeping the Atlanta Project, she was telling me, she said, "I went through the same thing, and there's nothing to it," you know.

Q. Because she was trying to dissuade them from being such black nationalists?

A. Yeah.

Q. Yes, that's interesting. Now . . . At the Holly Springs meeting, were these people whose names were read off on the payroll, were they all actually there? Did they get a chance to defend themselves?

A. Oh, no. There was no one at the meeting: The Central Committee, maybe one or two other people . . .

Q. And say Bob Moses spoke for all these people? Because, how did they find out what they were doing? How did they decide who to send letters to?

A. Well, just reports . . . I don't know, was Moses at that meeting? I don't know if Moses was there, it seemed like he was there. No, but there were a lot of people, not just Negroes but a lot of white people who worked with SNCC, not just the Summer Project people, but white people who had been

working who were also caught up in this Freedom High bag. And I must say, a large segment of them are here in New York now. Talk to Casey. Casey was one of the real subtle leaders of this whole Freedom High thing that "people must be free to do, free to think." Casey Hayden, Mary King, Emmie Schrader were these types. And they would go from one thing to...

Q. You said Jane Stembridge?

A. No, I didn't say Jane Stembridge because she was sort of out of everything by that time, I guess. Another young lady named Emmie Schrader, a good friend of Casey. But they had been involved in some project down in Mississippi. Then they got involved in becoming photographers and then filmmakers, and they'd be going from one thing to another thing, and the Central Committee just got sort of fed up with the whole thing.

Q. So the Central Committee . . . I still don't quite understand what they were doing at the Holly Springs thing. These people weren't there to defend themselves?

A. No. They had reports on the different areas, and you had a project director who was a member of the Central Committee, and he sort of had to give an account of what was going on in his project.

Q. Ah ha. Each project director . . .

A. Right. So, if ten people work in his office in Southwest Georgia and the project director happened to be Roy Shields, then they would say, "What are these ten people doing?"

Q. Oh, I thought it was just the Mississippi staff that was asked to report.

A. At the Holly Springs meeting?

Q. Yes.

A. Oh. Probably the Mississippi staff were the only staff that was dealt with at the Holly Springs meeting, but eventually, at different meetings, all the SNCC staff, including all the people in my office, had to deal with that kind of . . .

Q. I see. The Holly Springs meeting was just for Mississippi?

A. I think so. I really don't . . .

Q. But actually, later on, they had other meetings where everybody . . . ?

A. Right. I think maybe the Holly Springs meeting was only Mississippi. But eventually the whole staff was dealt with the same way.

Q. I see. Did you favor that?

A. Well, I favored trying to find out what people were doing. I did favor that.

Q. Okay . . . Now, at the May 1966 meeting, when Stokely was elected chairman, what happened there? How was it that you weren't re-elected?

A. Well, what happened there . . . The meeting had lasted for a week, and late Friday night, I guess, around 11:00 or something, it was time to elect officers for the new year, for next year, and the house was open, and two or three people were nominated, I guess. Stokely and myself and somebody else, I think. But I think one of them was a joke, and they withdrew it, or . . .

Q. Had your election been opposed before? I mean, in previous years? Had you ever . . .

A. No. Once in '65 about six people were nominated, including myself, and I remember that very well. There were about twenty some people on the staff then, and I think there were about six people nominated, and most of the people only received votes from the person who nominated them. I think the person who received the next highest votes received something like ten.

Q. Who was that?

A. I think it was Lafayette Surney, I'm not sure. But several people were nominated, I remember, in '65. And I received 200 and some odd votes. It was no problem. In Nashville I was nominated and I think maybe [Willie] Ricks or Stanley [Wise] or somebody else was nominated. Anyway, the person received one vote or something like that, and there was a standing vote, with the candidates in the house, and when it came down for the vote I was elected chairman.

Q. Where was this?

A. In Nashville. I was re-elected chairman in Nashville.

Q. But what year?

A. Sixty-six. In May of '66, when Stokely was elected . . . It's very . . .

Q. Chairman of SNCC? You were re-elected . . . You were re-elected chairman of SNCC in Nashville?

A. In Nashville. I don't know . . . It's a very bitter thing in history but things like this happen. I was elected chairman of SNCC in '66, re-elected, and by a wide majority—I don't know what it was; it must have been something like sixty-six to nineteen I think, with quite a few people abstaining.

Q. Was Stokely running against you?

A. Yeah. Quite a few people abstained. Because there had been a serious debate, a discussion, but it got much more serious and much dirtier later. Then, the thing came up with the White House Conference and they needed somebody to be elected . . . See, Forman opposed my election, and he lost

. . . Have you talked to anybody else about the Nashville meeting and election or anything?

Q. No.

A. You haven't talked to anybody about that yet?

Q. I'm getting just your story.

A. My story. So you have to talk to other people.

Q. I will.

A. You should go back and read *The New York Times* on it also, and maybe somebody else . . .

Q. Well, how long after this Nashville meeting were you de-elected?

A. De-elected. Well, just a few hours. It was around 11:30, and then I guess around 5:30 that morning . . . What happened . . . Some people got up and said . . . I had been attending these White House planning sessions. Earlier during '66 Johnson had appointed me, along with some other people, civil rights people, to the Planning Commission, Planning Council, for the White House Conference. And I'd been attending those sessions. And the White House Council was made one of the things that "we don't want a chairman to attend the White House Conference or White House meetings" or something. That was one thing.

Q. They didn't like it that you were involved in it.

A. Right. And another thing, people were opposed to my relationship with SCLC, in particular. Martin Luther King—we have been somewhat friends over the years, I guess. I got to know him back in '58. Well, you know, the strange thing, "we need somebody who will tell Johnson to go and do this," and somebody . . . I won't use the phrase or the word because it's not pleasant non-violent words. Those were some of the things. And the whole thing of "whiteness" and non-violence or violence issue. And "We need someone who will spend more time in the South and stop speaking on white college campuses," and that type of thing.

Q. Well, Stokely hadn't done that.

A. That's right. But that was a strong point: that they needed people to stay in the black communities, speak to the black people, live with the black people and stop spending all this time speaking to white people on white college campuses. That was one of the strong things.

Q. Did you in fact spend a lot of time?

A. I think I spent something like 60-40% of my time . . . I would say that maybe the first year as chairman of SNCC . . . Maybe in '64 I spent over half my time on the white college campuses. But in other years—'63 and

'65—I think I spent most of my time in the South. I spent most of my time on the white college campuses in '64 because in the spring of '64 in particular, and after, we recruited people for the Summer Project.

Q. Yeah. Okay. Now, how was it that there was a second election? That seems illegal to me.

A. Well, a guy came in and challenged the elections. He challenged on the same principle that we had challenged in Mississippi; that the elections weren't constitutional, that we violated our own laws and rules and SNCC doesn't have any rules or laws or anything. And this guy's not even on the staff or anything. But people used that, okay? So . . .

Q. Who was this guy?

A. A guy named Worth Long.

Q. Oh, yeah.

A. Have you talked to him?

Q. Not yet.

A. I'd be interested in what he . . . So, there was another election there, and all the people who'd been elected . . . See, at one point, Cleve had been elected executive secretary, had been elected program secretary, and Stokely had been elected executive secretary . . . Or maybe he refused, and Ivanhoe was elected executive secretary, but Stokely refused the position of executive secretary after I was elected chairman, and then a lot of the people after I was elected chairman left the room. The great majority of the people left and went home, went to (we had this meeting outside of Nashville) the place where they were staying, to their cabins, and went to sleep. And they didn't know anything about it until the next morning, or the next day. Because some of them had left and gone back to Arkansas and some back to Georgia, and they didn't know what was happening.

Q. That sounds pretty illegal.

A. And that's what took place. And that's never been told.

Q. That's why the vote went the other way? Because these people had already gone home?

A. People were asleep or people had gone home. For the most part that's why it went the other way. Again, I think a lot of people had been influenced . . . It was a very trying moment for a lot of people. Some people cried and went through all types of changes about what happened. But they got very sick over it. Personally, I was very cool and very calm through the whole thing. I was, you know, a little disturbed about seeing SNCC come to that point.

Q. Were you really illegally . . . ?

A. Well, not altogether because I was illegally de-elected, but to see an organization get so carried away. An organization that had played in honest measure a very important and significant role on the American scene. Then fall down to such tripe . . . "We need somebody to say to Johnson to kiss my . . ." You know. That type of thing. And "John Lewis won't say that to Lyndon Johnson." You know. "We need someone to tell Martin Luther King to go to hell," you know? It got to things just like that. A lot of the people were very sorry about it. Members of the staff sent me letters and things. But, that's beside the point. I guess I have to write that in my memoirs some day. That's why it would be very interesting to read your dissertation. It was a very trying moment, for a lot of people.

Q. Did SNCC very shortly after that change its policy?

A. At that meeting the whole question of "whiteness" was debated. "Black consciousness" and "black power" were not used, the phrases were not used, but . . . We had to stop talking to the white press, we only talked to the black press, and later they started talking about white people, they had to get off the staff. And you know, since then, I really have lost contact, so I cannot say much more. I resigned, submitted my resignation on July 11th.

Q. Had this been sort of a gradual development?

A. Oh, yes . . .

Q. Thinking more in terms of blacks?

A. Because I just noticed in this article that this guy was writing—Paul Good in the *New South* in March of . . .

Q. Is that also true that you are one of the few who accepts nonviolence as a way of life?

A. I guess he meant the people in SNCC.

Q. In SNCC.

A. Yeah. But another thing, this guy Paul Good, I'm not just using this, but it may be helpful in getting the transition of a particular thing. Did you see a copy of the *New South* anyplace?

Q. No.

A. But early in the game I said something like this: "I've been thinking about leaving the movement . . ."

Q. When was this?

A. This was while I was in Rome in April 1966. "I have been thinking about leaving the movement . . . It would be very hard for me to leave with all the years put in, all the time and energy. There seems very little change.

Back in 1961 I felt we were achieving something, but then my expectations were limited. Our expectations increased and I get the feeling that the rate of progress isn't increasing with the efforts we put into it. Maybe we're not using the right methods. I don't know."

Q. Do you still think that? That maybe you were not using the right methods?

A. No. I think we were using the right methods, but I don't think we used . . . We haven't used all the possible methods and techniques . . .

Q. More marches, do you think, would be good?

A. I think we have to use more marches but they must take a different form, a different pattern. That type of thing. I think the non-violent movement itself has got to become radical now, to meet the demands and the needs of the people, to evolve different forms of protest.

Q. Did you say the movement has to become more radical?

A. Yes. Become radical enough to meet the needs of the people.

Q. Like in the economic sphere?

A. I said this in Rome in April, 1966. The national meeting took place May, 1966. "I may very possibly be replaced in the future. We are having a meeting in May, and if most of the people in SNCC decide to end the nonviolence, then that's the way it will be. I wouldn't want to see it happen. I can't even promise I will be nonviolent in every circumstance. If someone was beating my mother . . . I don't know. But what else can you try to live by?"

Q. Okay. What do you think has been SNCC's greatest success?

A. Its greatest success? As I said earlier, I think SNCC has demonstrated more than perhaps any other organization that has been on the American scene in the past five or ten years, what a few people can do. What they can set in motion. I think with the sit-ins in 1960 and the Freedom Rides in '61, but particularly the sit-ins, SNCC started a fire. A different type of fire burning in this country that influenced so many institutions, so many other organizations in America. I think it had a tremendous impact on the federal establishment, on organized religion, upon the academic community . . .

Q. Earlier you said, when you were quoting yourself in Rome there, you said the rate of progress of the movement is slowing down. How do you account for that?

A. I think the lack of commitment, the lack of courage, the timidity of the federal government, in a sense, to be responsive to the demonstrations, to the protests of the people. I think SNCC, along with other organizations, along

with a large segment of the American people, has presented opportunities for the government to be responsive and to meet . . .

Q. Why do you think they weren't responsive?

A. I think for political reasons. In a situation like the Mississippi challenge, for example, the government was prepared to act on the basis of a great consensus in Mississippi and on the basis of political expediency, rather than on what was morally right. And see, at one time (and Moses used to put a great deal of emphasis on this stuff) . . . There was a certain amount of ethics—I guess you may call it ethics—or a certain amount of morality that engulfed the whole civil rights movement. Not just SNCC but the whole movement had an obligation or a mandate to inject some of this ethic, or inject some of this morality, into the body politic. And I think SNCC has lost that now, because SNCC at the present time is using some of their very methods. They're using some of their very language; they're using some of the things that we were fighting against.

Q. Black Power?

A. Yes. See, I think that an organization like SNCC had an opportunity to say that we do not necessarily want to become a part of that which we're fighting against. We do not want to copy that which we're fighting against, but we want to make it something better and something different, and right now it's picking up the same methods, using the same vicious and evil system that we have been trying to destroy.

Q. Well, what do you mean by . . . Such as what?

A. Well . . .

Q. What methods is SNCC using that are so bad?

A. That are so bad, and so violent? See, I'm a believer in this whole idea that you cannot separate means and ends, and that if you're striving for what we liked to talk about in SNCC in the past and what some of the people in the national movement liked to talk about—the beloved community. A community at peace with itself. What some people would call an open or a redeemed society. If this is our goal, if this is our end, then our means and our methods must be somehow caught up in our goals and our ends.

Q. Would you say that using political methods, trying to get political office, trying to take over a community, like Lowndes County, is incompatible with seeking the redeemed community.

A. No, I'm not saying it's incompatible. Not at all. Because I think the so-called good people, the so-called people who believe in nonviolence, who believe in a beloved community and an open society, in an interracial society,

must get involved in the political arena. I think this is a must. To take an effort, to take a morality and to make it something different, make it something better. On the other hand, I don't think we should put all of our emphasis and all of our stress on bringing changes through the so-called elective process, through the political arena, through the whole legislative process. We must also deal within that whole area of reconciliation—man-to-man, that type of thing, races to races.

Q. Yes. Do you know what happened to the people in SNCC who supported you, after Stokeley took over? Did a lot of them leave?

A. Well, I don't think all of the people left. I don't think so. I think a lot of people are still there. I think people fitted into other things. But, on the other hand, I think there have been massive turnovers since the national meeting. Different people . . . Not just white people. There were a lot of white people there who were asked to leave or something. But different people left. I think some people stayed as long as they could afterward and then they left. I think Marion for one stayed as long as he could. People say he was fired or he resigned from the new Washington office. I don't think he could have officially submitted a resignation, I don't know. But I know he's going to resign from the SNCC staff. That's what Julian Bond told me. Julian's one of my closest friends.

Q. He made a public statement saying it wasn't.

A. It wasn't because of that. Right. You should talk to him. People make public statements, they have one reason for making a public statement, and another reason for . . . I don't know, but I couldn't say. I'm not going to question his . . .

Q. What has been SNCC's greatest difficulty? The greatest obstacle to its success?

A. Unwillingness to come to grips with this. That is putting it too simply.

Q. Southerners?

A. I say it's unwillingness to come of age, in a sense.

Q. What do you mean?

A. It's an unwillingness to live in the real world.

Q. Could you give me an example of how that's hurt SNCC?

A. See, I think the greatest need right now is for SNCC, as an organization (I don't know whether it can do it or not), to really organize young Negro people, young white people in the South. I think the greatest contribution that SNCC can make, with its limited resources, limited staff, limited funds and all of that, is to concentrate primarily in the Deep South—the whole

South rather—and on organizing the young Negroes and the young whites in the South into a powerful political force for change. Not just getting people registered, but training people, teaching people how to conduct a campaign. And getting people elected and not just running people for the fun of running people. Go out and get people registered and get people elected, and that can be done and SNCC can do it. And I think that's what SNCC can do and stop spreading itself so thin, going all over the country. Talking about black power here, black power was just like Freedom Now—a slogan, and rhetoric. It was just like the slogan "one man, one vote," but I think "one man, one vote" was a possibility, a little more than "Black Power." "I have a dream." All these things that we've been chanting, and "Freedom Now," and "one man, one vote." It's rhetoric, it's slogans. You do not have the ABCs, you do not have the one, two, threes of how you do it. What are you going to do? Something is missing.

Q. Would you want to add anything about SNCC?

A. No. (interruption) . . . Let me give you a little history . . . See, I went on the Freedom Ride. I was one of three students who went on the original Freedom Ride for CORE. I left school without taking my final exam, my senior exam, at . . .

Q. You mean three SNCC students?

A. No, there were three students, three SNCC-type students, I guess, one from Morehouse College, one from the Atlanta student movement, and one from the non-violent action group in Washington. I went on the Freedom Ride in mid-May of '61, and I was beaten, on the Ride, in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Then I got off the ride because in the meantime I had made an application with the American Friends Service Committee to go on the VISA program—Voluntary International Services Agency. To go to India for two years on an assignment. So, I left the Freedom Ride to go for this interview, to Philly. And in the meantime I was supposed to rejoin the Ride in Birmingham, or Montgomery, and they had the violence at first going into Anniston, Alabama and they had violence in Birmingham, and CORE dropped the Freedom Ride. And I came back to Nashville and got involved with the Nashville students, suggesting that we should pick up the Ride, or continue the Ride. And we talked to a lot of people, CORE people, they said, "Don't do it," they were flying on to New Orleans. And people in SCLC, including Dr. King and the local people in Nashville, said "you all cannot go, it's just like committing suicide." So we decided to go. Ten of us

were selected to go on the Ride and to continue the Ride from Nashville, and I was one of the guys.

Q. Who was with you?

A. There were ten people . . . Ten Nashville students . . . There was Paul Brooks, Katharine Burke, a young guy named William Harbour.

Q. What other SNCC people were with you?

A. I don't know any names that stand out right now. Most of the people after '62 or '63, they really didn't get involved in SNCC as a southwide group. They stayed with the Nashville Student Movement, and after that they graduated from college and got involved in other things. So none of the names I can think of at this particular time of that original ten really stand out. I can't think of a single one. And I was chosen to be the spokesman for that particular group and went on to Birmingham and we were put into protective custody and all that. And later, we went on to Montgomery, where I was beaten again, and left out on the street unconscious and I think all of that has something to do with it; people didn't forget that. And then I went back to Nashville in September of '61 and I was elected chairman. See, Diane [Nash] had been chairman of the Nashville Student Movement in the past, and then I was elected chairman of the Nashville Student Movement, and when it was . . .

Q. When was that?

A. That was '61. September of '61. I was chairman of the Nashville Student Movement during the school years September '61-'62 and '62-'63, and when there was no other protest movement going on, there was something going on in Nashville. Massive demonstrations, 3,000-4,000 students involved in theaters, hotels and motels and that type of thing. And the Nashville Student Movement, being a part of SNCC, was a movement to be reckoned with, because it became a powerful movement in terms of getting things accomplished. So that's why two of the chairmen of SNCC have been from Nashville; from the Nashville Student Movement.

Q. You mean Marion Barry?

A. That's right. And some of the best people (and I'm not just saying that), but some of the best people that made up SNCC, people like Diane [Nash] and [James] Bevel and Marion [Barry] and [Bernard] Lafayette, all came from Nashville. Jim Lawson was their teacher.

Q. Okay. I sort of want to skip ahead to something else, and that is the whole Selma-Montgomery march, where Martin Luther King was involved.

What happened there? Was it some sort of thing where Martin Luther King made everybody stop and pray and turn back?

A. I didn't go on Tuesday because I was released from the hospital on Tuesday, so I wasn't there. I came out and I was there just before the people left, but I didn't participate in that particular effort. On a Sunday we marched, or attempted to march, were beaten and then Monday I guess we just sort of regrouped. What day did he turn back? On Monday or Tuesday? On Tuesday . . . Let's see—7th, 8th, 9th—I guess it was on Tuesday that he turned back, maybe.

Q. Did SNCC know he was going to turn back?

A. No. SNCC didn't know. I don't think people were aware . . .

Q. What did SNCC think about it?

A. I think some of the people in SNCC were bitter and angry about it, but I say this, and I say this for the record: I think SNCC forfeited its right to criticize the march from Selma to Montgomery, in a sense to say anything about it. If I can give you a little history here. I don't know if anyone else has talked to you about the march, but this is pure, honest history of what happened. The day before the march, the Saturday before the march, we had an executive committee meeting in Atlanta, in the basement of a local restaurant on Hunter Street. And the SNCC people, almost every person, opposed the march from Selma to Montgomery. They said that people shouldn't march. They said it was another trick of Dr. Martin Luther King to get people hurt and everything. We shouldn't march, we shouldn't support it, we shouldn't have anything to do with it. And it was the official decision.

Q. Did you agree?

A. No, I didn't agree. And another cat didn't agree, and that was Bob Mants. See, I took the position that the march was one of the most available weapons, was the most powerful weapon that we had to dramatize the desire of the Negro people in the Black Belt of Alabama and throughout the South to vote, and that we should march. It was a means of protest, and that we should march. Some people said if we should march, the only reason we should march is to protect the people, because people gonna get hurt and people gonna get killed, that type of thing. But when the vote came down, people voted against SNCC officially participating in the march. And I don't know what the vote was but I know two people who favored the march, and that was Robert Mants and myself. I said I was going on anyway . . . I guess this was when the whole consensus thing broke down . . . So I said

I would go as an individual; that I was a citizen of Alabama and I had a right, I thought, to participate in this particular demonstration, and that I was going to march. So, I left that Saturday night, driving with some SNCC people who were going down to observe, I guess. Some individuals who favored the march who were not members of the executive committee, went to Selma, and we marched. After all the violence and everything in Selma, after that first attempt to march, SNCC people got involved. The people who had voted against the march got involved, as far as saying that they wanted things to go in a particular way, in a particular direction. Some of the people, as individuals, were willing to cooperate and try to . . . Selma, during that whole period leading up to the march, had been a cooperative venture, since January 18th, between SCLC and SNCC. And since that time, I spent almost all of my time, almost every single day in Selma. Maybe I went to Atlanta on the weekends. From January 18th, all the whole month of February, except for about four days when I was on a speaking thing . . .

Q. Was there a certain rivalry between SNCC and SCLC in Selma?

A. I don't think there was necessarily a rivalry. I think some people disagreed on certain techniques and certain tactics and things like that.

Q. For example?

A. There was a debate over people signing a roster in order to get a number . . . A little thing, a little insignificant detail. But I don't think there was any real debate and division over major points of the whole Selma movement. Some people say that Martin Luther King betrayed them, betrayed the people; that he sold out the day he . . .

Q. Why do they say that?

A. On the bridge; that he made a deal with the federal government and that type of thing. See, and I think one of the basic principles of the philosophy of non-violence is that you always give your opponent a way out. You don't try to crush someone, but you try to leave room for them to get out. If they want to save face, let them save face. I think that was Kennedy's thing with the Cuban crisis. He never threatened to destroy Cuba, or destroy the Soviet Union if Khrushchev didn't move the missiles out of there. I know there's a lot of debate about that. But he sort of left a way, an honorable way, for those guys to come out. And I think what Dr. King did was said in a sense, "while we may lose in this particular demonstration today, we may lose the battle, but we will win the war. That we may lose on this Tuesday, but two weeks from today, we gonna be on our way to Montgomery." And it was not . . . To me that was not a big . . .

Q. Well, I don't understand. If he hadn't stopped there, then . . .

A. If he hadn't stopped there, there were real possibilities of another serious, probably more bloody, clash between the demonstrators and the state troopers of Alabama.

Q. The whole thing was about whether SNCC would have police protection on the march, or something like that?

A. I don't think so . . .

Q. If there had been another bloody clash, SNCC might not have been able to go on to Montgomery? I mean, the march might not have been able to go on to Montgomery?

A. If there had been another clash on that particular day . . . Eventually the people would have made it to Montgomery, but there would have been so many innocent people hurt and beaten and probably some people killed, when it could have been avoided . . .

Q. That bridge incident . . . What was the name of the bridge?

A. The Edmund Pettus Bridge, over the Alabama River.

Q. Were you . . . There was some sort of incident where you were leading people over the bridge? I mean, you were stopped and beaten by the police?

A. Right. That was Sunday. That was the first attempt to march. There was the Sunday March 7 march. Hosea Williams, who represented SCLC, and I were marching, supposedly as an individual. But it was really SNCC . . .

Q. But that had nothing to do with King turning back?

A. Oh, no. King was not there that Sunday. He stayed in Atlanta preaching at his church. There were different rumors about why he stayed away. Some people say the FBI or somebody in the Justice Department said that he could be assassinated and he shouldn't march, and he would be fired on when he got on the bridge. And so we decided to march, and then I was beaten and gassed, with other people.

Q. Oh, did SNCC people suspect that King turned back not because he feared a bloody clash, but because he feared being assassinated?

A. On that Tuesday?

Q. Yes.

A. I don't know about that Tuesday. I think people in SNCC generally just felt that probably he gave in to the pressures of the federal government. But they felt on that Sunday that he didn't march because of the possibility of being assassinated.

Q. Oh. Just that one day?

A. Yeah.

Q. What was the significance of that whole march?

A. The Selma march?

Q. Yeah. In general, and also in terms of SNCC's relationship with SCLC.

A. The Selma march, I think, must be considered a landmark in the civil rights struggle. Because it was the first time that we were able to involve more than just one city, more than one county, but several counties in the black belt of Alabama, into one massive movement. And at the same time we were able to bring the nation to the South and show, point out, what Negroes have to go through in being denied the right to vote. And the Selma crisis created such a concern, such a restlessness on the part of a segment of the American people. I remember on the Tuesday following the Sunday Betty Garman . . . have you talked to Betty Garman?

Q. Yes, I have talked to her.

A. Well, she was the Northern coordinator, and one night she called the Selma office when I was there and she gave me a list of cities for the demonstration . . . SNCC was a powerful force during that period . . . There were demonstrations in more than eighty-two major cities in the United States and in Canada, and I would say over ninety percent of those demonstrations were in cities SNCC had something to do with, including the one in Canada at the American consulate. But you had hundreds and thousands of people in the streets. In Michigan, the governor—Governor Romney—and the Mayor of Detroit were marching down the street together; and people all over the country, because of what happened in Selma.

Q. This was in . . . what? Spring of . . .

A. Sixty-five. March of '65. I think the Selma march was the beginning of a further deterioration of the relationship between SNCC and SCLC. Just in little problems, personality conflicts and things like that. We had some people on our staff who were very critical. They couldn't fit into the SCLC bag. SCLC put a great deal of emphasis on strength, a great deal of emphasis on the leader type thing.

Q. Did this make a momentum, this Selma march. Was it more successful than the march on Washington in this respect?

A. I think so. Because the Selma march, something concrete came out of it. The march on Selma created such a national crisis that the President of the United States had to go on nationwide television and deliver a major address, which I think was a marvelous speech. He said something about the "moans and the groans of the people," and when you get a government

official saying something like that, that "the cries of the people have summoned us all here," that brought even a President, even the highest legislative body, decision-making body in the country; one of the most respected, I guess, legislative bodies in the world: the Senate, the members of the House together, I think that is saying something to the South. Because I think if Johnson had not made that speech on March 15th, if there had not been any type of justice from the federal government, if he had not sent troops to Alabama, I think the summer of '65, or the spring of '65 could have been serious. There could have been disorder in every major city in this country. Because they talk about a credibility gap now concerning the war in Vietnam. But, I think SNCC had had the feeling for a long time that there was a credibility gap in the whole civil rights area. The government was saying one thing and not doing what it was saying it was doing; making promises and not keeping those promises.

Q. Do you think this somewhat changed the minds of some people?

A. I think the Selma thing . . . Maybe not "changed" the minds of some people; it was not a detour, but a postponement of certain actions.

Q. I would say a growing disillusionment.

A. Right. But now, you know, I think what could have happened if Johnson had not made that speech, and some other thing, like supporting and protecting the marchers from Selma to Montgomery, what could have happened at that time is happening now. I think it's sort of like Selma with the Meredith march, and we're seeing much of it now and I think you'll see more of it this summer. And if I may make a point about the James Meredith march . . . I think SNCC's involvement in that march . . .

Q. Yes . . . ? What happened on the Meredith march?

A. See, what made the Meredith march different from the Selma march . . . The James Meredith march didn't have any substance. See, demonstrations grow out of a movement. There was no movement in Mississippi . . . I think, in order for any particular demonstration to be powerful and meaningful it should have some basis, some basic purpose. Or there shouldn't be a demonstration.

Q. Did SNCC participate in that?

A. In a sense they did, in a sense they didn't. And that's sort of wrong in itself, I guess, but it's true.

Q. In what sense did it?

A. The sense it did . . . The chairman of SNCC at that time made a decision—along with two or three other people, on his own—to participate

in the Meredith march without the central committee or the coordinating committee. And at the Nashville meeting, just a few weeks before, they had been accusing other people who had been in elected office of making decisions without consulting other people.

Q. That was Stokely . . .

A. Yeah. And I think the Meredith march . . . There was no movement. I think few demonstrations, few marches, few protest meetings—anything—will surpass what happened in Selma. See, the Selma demonstration didn't take place in a vacuum; something led up to it. When we went there in September of '63, and then when SCLC came down, this was a type of joint effort, starting in January, that increased the momentum, you see. The Selma march was a climax of something, but the Meredith march was a reaction to a particular incident; that James Meredith had been shot, and people tried to create something out of that, which I think sort of fell through. I don't know whether I said it openly in public, but I don't know whether greater harm came out of the Meredith march, or good.

Q. What do you think were some of the other important developments in SNCC between '63 and '66? What were the big things in that period?

A. I think the development of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. SNCC gave birth to that organization. The development of the Albany movement, in Albany, Georgia, the first time that a whole community outside of Montgomery, Alabama got involved in the SCLC and SNCC. But you've got a whole movement, a whole city, a whole Negro community going to jail en masse. I think SNCC had to create that, with the challenge of the Democratic convention and the party, the Freedom Democratic Party, and, after Atlantic City, the Summer Project has to be considered as a landmark, I think, in the history and development of SNCC.

Q. Well, let's talk about these different things in more detail. You mentioned the FDP first. How did that come about? What led up to its being founded?

A. I don't know if I'm the right person to . . . If you can talk to Frank Smith or somebody like that, because they were more closely in the Mississippi development. And people like Moses, and [Lawrence] Guyot. Have you talked to Guyot yet?

Q. Not yet, no.

A. People like . . . (unintelligible)

Q. He's in Mississippi too?

A. Yes, he's in Mississippi. They know the details of what really happened. I was not that closely involved on a day-to-day basis with the development

or creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party. I was not altogether in that "wing" to give everything to Mississippi.

Q. Why was the party founded, do you know?

A. Yes. The party was founded because the Negro people in Mississippi—more than 450,000 of voting age and only about 25,000 registered to vote—had been denied a right, denied *the* right to participate in the regular Democratic party. And they felt that . . .

Q. Why didn't they just found another party, instead of founding another "Democratic" party?

A. They felt that maybe by using the methods of the Democratic party, using the methods of being accepted, of getting into the establishment and participating, they would be recognized as a big, official political party. And I think at this point, after the Atlantic City thing, people became so bitter and so stern and frustrated about what took place, that they used all the methods, used all the tricks of the game and played the game, and then they were turned down. I think they felt this was the only way the people would have a voice in the decision-making process within the political arena in Mississippi. I think people really felt and some of us were really convinced that the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party will be seated and will be recognized, and all of that. But . . .

Q. Yeah . . . Was this very effective in starting local leadership?

A. Oh, yes. By all means. Throughout the state, people participated in mock elections, you may recall.

Q. Could you go back? Let's go back to December of '63.

A. December of '63, right. When Aaron Henry and . . . Ed King were running for governor of the state, and I spent a great deal of time in the state during that particular period, down in the delta area. All across the state people had been organizing to different local, political organizations—precincts and county districts. People who had never voted before, who needed to get used to the whole method of trying to vote. Who had never registered. You had these different ballots and things—beauty shop, barber shop, grocery store, churches, homes and everything else—and in that election, if I recall, more than 80,000 . . . 82,000 I believe . . . I think it was 82,000, maybe more . . . Negro people voted in that mock election. In '63. And I think from that period, if you recall, a lot of whites too were involved in that, particularly from Yale and Stanford, I believe. Maybe somebody you should call and talk to who was involved in that is Al Lowenstein; have you talked to him?

Q. I'm going to.

A. Right. He's a good guy. I saw him not too long ago. I go down to his restaurant to eat a great deal. And I think he could give you some real insight on that. . . . And all those contacts that were made from that election were given to the different workers in the different districts, the different counties and the different communities. And those records served as a mailing list to get people to come to other organizations. So that whole mock election thing took on a prominent organization, that led into the real creation, engaged in MFDP as a real organization, I think. It was the beginning of the MFDP, in terms of having a mass base, a mass following in Mississippi.

Q. Okay. Now, the next thing you mentioned was the Albany movement. Actually in '61 and . . .

A. Sixty-one and '62.

Q. Would you evaluate that as a success? The Albany movement?

A. No, I think the Albany movement . . . It was successful in only one way. The fact that you got the Negro community aroused; you got people aroused. You got people in motion.

Q. But no really concrete . . .

A. No victories, or concrete gains. And a lot of people have said it was Dr. King's serious defeat. I don't know. If it was a defeat for SCLC, it was a defeat for SNCC also, for there were two organizations working there. But nothing really significant or meaningful in terms of change or victory came out of Albany. Chief Pritchett, the police official there, played it very cool.

****(Interruption)

When Kennedy died, I think something died within the movement itself. And I think something died within a lot of the young people. See, in spite of people being critical of Kennedy, and all of that, I think that, on the other hand, there was a great deal of hope and a great deal of possibilities with Kennedy; of being a friend to the movement and being a friend to young people in particular. Because people could tend to identify with him, he spoke their language.

Q. What were some of the other big turning points in those first few years of SNCC's history. Between say '61 and '63?

A. I think the central point, and it's the most important development in SNCC between '61 and '63, when people decided that they could no longer live in the college-community world, and because somebody had just brought the problems within the urban centers to their colleges and their universities; somehow they had to go out into what people in SNCC (because of the religious influence) called the "byways and the highways" of the South and take the gospel—Freedom—to the little people. Somehow you had to move beyond town and gown, and move out, for people to know anything about a town or anything about gowns.

Q. Yeah. Now, once they decided to do that, were there any big changes in the way they worked in these highways and byways?

A. Oh, yes, by all means. In the small towns, people were primarily based on college campuses or university campuses, whereas . . . I think in a sense SNCC's pattern in late '61 and all of '62 was a great deal like the early Christian church. You sort of went out there without anything. You really didn't know where you were going to stay. How much food would you have to eat? I mean, you really didn't know whether you were going to return or not. There was a great deal of faith. You just sort of were going out on your own; you became a missionary, in a sense. But not a missionary. You became one to go with the people, where the people are. If they're in the cotton field picking cotton, you would go there. And maybe help pick some cotton. If they were picking squash, you would help pick squash. Whatever the people were doing. You're there with them, stay in their homes, share their food and do everything they would do. But in the process, you're trying to build up their confidence, and starting to win their confidence, I guess. And at the same time, trying to get down to . . .

Q. Were SNCC people angry in those days?

A. You could say they was angry, but at the same time not angry. It was a good type of anger. It was a positive type of anger. It was against something, but it was also for something. It was against the whole system and structure of segregation and racial discrimination. It was also against the old guard Negro leadership. It was against . . .

Q. What about them?

A. Well, the old guard Negro leadership was that type of leadership that would tell people "you do this and you do that"; particularly an organization that happened to be based in New York, or be based in Atlanta, it was sort of looked on like they were looking down through a telescope, instead of going down and being with the people. They conducted membership drives

and membership meetings and big fund-raisers and rallies and things like that, but at the same time they were not suffering the type of indignities and injustices that the local people were suffering. And I think SNCC resented this. This was what, I think, brought SNCC into being, a sense of resentment against old guard Negro leadership and against the pace of change.

Q. Too slow.

A. Yes, the thing was too slow, and they wanted things to move faster, much faster. They resented people who said we got to work it out through the courts. They were saying that we've found a method, we've found a way. That we can do it ourselves, and it was saying to other people, "You don't have to wait until Roy Wilkins comes to Jackson. You don't have to wait until Martin Luther King comes here, but you can do it yourself. Just organize yourself into a powerful force and do it, and . . ."

****(Telephone interruption)

Q. You were talking about how SNCC had the idea people could do things for themselves, and not wait for the courts or for big famous leaders.

A. Right. And from that very period . . . had created this, I think, marvelous idea, which is a very noble concept, that you went into a community not to become leaders yourself; that you do not go in there to establish SNCC and make SNCC the organization that everybody should lie down and worship.

Q. Did that work out? Did SNCC really develop indigenous leadership?

A. I think so. When you look at the state of Mississippi, and look at all of the people who have emerged over the past few years. And it would be good, you know, to talk to some of those people, like Fannie Lou Hamer, for example. I think Fannie Lou Hamer was a product of SNCC. They took her out of the . . .

Q. Was there a problem of the SNCC people trying too much to be leaders in working with people?

A. Trying to be . . . too much . . . ?

Q. In other words, telling them what they wanted too much?

A. I think that became a problem much later on, telling people what they wanted, rather than let people sort of decide. You make certain information available to the people and let the people make their decision. But I think there was always a conflict within SNCC, over this whole thing of some

people deciding for people, in a sense, what they want. And at the same time, other people saying to people, "you decide for yourself." See, I don't know if people discussed this or not, but Gene Roberts did a story on people in SNCC, the so-called "Freedom High." Have you heard that phrase?

Q. I've heard it, yes.

A. Well, much later, after the summer of '64 but even before then, a great many people went through a period called the Freedom High period. This was when people did whatever they wanted to do, according to the spirit. You just go out and do anything, you're not responsible to anybody. There was serious discussion in SNCC once, some year and a half or two years ago—about firing people. People would say, "You can't fire us. No one can be fired from SNCC. SNCC is not an organization, it's not a union, it's not a club, it's a movement." And people would try to bring discipline. But I understand now, from somebody last night, that SNCC is getting back to this thing of trying to bring about some sense of discipline, a sense of organization.

Q. You think that's a good thing? How does that stack up with what you said earlier, about consensus? Group leadership?

A. Well, I think an organization like SNCC needs or must have some form of discipline, some form of leadership. On the other hand, you must be willing to reconcile the best qualities within the consensus, this whole other thing of consensus of group leadership, with the best qualities in this whole discipline approach. I think it would be the death of SNCC if it became so highly organized and became disciplined like the military. I think it would die of its own, you know, organizational structure, if that would take place.

Q. Well, why do you say that? Was there a lot of initiative coming up from SNCC workers in the field?

A. Oh, yes. I think . . .

Q. How about initiative coming up from the people who were working among the local people?

A. A lot of initiative from the local people. But a lot of initiative came from workers in the field. People were free. They didn't have to make reports and things like that. Particularly during '62, '63 and '64. But we'd get all these reports from the field about what people were doing. People were very creative. But, when SNCC came to . . . "we're gonna concentrate on Mississippi this summer; everything is gonna be for Mississippi and we're not gonna do anything in Arkansas," then the Arkansas people felt sort of left

out, and the people in Southwest Georgia and the people in the Black Belt of Alabama.

Q. Was that part of the Freedom High problem?

A. I think so.

Q. Could you expand, and say exactly how?

A. Well, I think there was a danger . . . After the Summer Project in particular (and we were for the Summer Project), all the people started talking about Mississippi, Mississippi this, Mississippi that, and there were no resources, no new staff for Southwest Georgia or Arkansas or Alabama. Most of the funds had been routed to Mississippi. So the Southwest Georgia people felt like they were being treated like step-children, and I think Alabama people and Arkansas people felt the same way.

Q. Now, what position did they tend to take in the whole Freedom High controversy? Did they want more discipline?

A. They wanted more discipline. They all did. Because they felt that Mississippi was, like, they had so many people down there—so many staff people there—they were not doing anything, and in a sense that was true. They just had a lot of deadwood on the SNCC staff in Mississippi. I think people had some legitimate gripes, and that a lot of people became Freedom High.

Q. Was this connected with the problem of whites in SNCC too?

A. I think that had something to do with it. I think the whites in SNCC had something to do with it. I think a lot of people felt, after the Summer Project of '64, we just had a lot of people, white and Negro, I guess a lot of people were white, because most of the Negroes happened to be from Mississippi, and you couldn't tell the Negroes from Mississippi to leave home, and they were there, but their relationship with SNCC was sort of nebulous. Sometimes they were on the staff, sometimes they were off the staff. On the other hand, I think some of the local Negroes on the Mississippi staff wanted white people in a sense to leave the state; it was almost like "we've been here for so many months and we want to stay here and the local people want us to stay," and we went through that whole thing.

Q. Wait now. They wanted the white people to leave. So did they favor a tighter structure, too?

A. Who? The Negroes? I don't think so. See, I think Moses, more than any other person, played a great role in this Freedom High thing. There was a segment of the Northern whites and the Northern Negroes, and I may be a little biased here but I don't think so. Because I'm a Southerner, see, but

I think Moses had a tremendous impact upon a group of Northern Negroes, and a group of Northern whites. And not just in Mississippi, where they sort of made him their own little thing. He became the all-perfect and all-holy and all-wise leader, and I think that's one of the reasons he changed his name and all that stuff. Because of that. Moses had this whole thing that people should just be free. That people should be paid to just do anything. Somebody wanted to write a play, there's nothing wrong with writing a play or writing poetry. There's nothing wrong with that. It's good and necessary, if people want to do that. And then you got involved in this whole thing of defining work. What is work? It was a hassle . . . At that point, after '64, SNCC was going through serious, very serious internal problems. There was really a real split, and it was divided into many, many factions. It was not just personalities, but it was a whole thing of disciplined consensus, the participation of the staff in the decision-making process. That's when we abandoned the so-called "coordinating committee," and elected people from different areas of the South, and the whole staff became the coordinating committee. The whole staff became the chief decision-making body of the organization. The small committee that called itself the executive committee later, changed to the central committee.

Q. Were you still chairman then?

A. Yeah.

Q. Were the people who favored a tighter structure also the ones who tended to be more critical of whites' role in the movement?

A. I don't think so. I think there were some of them in both camps.

Q. Who were these Northern Negroes who were with Moses?

A. I think people like Courtland, Courtland Cox. Have you heard his name?

Q. Yes, I'm sure . . . What about him?

A. I think Courtland would be in the Moses camp. I think Stokely would have been in the Moses camp. Well, I will say Stokely, Courtland, Ivanhoe Donaldson, Charlie Cobb. I have this whole theory and I think if you had some real investigation it would bear me out, just from talking to other people . . . You know Rochelle Horowitz at all? She was sort of an outsider; she was never really that much involved in SNCC. But a few days from now, Rochelle and Tom Kahn and I think Ivanhoe are going to get together, I guess it's on February 1st, and sort of have an interview/discussion . . . what SNCC was like . . . so many years ago.

Q. Oh, will that be published in *Dissent*?

A. I think it probably will be published. So we're going to get together on the 1st or the 2nd. Next Wednesday, I guess.

Q. Here in New York.

A. Here in New York. Yes.

Q. Will that be open to the public?

A. Oh, no. It just gonna be at somebody's apartment so they can just ask those questions, and probably just three, four, or five people. So you might watch out for that issue of *Dissent*.

Q. How come you chose those people instead of choosing people who were more important to SNCC?

A. Well, I think for this reason. Perhaps Tom Kahn more than . . . Who happens to be white . . . You know Tom Kahn?

Q. Yes . . .

****(interruption)

Q. Courtland?

A. Courtland . . . Courtland Cox, Ivanhoe Donaldson, Stokely, Bob Moses—they went through this period of . . . Bohemian . . . Village . . . And all their friends happened to be white, and they sort of grew up and lived, for the most part, in a white world, attended some of the best schools and some of the best universities and all of that. And after the sit-ins—when the sit-ins started in 1960—they were in a serious dilemma.

Q. They what?

A. They were put in a dilemma of seeing young black students in the South being beaten, harassed and put in jail for trying to get a cup of coffee or a hamburger at a lunch counter, and somehow they wanted to identify with that. And so they had to in a sense throw off their past and disown their past, and they became very bitter and very angry, and they all came South, and that's where most of them are today . . . and I think this has something to do with the participation of some of the people that led them to this issue, particularly, the Northern Negro. I remember at the national meeting one young Southern black guy said, "most of us from the South do not need a white to tell us that we are black; we don't have to wear signs saying we're black. We don't need it. We do not need to wear afros to say we are black, we know we are black." And I think that is saying a great deal.

Because I still maintain there is a great difference in the young Negro people who get involved in the movement—those from the South and those from the North.

Q. Is there a certain guilt on their part?

A. I think it's guilt, and I think the frame of reference is different.

Q. It's interesting that this group—Stokely, Ivanhoe and so on who were later involved in SNCC at the time when whites were more and more excluded from the organization . . . How do you think that adds up?

A. Well, I think that's part of the pattern. See, I think it's a very interesting theory. I think maybe somebody should do some research on it and really trace it.

Q. A psychologist.

A. That's right! It would be good for a psychologist to . . . You know Bob Coles?

Q. I haven't met him yet . . .

A. You've got to talk about . . . He's on the board of the Field Foundation also. He's a good friend of mine. I know him very well. He's very close to SNCC.

Q. I'm planning to . . .

A. Well, you should talk to Bob Coles because I think he knows a great deal about a lot of these people. But I think this follows, that at a particular period in the very early stage, when they were very young, they went through this period where they wanted to disown their own background, disown being Negro. At the same time . . . I think this happened in other situations and other cases that had nothing to do with race; that people moved from one extreme to a position of moderation on one thing, and then they'd move from that to another position . . .

Q. Another extreme?

A. Another extreme. And I think that's what has happened to a select number of people in SNCC. I don't know that much about some of their backgrounds, but I know just from talking to people, talking to Bob [Moses]. I doubt seriously if he would speak to me today. I don't know. Maybe he would. But I understand he refuses to speak to any white person and he selects the Negroes he likes to talk to.

Q. Why do you think he won't talk to them?

A. To the white people? He said they live in a different world, and there's no way for him to communicate, to understand. He cannot understand, he cannot talk to them.

Q. And yet he was a leader of the whites, when he was in the South.

A. That's right. He was one of the guys who fought for whites to come into Mississippi when everybody else was against it. But today, three and a half years later, he's saying that he cannot talk to whites; he cannot deal with them. And the best schools and colleges. He was at Harvard and studied philosophy . . . a good student . . . I guess he taught at Horace Mann. A math teacher. . . Hunter College . . . Interracial background. Studied the philosophy of science.

Q. It is kind of ironic that the people at SNCC with the most interracial background are now the black nationalists.

A. That's right. And I think there's truth in that. I really haven't seen anything in writing about it, but it would be great for somebody to do a study of that.

Q. I'll probably include that in . . . some of that on the chapter on that.

A. That would be very interesting. You really should talk to a lot of people about that, particularly Sherrod. I understand he is going to be up this way in a few weeks . . .

Q. Most people haven't told me that. I sometimes ask the question whether in the Freedom High movement there was any split on issues between Northerners and Southerners, and they usually say no.

A. No, people tend to sort of evade that. Even one white kid I was talking to the other night, who had been very active in SNCC in Jackson, Tennessee came by here—had worked for SSOC [Southern Student Organizing Committee] and Hamlett. You should talk to some of the Southern white students who were involved.

Q. I've talked to Jane Stembridge.

A. Jane Stembridge. Sue Thrasher, who is at the Institute for Policy Studies in D.C. Ed Hamlett, a young white cat from Jackson, Tennessee. Sam Shirah from Alabama. As a matter of fact, he's from Toronto. Well, he was born in Toronto . . . Bob Zellner . . . You've talked to Bob. Because, I do think that young white Southerners and the young black Southerners—and maybe I'm becoming biased and prejudiced, but I think I'm trying to be as objective as possible—there's a greater sense of knowing each other, a greater sense of understanding the language, the culture—whatever you want to call it.

Q. More than, say, white and black Northerners?

A. Oh, yes. I think so.

Q. I think you're right. Jane . . . I was just talking to Jane yesterday, and she said something like that . . .

**** (turned machine off) . . . (inaudible question)

A. Well, I was not out of SNCC during that period. See, they had the coordinating committee, and I was a member of the coordinating committee during that whole period from '60 . . . I guess the first time I was elected to the coordinating committee it was the fall of '61. So I attended all the meetings and things like that. And I took a very active part in it, between going from Nashville to Atlanta and during the summer I was very involved in some of the projects and things. Chuck McDew resigned as chairman, he said because of health, and he didn't come to the meeting. But in the meantime he sent me a telegram. I have just looked at some stuff on the desk, there's a telegram that he sent to me saying that we were having an emergency meeting of the coordinating committee; this was really not the coordinating committee. In theory it was the coordinating committee, but we didn't have that many representatives on different college campuses at that time. So I came to that meeting and the house was open for the election of the chairman, and I had . . . In all seriousness—I'll be very frank and very honest: I had no idea that I would be elected chairman of SNCC. I had no dream, no thoughts on anything. I'd been very active in the Nashville Movement, at that time. I had been chairman . . .

Q. Who sort of pushed your candidacy? Who was eager to see it happen?

A. Well, I understand that Forman . . . I later understood that Forman was interested in it, that I become chairman.

Q. How was that election procedure?

A. Well, the only thing that happened, I think Forman made the motion, or somebody made the motion, that . . . well, the house was open for the nomination of the chairman, and I was nominated, and this was not a meeting of the Conference. It was not an annual meeting, but it was in June. We usually have our annual meeting in April, and McDew had just been re-elected, I guess. And so I was really elected to serve out his time. And personally, I don't see anything evil about it.

Q. Was . . . Did the whole organization elect you, or were you elected by just the . . .

A. The coordinating committee. But it was not a conference of students from all over the South, who usually elect the chairman; who had been electing the chairman, but just the coordinating committee.

Q. And usually when they elected a chairman it was everybody?

A. Right. The representatives from all of the colleges and things like that. Then, that was in June of '63. April of '64 they had a new election, and I was re-elected chairman by the whole organization, the conference—the usual thing. And the same thing happened in '65.

Q. Was there anybody who opposed your candidacy?

A. In '60?

Q. At first. The first time.

A. Oh, no. There was no one.

Q. So, I guess it wasn't that . . . really important.

A. No, no one opposed. And the rumor was at that time—I understood later—that either Sherrod or myself would become chairman. I didn't know anything about it, I guess because I was in Nashville and it's not that close to Southwest Georgia. But . . .

Q. Why do you think you were chosen?

A. Well, I think because . . . I think two or three things. And I'm not saying this in an arrogant or boastful sense. I think I was elected chairman of SNCC and the reason I served the period I did was because more than any other person at that time (and it's a pretty arrogant presumption, I know, to say this), I had demonstrated a type of commitment, a serious commitment to the philosophy and to the discipline of nonviolence, perhaps more than any other person.