

Interview with Bruce Payne
Durham, North Carolina
October 24, 1983

Joe Sinsheimer:

Bruce, one of things I was interested in when we last talked was your perception of the differences in student groups. Would it be possible for you to place for me the volunteers within a framework of students ... ?

Bruce Payne:

Yeah. I would say that the people I knew on the left in Berkeley, very many of them in the late fifties-- and I knew some of the people going back to then-- and the early sixties, were people who came from kind of political families, and had some, kind of left political families. It was up until about 1961 or '62, it was reasonably rare for the the people involved in the various movements, whether it was capital punishment stuff or SLATE, the campus party, it was fairly rare for people to be involved who didn't come out of that kind of background in some way or the other. At the level of two or three to one. And there weren't many people involved in politics all together.

I think that changed when the movement hit Berkeley. But in a certain kind of way I was one of the unusual ones at Berkeley. I got into politics because of being a boy scout and taking that kind of stuff seriously.

At Yale, the people who were involved, many of them got involved through Bill Kaufman, through some kind of connection with him. And there was a sense on the part of some of them of noblesse oblige. I think what distinguished them from the people at Berkeley was a sense, I guess of what I would now call political efficacy. I didn't understand it to be exactly that then, but I think that is what it was. And that is to say I think that being at Yale and many of them coming from well-placed American families, that the possibility that they could be involved seriously in making some changes wasn't foreign to them.

When you would talk to people about that at Berkeley, and I did do a lot of recruiting for the organizations there, and recruiting among people without much political background, that was probably the hardest thing to get people to have a sense of. You know, that a few people could get together and really make a difference. That the political order

Payne (cont.):

was permeable, and there were not all that many people in it.

Somehow that was always an easier message to get across at Yale. And I think even when it wasn't people who came from families that weren't some way or another well-off, or powerful, or what have you. That was the milieu they were in.

But the other thing that I would say is that it was a little rarer in my political experience at Yale for the unpolitical people, the people without any political background and without much political experience, to get involved and then be very rapidly radicalized. Some of the people at Berkeley, and people on the left generally in the sixties I think, some of the people who were most left were the David Harris', who got in and were outraged and had never been much involved in politics before, and kind of went all the way with whatever it was. I think there was more, with the Yale people more a sense of the solidity or validity of existing political positions, or the importance of working with the system. Maybe more a sense of the strength of the system.

So the only person I can ever remember being real surprised by him, was rapidly radicalized, was Steve Bingham. And that was odd because he was a Bingham. His uncle was in Congress, his grandfather had been a Senator and so forth, and he had a lot of political experience before it all happened.

I knew, he was one of the first people I met at Yale, he was involved in the NSA, he knew Lowenstein. It was peculiar, but it was partly that he went to Mississippi with all of that stuff hanging over him. And gradually stayed closed enough to things, and got more and more angry. But that movement to radicalism wasn't casual.

Sinsheimer:

We didn't talk much about what you did at Yale when you returned, as in recruiting for the summer. Were you involved in that?

Payne:

I was involved in the discussions about it. And I knew there were discussions going on elsewhere. That is to say I knew something about Al being in touch with Bob (Moses) and about the disagreements down in Mississippi.

We had some meetings regularly in New Haven. And let me see if I can put together who was part of them. Eleanor Holmes, later Eleanor Holmes Norton, was part of them. At one point ... I seem to remember that Tim Jenkins was there. Who had been

Payne (cont.)

National Affairs Vice-President of NSA. There was somebody else ... and me when Al came to town to talk about these things. And we met a couple of times without Al being there I am sure.

The idea was to talk about lining up people who would be ready to go. Al said more or less, "I think it is going to happen." We were in agreement, this small group of us, that it was important that it happen. And that it was important that people be lined up and committed for the summer, even though we were in a position where Mississippi SNCC was clearly doubtful. And for awhile rejected it.

I don't know if Barney (Frank) ever came down, but we knew that Barney was doing the same thing up at Harvard. And I did go ahead and talk to a few undergraduates that I knew about doing things. I had long talks with a few of the guys who had been down in Mississippi in the fall and I think _____ went partly out of the recruiting that I did.

Sinsheimer:

Do you remember if any of the returning volunteers gave speeches up there, or Was it sort of informal or was there some sort of formal program too.

Payne:

Well, there were two or three things going on. One is that we would have sort of informal meetings of the people who had gone there, and we had at least one of those. And after that they were even more informal.

Gordon Wilcox put together a small group of people to go out and speak and raise money at the prep schools. And I was part of that. And Nick _____ was part of that. Gordon and somebody else, I think Bingham. No, well I am not sure. Had Steve been down there in the fall? I don't remember.

Sinsheimer:

I don't have a list of the fall, I have a list of the summer (volunteers).

Payne:

It is mysterious to me. But I know I was talking to Steve Bingham a lot during that time, intermittently, because we knew each other. And we talked about his going that summer.

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- Payne (cont.): As far as other activity ... I just don't remember. Sorry.
- Sinsheimer: Do you remember if anyone was doing formal interviews, any professors recruited to do that?
- Payne: No I don't remember that at all. Though I remember that there were a fair number of professors who were interested, who I would see and talk to once in awhile. It is not to say that there weren't at Yale, that's, the funny thing is that Al was in touch with so many people there and I just never worried about what was going on. If he said would you meet with Elanor and Tim and a couple of other people, I would say yes and we would go ahead and do that.
I know he would always see Bill Coffin when he was in town, he would always see Lou Pollak at the Law school, there were a lot of other people on his list of folks to see. Do you want tea ?
- Sinsheimer: Please. I guess the thing that I really wanted to talk to you about was the question-- I guess it is in Forman's autobiography, he is talking about, he talks about the trouble with the volunteers. And it is written after the summer, and he casually mentions, "We began to see," ~~when he talks about~~ when he talks about trouble I guess he means sort of white students taking over leadership roles. And he says, there is one sentence, he says, "We began to see the problem in the Freedom Vote. And then it became more clear to us in the summer."
And what I am trying to piece together is whether or not-- well he mentions part of it-- part of the problem is his reaction to Lowenstein. And in our interview you alluded to one example-- Moses sort of rejecting Lowenstein's plan to send you to one part of the state. So what I am trying to decipher is how much of this reaction is tied up to the SNCC leaders' reaction to Lowenstein and how much of it might be tied up to, with a few incidents with students that fall.
- Payne: I guess I would say that it would be hard for me to sort that out. But I have some impressions and I would say that I don't remember any incidents of the kind -- that I talked to you about Al and Bob, and I think there were others with Al. Because I think Al was always thinking tactically and strategically in a very direct way about what do we need

Payne (cont.):

to do next, and what is the most important thing. Al used to prioritize things very rapidly, and he tended to say what he thought. And he tended to make the case forcefully, though he always accepted other people not agreeing.

But he made the case in a forceful way, in a way that was not like the way that most of the SNCC people talked in Mississippi, which was more roundabout. And that had to do partly with the ideology of consensus and partly for a respect for people who were less able to talk. A kind of real deep egalitarianism I think there. And Lowenstein was perfectly willing to participate in the consensus pattern, to talk as long as it took. But he never adopted the way of speaking that Mississippi SNCC people had there.

I think that that difference was also true of most of the students. That is to say they were more deferential to the black leadership and less sure of the things they said sometimes, but their mode of speaking was still very different from the SNCC people.

And they were all used to that standing American thing of committees, of making a decision, of getting work done and so forth. And I think that was a recognizable difference. I think what was also there in the fall was a certain reserve, and even a possibility of anger on the part of SNCC people that wasn't recognized for what it was by most of the white students.

I think that they were more or less saying, "Make use of me, tell me what to do. I am here, I am glad to help, let me be a peon in the struggle." The fact that they came from a higher place in society, that they had places that they could go back to, that they might be more effective, and that they might be in some way or other resented because of that I don't think they understood.

And because they were at odds with the political system as they understood it, I don't think that they were aware very often of the extent to which their political positions were regarded as inadequate, inadequately left, inadequately critical of the system by the SNCC folks there.

And those discussions just didn't happen very much, and in terms of the way they happened with SNCC people, talking, the SNCC people tended to talk more elusively or and, or reverentially or something. And if you didn't pick up on it, the

Payne (cont):

conversation didn't get into those things. I had a little more political sophistication about the Left, then most any one else from Yale who was there because I had been arguing with the Left for years.

And I noticed that, and followed out some of that, but in my case not argumentatively because again that was what I was used to doing with the Left, trying to figure out what the position was-- and my usual mixed feeling about the Left, feeling that they had some insight about America that other people didn't have, and some doubts about liberalism that were appropriate.

And I wasn't prepared to argue with anybody in the fall of '63 about those things. I think it was, oh I probably would have hesitated, if I heard the kind of thing that I know Stokeley said later, which was that, "Mississippi was a lense with which to see America," and my argument was that it was a kind of distorted mirror to see America. I may have a kind of conversation like that with a couple of people. I probably did with George Greene who I was working with, because I, we were real candid with each other. But I wouldn't have pushed myself in that kind of way in other settings. But I think, I think it didn't emerge very much, but when I heard later on from Al about the reservations, my sense was to think, oh shit that was that was about. Because you certainly have scenes of anger.

Sinsheimer:

So, going back to this term politcal efficacy, do you the Freedom Vote, the November Freedom Vote was sold-- did you have the impression that it was symbolic, or the impression that there was a chance here really to use voting as an instrument in changing politics? I mean do you think there was a problem in how the volunteers viewed what was going on and how the SNCC people viewed what was going on?

Payne:

Let me speak for the volunteers first. There was a short ideology and a long ideology, or a short argument and a long argument rather about the importance of the Freedom Ballot. The short argument was that it was kind of tactical in relation to things that (Senator) Eastland asn some of the other were saying, that black Mississippians didn't want to vote and that was the problem. And beyond that it was clearly preparation for serious work to register people, to get them thinking about voting. A feeling that voting was the most important need, that as long as people couldn't vote they couldn't establish any substancial basis of independent politcal power in Mississippi.

Payne (cont.):

There was also a feeling--and that was kind of the long range thing-- there was in addition a kind of feeling that the movement was stymied tactically. You know that was at a time when the NAACP had essentially gotten out of Mississippi, and we knew about that. We knew about all the amount of money that had been expended in bail. There was kind of a sense that straight confrontation/demonstration wasn't working out very well, it wasn't working out very well partly because you couldn't get the federal government to intervene on behalf of Mississippi blacks. And the idea was that white outsiders could help some there. that they could get more protection, that they could get more press coverage.

But also just that a new tactic, a new focus was needed to get black Mississippians hopeful again. That they had turned out in great numbers for the demonstrations, but that they weren't going to turn out any more, and not much had changed, and they had all been arrested, and the resources of the community were somewhat depleted and so forth.

So I think that nobody thought of it as merely symbolic, everybody thought it would make a difference in terms of the movement. And at that level I don't see any real difference between what I knew then to be the SNCC workers' position. I think what their expectations were about where the movement would take people were different. I think they really wanted to radicalize people in Mississippi. And I am not sure that in the fall of '63 they had a real clear view of what that meant, except that people would be committed, and stay committed to large scale change in the way that the SNCC people were committed.

And there were lots of symbols of that, the behavior at Parchman farm, the ninety-nine and a half won't do, and yet the language was all about rights. The language, it was hard to distinguish their political vision from the political vision of the volunteers. Everybody was talking about people being citizens, having rights, having political power, but it didn't have this kind of problematic Black Power connotations or anything, it was the same as we all believe.

And I think that moreover, the sort of radical hopes that were there in the SNCC people, the volunteers picked up very easily. That old fashioned language about the last shall be first. That we can make a new day in Mississippi. That Mississippi can become an example. It was the old city on the hill rhetoric from New England. And surely Yale people were ready

- Payne (cont.): to hear that, as I was ready to hear that.
But it was going to be the true American democracy. And if it had a kind of town meeting aura to it-- and I think it did-- it still was well within our sort of ideal hopes about democracy.
- Sinsheimer: So, in a sense, they just plugged into that ideology that was already there.
- Payne: Yeah. Yeah, I say that the disagreements that were there weren't very evident in the fall of 1963, but I also don't think that they were very large. I think that the feelings, the differences in the feelings were substantial. And I think that the, that the whites were kind of taken with the participatory democracy style of effort. And still had trouble getting used to it and the way in which that was a model for society-- which was a pretty vague notion in SNCC after all--you could adopt the words about it and rejoice in, "We don't vote, we census," and all that kind of stuff. But in terms of the political division that it represented, that was all pretty much inchoate.
- Sinsheimer: How much of that participatory democracy stuff do you think lasted in terms of the effect it had on people, in terms of what they were doing afterwards.
- Payne: My sense was that a suspicion about voting, and parliamentary tactics, and parliamentary procedure was present, voiced in the air at most of the political meetings I went to in the sixties. And that, that is to say after the encounter with Mississippi. I think it was there at Yale. I think that it was, it was spreading like wildfire around the country, and I think SNCC really was the center of that. It was one of those ideas that was ready to move very fast and you only had to hear a little of it to have it to use as a tactic against the people you disagreed with in a meeting.
And it often followed a kind of left-liberal division, or a liberal versus moderate-liberal division, or a liberal versus moderate division, or something, you know, however you slice those. The people more orientated to the status quo were less attracted to participatory democracy. And the people who were sort of orientated to the movement, who wanted to plug into the feelings, who wanted to get the pace of change rolling

Payne (cont.): Participatory democracy was on the one hand a very slow way to proceed, but the movement wasn't slow at all. And to the extent that the movement depended on agreement and enthusiasm, and not beating down the opposition, participatory democracy was in kind of an obvious way, the right way to proceed.

Sinsheimer: Do you think there was ever-- this is not talking necessarily about the SNCC people-- but do you think it was ever used, the term participatory democracy as an excuse for sort of lack of direction offered by leadership? Do you think there were times when that was a call that people could just say we are going to do things, because they didn't really know where to go?

Payne: I think that is true. And I also think it was used as a screen for disputes. I think when it came down to running organizations it was a terrible method of running an organization. And what it meant was that if somebody held out against a policy, they could hold out almost indefinitely. And my sense was that Formanites in SNCC didn't believe in participatory democracy at all, but were perfectly prepared to use the ideology of participatory democracy to stop things that they didn't want to see happen. And then of course they were willing to give it all up. And I think that the people who really did believe in it as a matter of principle felt betrayed.

I don't know if Bob would talk about his differences with Forman but my impression was that they were deep to the point of being fundamental. Though I never really saw them together, and I certainly never heard the two of them argue about anything. I didn't think that Forman's position was clear on anything in the winter of '63 in, at the SNCC meetings at Howard. But it seemed to me that his attitude was very different from the attitude of the Mississippi SNCC people. I felt that even then.

Sinsheimer: What about Lowentsein's view. (David) Harris talks about that when they were in the planning stages, of even planning the November Freedom Ballot, he talks about, he uses the word "frustration" when he talks about Lowenstein and the whole sort of talking the whole process out.

Payne: Well, I think that frustration was there very early. But I think that you wouldn't want to underestimate Al's enthusiasm for one kind of talk, which was the everybody getting together, and working together, and I mean ... nobody was more enthusiastic about the

- Payne (cont.): singing than Al was. Nobody was more enthusiastic about in principle, about making sure that all the views were heard, and about making sure that all the people were included.
- And I can remember meetings in which Al was not at all with odds with what was going on. Was sort of very much a part of it.
- Sinsheimer: So his attitude then was almost like enough is enough though at some point?
- Payne: Yeah. Enough is enough. And if the problem was a small scale problem, an administrative problem or, or if there was kind of real disagreement that was less than fundamental, Al was willing to lose rather than to have his mind changed, so we could get on with whatever it was. And there was a kind of insistence in the participatory democracy thing that it was illegitimate to say, "Well I disagree, but I am willing to accept defeat." You almost had to be either silent or say that you agreed in one way or the other.
- And Al who was sort of sensitive on the history of totalitarianism, I sure was bothered by the pressure toward thought conformity. And in a way was symbolically distancing himself from that. I think that at a more instinctive level a lot of other people, among the white students had that sort of feeling. Hell, we are used to, we are used to losing, or to disagreeing, or to accepting the will of the majority, we don't have any problem with that. And even a kind of comfortable feeling, well we might be wrong about these things.
- But anyhow, a sort of clear division about tactics, that that was the less significant stuff. And it was also, I mean Al was fairly early on prepared to talk about the values of ninety-nine and a half won't do in some situations, and the value of negotiations and compromise in others. He was perfectly alive-- as God knows the rest of us were-- to the extraordinary force of SNCC in meeting the uncompromising Mississippian power structure with a similarly and even more dramatically uncompromising stance. And in many ways, in many ways that was the tactic that nobody else was using in Mississippi. Though King had done it in some other places. And it was just obviously right. But it was awesome to see SNOC people taking that position with other SNCC people.
- You know, it was obvious that negotiation and compromise in some way or another was appropriate. Or negotiating with R.L.T. Smith or some of the other members of the old NAACP in Jackson as if they were Bull Conner or somebody. And that, I know in the fall of '63 Al would say things like that already. And

Payne (cont.): it was a kind of constant theme of his and my discussion, one of a hundred constant themes over the next several years.

Sinsheimer: So do you think that -- I am kind of getting the impression that there is almost this argument of purity coming through in a way. Do you think-- it is a harsh word-- but

Payne: I don't think that it is so harsh. It is only a little odd in that nobody used it. But with various friends, Al included, I am sure, I remember doing it and I think I did it all the time, I talked in the language at Berkeley about the kind of "true church" mentality. And nobody ever had any trouble understanding what I meant about that. And, you know, you kind of use, even the metaphor sometimes of the "elect" and the "saved and the damned," you know what Our impression was that the SNCC people had that attitude about almost everything. And somehow all questions were fundamental, and that anybody who fell away from the true way, no matter on what issue, was wrong.

I think I told you the story later on of Marge Berroni of Natchez writing to me about how the SNCC people had stopped talking to her. Did I tell you this?

Sinsheimer: No.

Payne: Well, she was a Catholic activist, a white Catholic activist in Natchez, and she had been just as brave as anybody. They had threatened to kill her, they had threatened all kinds of things. She kept in touch with her friend the priest who had the black church, she stayed in touch with SNCC people. But she was unwilling to help the SNCC people integrate the Natchez pilgrimidge, the annual trek through the great houses.

She thought that food and clothing and police, those issues were important. She hated the pilgrimidge and didn't want to go on it, and thought it represented all the bad stuff of the past. And she disagreed with them, and said that she didn't want to, she thought it was not important, and she didn't want to make that the place where she took a stand, and went to jail and so forth. But she was willing to on other questions, and they, they regarded her as a traitor and stopped talking to her.

And when I heard that I was horrified, partly because of the anguish in her letter, this kind of

Payne (cont.):

sadness-- and the kind of understanding that she had also. And she was sort of asking me if I could reason with them a little bit.

But I remember thinking that it was in a way absolutely typical. And they were particularly angry by then because the community that they had put together in Natchez, that had been willing to risk their lives on various things, then wouldn't, wasn't willing to go all the way with it. Was willing to accept as a temporary tactical expedient the appointment of a couple of black members of the police force. Well, you know, that wasn't ninety-nine and a half won't do, that wasn't a full scale representation on the police force of the percentage of blacks that were in the town or something.

The local people in the community thought well that was a beginning and they would get further. Two was a foot in the door.

Sinsheimer:

So the sense that you got from letter was that the label of traitor was used as more than a tactic, it was sort of deep-seated?

Payne:

Yeah. That she was another one who had betrayed the fundamentals of the movement. The fundamentals were to be, to go all the way on every question. No, no she felt the force of them calling her a traitor and she knew that at some level they meant it. Just as they were calling the blacks who agreed with her "hankerchief heads" and "Uncle Toms."

And these were people who had, you know, backed them up and housed them and fed them and who had fought with the police and who had, as I said, risked their lives, and had come to every meeting and so forth.

And in a way SNCC had done this wonderful thing, they had created a local movement and power was now in the hands of the local people and they disagreed with SNCC. And it was what organizers ought to hope would happen. But the SNCC people felt that they had failed. When in fact from my point of view they succeeded.

And in a way I think that is the astonishing part of the whole SNCC story. Is that SNCC ended up by '65 and '66 believing that they had failed heavily. Yet, the things that they seemed most to want to do in the fall of '63, which was to get people making their own decisions about their lives, had built some political power and citizenship for people in Mississippi-- had largely been accomplished and through their efforts.

Sinsheimer: I think it is one of the reasons I asked you the question on how the two sides the November election. Because it seems that ... on various different levels there is sort of evolving goals and perhaps at some points those goals were not clearly matched. And I think that is part of the tension that I am beginning to understand.

Payne: I think that you are right. And it is the central question. And all that I can tell you about it, it is a central question-- all I can tell you about it is that the differences in goals were not very well articulated by anybody in the fall of '63. And I don't think that they could have easily been articulated by anybody then. I think that, you know, that there were different perspectives about politics, there may have been But I think if we had sat down and talked about them it would have been hard to figure out the disagreement.

The white volunteers would have gone most of the way to where SNCC was at that point. And in terms of the visionary possibilities they did go with them, but nobody was spelling those out. But on the small questions of tactics, the absolutism did come up. And that was one of several differences of style. And I have talked about some of the others.

And I think that part of what happened-- now how much a part, this is the hard question-- part of what happened was that the SNCC people who worked so very hard and gave it everything they had, were not just radicalized-- I am not sure I know what that means-- but liked the fact that they were at odds with everybody, that they were the vanguard, that they had the truth, and saw their own sense of power and of efficacy, and their own heroism was tied up with that-- and no one should deny that it was real heroism-- and I think that there was an eagerness to distance themselves from ... from everyday life, from ordinariness, from the bourgeois mentality, from anything that represented a compromise with the system and settling for less than the bright image of hope that they had.

And so they kept moving to positions that would be at odds with the establishment, and moving to positions that reflected the intensity of their hopes, even though the positions were eventually out of touch with political possibility, partly irrational and incoherent, inconsistent with each other, and sometimes just words.

Sinsheimer: Do you think that feeling though wasn't fed by both the press and the white students that they were working with in the sense that, that otherness was kind of -- I was struck by people writing letters home after one or two days at the Training sessions at Oxford, you know talking about this "otherness." And in a sense if it existed they almost fed it by comments saying, you know, the deference of heroism. And then Moses' reaction maybe, to being

Sinsheimer (cont.): sort of Moses.

Payne: I think that is right. But that is just to say that there were powerful forces operating, to push them in the directions that they went. The ... when I said that it was partly that, I think you also want to have to say, you would also have to say that they were on the frontline of some of the worst that America had to dish out. They got some of it from Mississippi authorities, they saw some of the rest of it in a very direct and intense way. And their anger at the failures of America, and their determination to fashion some kind of alternative that wouldn't do that, and that would somehow or another even make up for it, would put the bad guys down. That that kind of injustice had to be met with some thing other than business as usual, which meant for them the likelihood of some injustice as usual.

But I think that-- so what I am saying is that part of it was the feelings, and also the resentment at having the whites come in and get the glory, I think there had to be some of that. But it was also what they really knew, and what did SNCC people know for sure that they knew and other people didn't-- and that was the sort of terrible-- facts of injustice in great detail.

And I guess those two things and then the whole business of the consensus thing made it hard to establish, I mean it pushed for extremism. Because the more extreme people and most passionate people could hold out. And so I think it was hard to establish a position within SNCC of leadership that pushed the other way.

Also there were very many leaders within SNCC who were confident of the other way. And people like Bob (Moses) were not only uncertain, but also uncertain about the rights of leadership. They knew how great a thing it was that these people had made themselves, and that it was their movement. And you shouldn't talk them out of things even if they were wrong-- I think there was some of that in Bob's view. And I think there was some of that also in the reaction of a lot of sympathetic whites. Reminds me of (Tom) Wicker not speaking, partly as he says out of cowardice, at Attica.

But also rejoicing in what these people had to say. And that they could say it and it was them saying it. I mean all of that stuff. In a sort of sense of who am I really to devote myself to disagreeing with them. So I think that the whites who got into the movement made a kind of

Payne (cont.): choice to join up and be enthusiastic, of course it was the only way to be a full scale part of it-- but to mute their disagreements on a kind of who am I basis.

(Break)

Sinsheimer: Bruce, can we talk some more about Al Lowenstein and his involvement, and method of dealing with people, exciting people, encouraging people.

Payne: ... I think that part of the hugely mixed feelings about Al-- I mean Ivanhoe Donaldson talking to me in the winter of '64, late fall '64, about how Al was a traitor, that they had a file of letters that showed that he was a traitor, all this kind of odd mythology. And then early in '65, greeting Al, and hugging him, and being pleased to see him. I think that that kind of mixed feeling about Al had a lot to do with exactly that, they felt his liking for them, and his enthusiasm, and the way he really did deal with them directly. There wasn't anything condescending in Al's attitude there.

And yet they felt quite at odds with his mode which was so different from theirs. And I think threatened by it, and threatened by his attempts to bring them back into the mainstream. Because that is how they saw it and you know, and Al thought that liberty and citizenship and power were in stream .

Sinsheimer: Right. I have read a couple of different accounts of-- I guess (David) Harris' is one-- of Lowenstein, you know, his first visit to Mississippi, and him finding Moses. It's almost ... in a lot of situations, things I have read about Lowenstein, he had this sort of ability to have instant credibility.

Payne: Yes.

Sinsheimer: I wonder if you could talk about how he managed to do that. If you feel that is the right term or ?

Payne: No, I think he did tend to have a kind of instant credibility. And I would say several things and they don't account for it all. Al was always remarkably well-informed to start with, he always asked good questions, he wanted to understand the situation, he absorbed an enormous amount in conversation, and God knows Al was just phenomenally bright.

He also had such evident strength. You felt buoyed up when you started talking with Al, the possibility that things could be done was there.

Payne(cont):

And if things needed to be done, Al would help. When other people would come to town and talk about things, you had sense well they are interested but, you know, will they be here. With Al, without him having to say it, but he would say it at times, without him having to say it you knew that if you called him he would come back.

Also he had been around for a long time, and he was in touch with powerful people. But more than that there was sort of-- the tales of organizing, of getting stuff mimeographed, of all the kind of hard business of putting together the details of a movement was totally undaunting for Al. If a statement had to put together, Al was prepared to say, well why don't you write it, or write a draft and I then I will work over it some. Or if you want I will sit down and work on a couple of paragraphs. You know, whatever it was Al was ready to get right involved.

And if you talked about strategy, again Al would ask wonderful questions. He would have suggestion about how it was done here and there. He knew a lot of history, he knew a lot of different things. And he would try out ideas, one after another. He was tactically and strategically, he was wonderfully inventive. And you had a kind of sense when you were dealing with him that-- I mean here was guy who was a pro.

Sinsheimer:

This (Mississippi) was relatively early though. I mean this is 1963 and '64.

Payne:

Yeah, but when I met Al in '62 at Stanford I was struck by how on top of every subject he was that came up. When I heard him in 1960 speak at the NSA Congress, it was clear from what people had said in advance that this was the most impressive speaker on the circuit. Al had an immediate presence. On the platform and otherwise, here was a guy who spoke from a wide range of experience. And who also knew the South. I mean who come South in the forties to go to school, who had been a legislative assistant to a southern Senator. Who stayed in touch with what was going on in the South. And who also knew the civil rights movement.

No, Al was already a well-developed and practiced leader. He had been head of the Collegiate Council for the U.N., he had been president of NSA already back in '50-'51. I mean he was just a person with enormous experience in organizations and politics. And even though-- the first few times I met him I didn't know much about his background. I knew-- you would always know a few things because people would tell you.

Payne (cont.):

It was clear that this was just the most competent person you had ever run into politically. And I think that that wasn't just an illusion. I have known an awful lot of people who have worked on campaigns, who have done one thing or another. I don't know many people who have the diversity of experience that Al had.

He really could put together a statement about this or that very rapidly. He really could, you know-- he could estimate printing costs (laughter). He knew an awful lot of the small details as well as having a large scale sense of strategy.

Sinsheimer:

And so ... in a sense then that rapidness was both sort of an advantage and a hinderance because he was probably ahead of some people in SNCC, especially in SNCC.

Payne:

Yeah.

Sinsheimer:

I mean he had the experience.

Payne:

I think that is absolutely true, and where he was perfectly at ease in negotiating with the Justice Department, or thinking about the top levels of American society-- at root he was very angry-- but he was at ease in terms of dealing with them. And that was a world that was foreign to most of the SNCC people. A world that they didn't trust, they wanted to deal with, you know, they wanted them to come to Mississippi and deal with the SNCC people on their terms. Al didn't think that was logical, but also didn't think that the terms of the powerful were all that hard. "You know you want to deal with that, well you know, it is possible to deal with that, here is how. And you do it." "You want ot argue with a Justice Department Attorney, let's go over an argue with them."

You know, it was both, it was wonderfully heartening at times. You had that sense that this guy said you could do all those things. And that he thought that your plans were possible and reasonable. I mean he was a terrific encouragement to SNCC and the kind of transformation from the small scale to the large scale operation.

You know for all the mixed feelings that were evident about Al even there on Lynch Street in October '63, a kind of feeling that he was too much, there was also a feeling of life that people said they owed very much to him. And things were

Payne (cont.):

moving. This Freedom Ballot thing, people were greeting us with great enthusiasm. You know, oh here are some of the people that Al went out and recruited. Mixed feelings, but part of it was very, very enthusiastic about him.

And you would hear the Al stories from some of the SNCC people. "You know, by God, he has really got into it. They arrested him nineteen time on the way back the other night," and so forth. That kind of stuff.

End of Interview.