



Digital Education Systems
730 17th St. Suite 360
Denver, CO 80202

303-573-1284
fax: 303-573-1285

www.digitaled.com

MEMORANDUM

To: Tim West

Fm: Joe Sinsheimer *JAS*

Re: Robert Coles/Barney Frank Interviews

Dt: September 23, 1998

Enclosed in this mailing are two interviews:

The first interview is with Dr. Robert Coles, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of the Children of Crisis series. Dr. Coles served as an advisor to SNCC during 1963-64. This interview focused on Dr. Coles' recollections of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. Coles discusses 1) the intense media scrutiny of the project 2) the tensions between the SNCC staff and the student volunteers 3) his recollections of Dennis Sweeney (who later proved to be Al Lowenstein's assassin) and 4) the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's (MFDP) challenge to the all-white Mississippi delegation at the 1964 National Democratic party convention at Atlantic City.

The second interview is with Barney Frank, who now serves as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Massachusetts. Frank was a student volunteer during the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. Frank discusses 1) how he was recruited to the project by Al Lowenstein 2) his experiences that summer in Jackson, Mississippi and 3) Al Lowenstein's reaction to the MFDP's Atlantic City challenge.

Interview with Barney Frank
Washington, D.C.
November 14, 1983

Joe Sinsheimer: How did you get involved in the Mississippi Summer Project?

Barney Frank: Al Lowenstein got me involved with the Mississippi Summer Project. I had met Lowenstein a couple of years before-- I don't know of 1963 I was a graduate student at Harvard. And I got a call from Lowenstein late one night saying can you come see me I have to talk to you about something. So I went to see him in this Harvard house and he outlined the Project and asked me if I would help recruit Harvard people to go down. Well you could not agree to recruit people to go down there. But having agreed to recruit other people to go down there how the hell do you refuse to go yourself. I mean I was, the only thing I wanted to do less than go to Mississippi was to go to Mississippi in July. But he was a very persuasive guy, so it was through Lowenstein.

Sinsheimer: What was your, how did Lowenstein know you?

Frank: I had met him through National Student Association through some political things and had gotten to know him pretty well.

Sinsheimer: Okay, So how did you go about the recruiting?

Frank: I don't fully remember. I worked with the SNCC people, Dottie Zellner at Harvard was in charge of the Project. Dottie and Bob Zellner were at Harvard.

Sinsheimer: Did you bring any of the field staff to make speeches?

Frank: I don't remember.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Frank: They did most of it, I was involved. Dottie Zellner really ran it out of an office in a church near Harvard Law School. And I helped some, that's twenty years ago I don't remember.

Sinsheimer: Okay. The Harvard people that you knew that went, were they involved in church activities or ... ?

Frank: No I don't think so it is mostly just people who were on the left politically who wanted to go down.

Sinsheimer: Okay.

Frank: Paul Cowan ... it was a pretty broad, I don't think it was church based it was more politically based.

Sinsheimer: So you went to the Oxford training sessions?

Frank: Right.

Sinsheimer: So you were at the first one with the voter registration workers?

Frank: I think it was the second one, I was in the second shift.

Sinsheimer: You were in the second shift?

Frank: Yeah, because I was there, we were about to leave that word came that Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman had disappeared.

Sinsheimer: What were the staff/ volunteer relationships like?

Frank: They seemed pretty good up there as I remember. I am not conscious of any negative feelings there.

Sinsheimer: So how did you go to Mississippi?

Frank: You mean physically.

Sinsheimer: Physically, yeah .

Frank: We took the bus to the Tennessee-Mississippi border and a train from there. There was a bus coming through in the morning. So we took a bus from Ohio to Memphis, Nashville? And then we took a train down from there to Jackson.

Sinsheimer: How big was the group that you were traveling with?

Frank: As I remember one bus load, there was another bus.

Sinsheimer: And you went to what part of the state?

Frank: Jackson.

Sinsheimer: Jackson?

Frank: I went to Jackson and spent most of my time in Jackson with a couple of side trips. But I spent almost every night in Jackson. One night I went to Vicksburg. But I was in Jackson.

Sinsheimer: Where did you live in Vicksburg, I mean in Jackson?

Frank: They rented a house around the corner from the Lynch St. office. Six or seven of us shared mattresses on the floor.

Sinsheimer: So what was your primary involvement that summer?

Frank: Well, I am hard to understand my diction is not terrific. I was not your ideal person to talk to your average Mississippian black or white, particularly people who were frightened, etc. So I worked in the headquarters in Lynch St., the COFO headquarters on liason with the, I worked on the Convention Challenge, trying to prepare it doing the headquarters work, and doing some liason work with people in the North. I stayed there about a month or five weeks and then at the end of my stay I went up to Washington for a couple of days and worked with Joe Rauh who was doing the brief for the Freedom Democratic Party. So I was coordinating the political side of the challenge, talking to people in the North. I did a couple of stints-- oh one day we had to drive a truck to Greenwood and one night they needed people to go to Vicksburg just to be warm bodies.

But mostly I was in Jackson. I did go out and speak at a couple of meetings. Hartman Turnbow I remember had meetings in which I, they just wanted a student to go, to go out there and talk about what we were doing, I think it was mainly just to have a white face out from there from the North to show them that they were being abandoned.

Sinsheimer: Was there a tension that summer between whether you should be involved in actual voter registration work that was conventional ...

Frank: There was no option of doing voter registration before the Voting Rights Act. There was simply no physical way that they were going to get people registered. And the Justice Department wasn't doing very much. So you would not have gotten anybody registered. There was a conscious decision made that everybody agreed to-- the Civil Rights Act was passed early in the summer not to test it, not to go to lunch counters, not to go to movie theaters; but to concentrate on the challenge at the Democratic convention.

Sinsheimer: But I guess what I am referring to is that it seems that a lot of the Freedom Democratic Party registering was done sort of at the last minute. In fact there was a goal of 100,000 signatures ...

Frank: Oh, it was an unrealistic goal. That was just, they set themselves an unrealistic goal and there were a lot of things to be done. Do you mean conflict about within the mock registration versus other aspects of what was being done. I honestly don't remember that. There may have been,

Frank (cont.): I wasn't at that level to know whether there was that kind of conflict.

Sinsheimer: So you were there then at the Convention when ... ?

Frank: No, I didn't go to the convention. I was then a graduate student at Harvard and I had my Ph.d. orals in November of 1964. And I had taken, I had just budgeted how much time I could take. I had to come back and study for my generals.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Frank: And my orals and my written exams, my general exams in November, October-Novemebr. So I did go out to the National Student Association Convention for the Young Democrats. And then I came back, I couldn't take the time off to go to the Democratic National Convention so I wasn't there.

Sinsheimer: What was your reaction to what happened there?

Frank: Well I was probably among the less left, I was Democrat, liberal Democrat, was, am. A lot of people were bitterly disappointed, I was surprised it got as far as it did. I just thought we would get thrown right out the door. And I thought it was a very important step forward and I think that was ratified by what happened in '68.

Sinsheimer: Did you ever talk to Al Lowenstein about the convention?

Frank: Yes, a lot.

Lowenstein: He was disappointed too, he was disappointed at both sides. He felt that it had been misinterpreted. He had never said that the Freedom Democrats, he tells me, he told me, should have accepted the offer. Because he said of two delegates with them naming the delegates. He said they should have said okay we will name two delegates you tell us who they are.

That was a significant victory to have a rough group or be it a _____ a very legitimate rough group be given two delegates like that over a state Party that was a significant thing to happen. And his criticism was that though, no they shouldn't tell you who the two delegates will be, you should tell them who the delegates will be. He found it a very frustrating experience as it always is when you are trying to work with people, I mean the kind of people who go out and become super activists unfortunately aren't the kind of people like to make the compromises that I think are useful, some aren't useful.

But the '64 compromise there is no question in my mind just advanced things enormously. I think that has been borne out historically. Having the Democrats faith

Frank (cont.): that time and half a vote but giving ten percent of the vote for '64. By '68 the fight was over.

Sinsheimer: Did you ever run into Bob Moses?

Frank: Sure.

Sinsheimer: Did you talk to him about it.

Frank: After the fact, no. I saw Moses down in Mississippi. He kind of disappeared some time after that.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Frank: And became Bob Parris.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Frank: I worked pretty closely with his wife in Mississippi, Donna.

Sinsheimer: What was she like?

Frank: Very funny, very out going, very urban. Upper west side New Yorker. I mean she came from a middle class background. I remember I was trying to, given to the schools she went to and she lived in a kind of upper-middle class and the other thing. She was of a significant age like ten, eleven, twelve before she realized that all white people were Jewish. And she just lived in a ... she was very funny, very out going person.

Sinsheimer: Did she ever talk to you about Bob Moses' feeling about leadership.

Frank: No.

Sinsheimer: Do you think he was comfortable that summer?

Frank: No, he said he wasn't. I mean he went off and self-immolated I suppose that is I gather he had great anxious feelings about being a leader. I just, I never saw the Mississippi Summer myself as a transforming experience for America. I thought black people were getting the shit end of the stick and that they ought to be able to live just like white people. A large number of the people on that project at the leadership level and at the activist level didn't like American society and thought that blacks-- this was really all part of a movement to transform, change, purify American society. They were very

(Frank) p.6

- Frank (cont.): disappointed. I just don't think there was any chance of that. I think that Bob (Moses) felt that in part.
- Sinsheimer: What about ... the Jackson office was it, I mean since you were around it, did you think it was in control of what was going on in the state. Or do you think... in other words was there sort of a central organization that summer?
- Frank: Yeah, there was. I think it worked out pretty well considering it was what NAACP and SNCC and CORE and SCLC. Charles Evers in Jackson was somewhat separate with the NAACP operation, but I didn't see the friction as a real problem there during the summer.
- Sinsheimer: So you think there was good communication between Jackson and the field?
- Frank: Given, you there are inevitable problems when you are throwing together an ad hoc organization that way. Yeah, it went surprisingly well.
- Sinsheimer: What about, did you hear from volunteers who were working more in the field talk about their living conditions at all?
- Frank: They sucked. Everybody's living conditions were terrible.
- Sinsheimer: Right. But what about sort of things about, like discussions about black religion for example.
- Frank: Black religion, I don't remember talking about black religion with anybody.
- Sinsheimer: Or ...
- Frank: There were some black/white tensions. You know the whites were there for a little bit of time and were going to go out of it again. The blacks lived in that hell and at that point in '64 while it was about to get a lot better, nobody knew that. So they were living with that. They didn't have any money, the whites would have money and go out and buy food and the blacks ... there were tensions.
- Sinsheimer: One of the things that I am getting a sense of as I talk to people is I mean here is a group of people coming from colleges and homes where they believed in their political efficacy. I mean you are in a congressional office now.
- Frank: Right.
- Sinsheimer: And they are trying to translate that to people who some of the people labeled as apathetic. Is that a workable thing?

(Frank) p.7

- Frank: Yeah, it worked pretty good there in Mississippi. I mean that is probably what we were down there to do, but I found on the part of the blacks of Mississippi that they were ready, ready to get involved.
- Sinsheimer: So the volunteers sort of acted as a catalyst?
- Frank: Partly as a catalyst, partly just as hostages. We were there so they all wouldn't get shot. I mean that was the main reason we were there. And then we also did some other work, spoke and helped organize. But our main function was so that, they wouldn't be physically abused.
- Sinsheimer: Was the Jackson office harassed during the summer?
- Frank: No, I was never ...
- Sinsheimer: Did you ever try to contact ministers to get their support?
- Frank: What kind of ministers, do you mean white?
- Sinsheimer: White ministers, yeah.
- Frank: I never contacted, I don't think I have ever contacted a minister in my life.
- Sinsheimer: When you say you were working on the Convention Challenge ...
- Frank: Oh we weren't trying to get white support within Mississippi. We were just doing the organizing, making sure that the meetings were held, making sure that we had followed Mississippi law. I went and got precinct maps. We were making sure that our process was truly a parallel process. So that while it wasn't going to be allowed to be legal, we could make the best case that it was.
- Sinsheimer: How many people do you think were involved in that?
- Frank: I have no idea. I suppose I did once.
- Sinsheimer: Okay.
- Frank: All right.
- Sinsheimer: You have been helpful, thank you.
- Frank: Your welcolme.

End of Interview.