



MFDP Challenge to the Democratic Convention August 1964

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The Plan

As 1963 fades into history, 1964 dawns with Mississippi's white power-structure still continuing to deny Blacks the right to vote — no more than 5% of the state's Black population have been able to add their names to the voter rolls. And those few Blacks who are registered are shut out of the political processes. In many cases they face Klan violence, arrest by police on phony charges, and economic retaliation organized by the White Citizens Council if they actually try to cast ballots.

Mississippi is a one-party state, all office-holders and political power-brokers are Democrats. The Democratic Party of Mississippi is the party of state legislator E.H. Hurst who murdered Herbert Lee in 1961. It is the party of delta plantation owner and U.S. Senator James O. Eastland who preaches that "Segregation is the law of nature, is the law of God." It is the party of Governor Ross Barnett who incited whites to riot and kill when James Meredith Desegregated 'Ole Miss. They call themselves "Dixiecrats" — meaning that their true loyalty is to the southern social traditions of slavery and segregation and that they are loyal to the Democratic party only insofar as it defends white supremacy.

In the first half of 1964, MFDP supporters attempt to participate in Democratic Party precinct, county, and state meetings, caucuses, and elections for committees and delegates. They are excluded. In April, the MFDP nominates Fannie Lou Hamer to run in the Democratic primary for Senator, and Victoria Gray, John Houston, and Rev. John Cameron for three of Mississippi's five seats in the House. With Blacks denied the vote, they are easily defeated. They file to run in the November general election as Independents. The Board of Elections rejects their petition. These outcomes are all expected, but they build a record of proof that Blacks who try to participate in Democratic Party and general election activities are systematically blocked at every turn.

Historically, like other Deep-South states, Mississippi sends all-white (and male-only) delegations to the national Democratic conventions. Despite the fact that these delegates are members of the Democratic Party, in 1960 they refused to support party nominee John Kennedy — instead they voted for Robert Byrd the "Dixiecrat" candidate. Now in 1964, they oppose President Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ), their party's presumptive nominee, because they consider him a supporter of civil rights for Blacks. Instead, these Mississippi "Democrats" openly campaign for Goldwater the Republican.

With Black voter registration and political participation blocked, the Freedom Movement adopts a three-part strategy:

1. Continue trying to register Blacks through the official process, and continue pressuring the Federal government to enforce the Constitution, Federal law, and Federal court decisions in defense of Black voting rights. Hopefully, the presence of 1,000 northern, mostly-white, summer volunteers will focus enough public attention to force Washington to act.

2. Build on the success of the Freedom Ballot by transforming the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) into a fully-structured, non-discriminatory, political organization so that Blacks have a party that encourages their participation and represents their interests.

3. Organize the MFDP in strict adherence to the rules and regulations of the national Democratic Party, elect MFDP delegates to the national Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, challenge the legitimacy of the all-white, pro-Goldwater delegation, and demand that the MFDP be seated and recognized as the official Democratic Party organization of Mississippi. Liberal party leaders and activists in the North and West have promised their support. If the convention rejects Mississippi's Dixiecrat delegates in favor of the MFDP it will strike a powerful blow against white supremacy across the South.

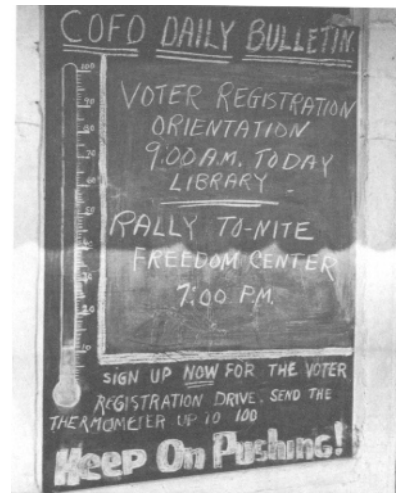


Photo by Ed Hollander.

The MFDP challenge to the all-white regular delegation rests on a firm foundation of four solid arguments:

- That Mississippi's systematic denial of Black voting rights and political participation is unconstitutional, a crime under Federal law, and violates the principles that the national Democratic Party claims to stand for.
- That the top-down, good 'ole boy, delegate-selection process used by Mississippi's regular party is un-democratic to all voters regardless of race, and is in flagrant violation of party rules and procedures.
- That Mississippi's regular party delegation is in rebellion against the national party because they refuse to support Johnson for President, and are instead campaigning for Barry Goldwater the Republican candidate.
- That unlike the regulars, the MFDP is "Double-D Democratic." Meaning that it's a democratic organization open to all and run according to the rules, and Democratic because it supports the Democratic ticket in opposition to the Republicans.

These are strong, powerful arguments. But arrayed against them is the political opportunism of the national Democratic leadership who fear alienating white segregationists — not just in Mississippi, but across the entire South. Johnson and his power-brokers worry that if the national party recognizes the MFDP, white Democrats in many southern states will bolt the party as they did during the "Dixiecrat" revolt of 1948 when they voted for Strom Thurmond of South Carolina rather than Harry Truman.

On the national level, SNCC, CORE, and SCLC all support the MFDP challenge, as do most of Mississippi's NAACP chapters. But the NAACP's national leaders oppose the idea. NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins tells reporters, *"We're sitting this one out."* Some Movement activists attribute this opposition to Wilkins' close alliance with the Johnson administration — Wilkins calls for a moratorium on all civil rights protests so as not to stir up a "white-backlash" that might hurt LBJ's chances against Goldwater. Other activists see it as a continuation of the NAACP's long-standing hostility to the formation of any mass-membership organization in any Black community that might compete with

them for dues-money and political influence. (CORE, SCLC, and SNCC are not mass-membership organizations in the way that the NAACP and MFDP are.)

Building the MFDP

On June 20th, the first wave of Freedom Summer volunteers arrive in Mississippi Black communities. The next day they begin canvassing door-to-door on two simultaneous voter registration campaigns — regular registration for the official voter rolls and “freedom registration” to join the MFDP.

If you're Black in Mississippi, official voter registration is a courageous public act that challenges the established order. You can only register at the court house at certain times, the cops are always there to threaten, intimidate, and arrest you on trumped up charges. You have to pass the humiliating, so-called “literacy test,” which is not really a test at all, but rather a bogus sham explicitly designed to deny voting rights to Blacks. If you dare try to register, your name is published in the local paper so that the White Citizens Council, your employer, your landlord, and your white business associates know to target you for economic retaliation.



Voter registration line, Greenwood MS, just before pickets are arrested. Photo by Ted Polumbaum.

Over the course of Freedom Summer, 17,000 courageous Blacks don their Sunday-best to defy these threats and a century of repression by attempting to register. Most are denied. Only 1600 — less than 10% — manage to become voters. COFO had hoped that the presence of summer volunteers would pressure the Federal government to finally enforce the Constitution, but — as usual — Washington takes no effective action to protect the voting rights of Blacks. By mid-July it is clear that even under the glare of national publicity the white registrars at the courthouse are determined to deny Black voting rights, so the Movement shifts focus to concentrate on “freedom registration” to build the MFDP.

Registering to join the MFDP is much simpler and can be done anywhere at any time — in the privacy of a home, a barber shop, even a “juke joint.” All it requires is filling out a short form that just asks name, citizenship, age, and residency (similar to the voter-registration cards used in most states today). But in the closed society of Mississippi even this is an act of defiance and a test of courage. By the end of summer, 80,000 have become MFDP members.

In mid-July, Dr. King comes to Mississippi in support of the MFDP, speaking to mass meetings in Greenwood, Jackson, Tougaloo, Meridian, Vicksburg, and Philadelphia in Neshoba county where the three freedom workers were lynched. In pool halls and cafes, churches and Masonic temples, he tells audiences large and small that “*America needs at least one party which is free of racism,*” and he asks them to join the MFDP. Klan threats to assassinate him are numerous and credible. President Johnson forces J. Edgar Hoover to assign FBI agents to protect King, and armed Black men stand night-guard while sleeps.

But membership recruitment is just the first step in building the MFDP into a solid political organization that can achieve and wield political power. Precinct meetings open to all MFDP members are held where members form ongoing precinct structures and elect delegates to the county meeting. While some Black churches “call” (elect) their pastors, for most Mississippi Blacks these precinct meetings are the first time they have ever voted or democratically chosen their leaders in a political context. In many areas, the precinct meetings take on the fervor and excitement of a social revolution.

The county delegates elected at the precinct level are a cross-section of the Black community — sharecroppers, farmers, housewives, teachers, maids, deacons & ministers, factory workers, and owners of small businesses — a far cry from the white-only regular Democrats whose delegates represent wealth and power, excluding not just Blacks but poor-whites as well. One Freedom Summer volunteer writes home from Vicksburg:

Hundreds of people risked their lives and jobs to come. Representatives were elected after the election of a permanent chairman and secretary. Resolutions were introduced, minutes were kept ... The precinct meeting was one of the most exciting events of my life ...

The MFDP holds county meetings in half of Mississippi's 82 counties. County Central Committees are elected, as are delegates to the Congressional district caucus. A volunteer writes from Moss Point:

The county convention was held here last Saturday. It was just amazing seeing these people, many, or rather most, of whom had never had any experience at all in politics running the meeting, electing the people and passing resolutions for a state platform. These people, housewives, unskilled workers, many, but not all, uneducated, are fantastic. People who have never spoken publicly before get up and make the greatest speeches...

At the five Congressional district caucuses the process is repeated, and delegates are elected to the state-wide convention. On the eve of the state convention, Joseph Rauh, Chief counsel for United Auto Workers (UAW), friend and ally of Senator Hubert Humphrey (D-MN), and a leader of Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) the liberal faction of the Democratic Party, arrives in Jackson. He's a member of the party's national Credentials Committee and he agrees to present and argue the MFDP's case for replacing the "Regular" Mississippi delegates before the committee. Along with Bill Kunstler (whose daughter Karen is a summer volunteer), Arthur Kinoy of the National Lawyers Guild, and ACLU attorneys, they review every party rule to make sure that the MFDP has correctly crossed every regulatory "t" and dotted every procedural "i."



Photo by Herbert Randall



On the morning of August 6, the MFDP's state convention comes to order in the Masonic Temple on Lynch Street in the heart of Jackson's Black community — the same hall from which Medgar Evers's massive funeral march issued just one year earlier. With state NAACP leader Aaron Henry of Clarksdale presiding, over 800 elected delegates and more than 1,000 supporters fill the building with energy and excitement. Historian Howard Zinn describes it:

It was a beautifully-organized, crowded, singing assembly of laborers, farmers, housewives, from the farthest corners of Mississippi, and made the political process seem healthy for the first time in the state's history. It was probably as close to a grass roots political convention as this country has ever seen. Most delegates were Negroes, but there were a few whites: one was Edwin King, Mississippi-born white minister at Tougaloo College; another was a husky former fisherman from the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Ella Baker gave the keynote address, Charles Payne describes her speech:

Miss Baker talked about the way the rest of the country tacitly supported white supremacy in Mississippi: *"At no point were the southern states denied their representation on the basis of the fact that they had denied other people the right to participate in the election of those who govern them."* She warned the delegates that when they were able to elect their own representatives, that wouldn't be the end of their troubles; elected representatives had to be watched: *"Now this is not the kind of keynote speech, perhaps, you like. But I'm not trying to make you feel good."* She urged them to spend less time watching television and more time reading about political and social issues; uninformed people cannot participate in a democracy. She reminded them that young people want some meaning in their lives, and they weren't going to get it from owning big cars and having a place in the power structure. Echoing the theme of the summer project, she said, *"Until the killing of Black mothers' sons is as important as the killing of white mothers' sons, we must keep on."* The delegates, one journalist observed, gave "Miss Baker, the party, themselves a traditional placard-waving march, the first in American political history that stepped off to the tune *Go Tell It On the Mountain* and *This Little Light of Mine*."

SNCC field secretary Lawrence Guyot is elected state chairman of the MFDP, Fannie Lou Hamer is chosen vice-chair, and a full slate of 68 delegates and alternates (64 Black, 4 white) are democratically elected strictly according to the rules of the Democratic Party. Among the national delegates are Charles McLaurin of SNCC, Annie Devine from Canton, Hartman Turnbow from Holmes County, E.W. Steptoe from Amite County, Unita Blackwell from the heart of the Delta, and Victoria Jackson Gray of Hattiesburg and Palmer's Crossing. When Lawrence Guyot is jailed in Hattiesburg before the convention, Mrs. Hamer — the MFDP Vice-Chair — steps up to become the public voice for Mississippi's disenfranchised Blacks.



Photo by Herbert Randall

Showdown in Atlantic City

While the MFDP prepares in Mississippi, Ella Baker, John Lewis, Marion Barry, and Friends of SNCC and CORE chapters in the North, begin contacting party officials, officeholders, and convention delegates. By the beginning of August, they report that 9 state delegations from the North and West, and 25 Democratic members of Congress, have promised to support the MFDP.

But others are also preparing. Segregationist Dixiecrats from Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, the Carolinas and other southern states adamantly oppose seating the MFDP delegation in any way, shape, or form. Rejecting, or even questioning, the all-white, "good 'ole boy," process in Mississippi threatens the same practices across the South. The Dixiecrat delegates explicitly threaten to bolt the party as they did in 1948 against Truman. President Johnson knows that most of the white Mississippi delegates will end up supporting Goldwater in November, but he is determined to prevent a southern walkout, or any large-scale public break in party unity. All of the polls show him cruising to an easy victory over Goldwater even if the South deserts him, but a multi-state southern defection would be a slap in the face to him personally, and he yearns for a massive landslide victory that affirms his legitimacy as JFK's successor.

On August 19 — five days before the convention convenes in Atlantic City — Johnson meets with civil rights leaders in the White House. As a sign of his opposition to seating the MFDP, he refuses to even discuss the matter.

The Freedom Movement leaders are not informed that LBJ has ordered the FBI to illegally bug their rooms and offices and tap their phones so that he and his political operatives can spy on the MFDP's strategy discussions. When the convention gets under way, NBC helpfully provides FBI agents with press-passes allowing them pose as reporters who trick unsuspecting MFDP delegates into giving them "off-the-record" information that goes straight to Johnson's hatchet men. Eventually, 27 FBI agents, two stenographers, a radio operator, and an unknown number of informants are assigned to secretly gather political intelligence for use by those who oppose the MFDP challenge

Senator Hubert H. Humphrey (HHH), the champion of the party's liberal wing, is idolized by the progressives who have promised to vote for the MFDP challenge. Johnson has yet to name his Vice-President, and HHH desperately wants the job as a stepping stone for his own presidential ambitions. LBJ dangles the prize before him, but only if he influences liberal delegates to abandon the MFDP. Congresswoman and Credentials Committee Edith Green later recalled:

"I am absolutely persuaded that the scenario was as follows: that LBJ said to Hubert Humphrey, 'If you can prevent a floor fight over civil rights, you will be the next Vice President of the United States.' And Hubert Humphrey said to the then-Attorney General of Minnesota [Walter Mondale], 'If you can prevent a minority report from coming out of the credentials committee on civil rights, you will be the next senator from Minnesota.'"

On Friday, August 21st, chartered busses carrying the MFDP delegation pull up to the old, run-down, Gem hotel, the only lodgings they can afford. Three and four to a room, they bed down after their long journey. They are short of cash but high in hope.

On Saturday, August 22nd, the MFDP presents its case to the Credentials Committee. Johnson and Humphrey have eroded the MFDP's support. Hope that the committee will reject the all-white Mississippi delegates and seat the MFDP in their place fades. But it only takes 10% of the Credentials Committee members (11 votes) to issue a "minority report" supporting the MFDP's challenge. Eight state delegations can then demand that the minority report be debated and voted on by the entire convention before the eyes of the world. They know — as does LBJ — that the MFDP might very well win such a floor fight. Winning 11 votes for a minority report becomes the crux of the battle.

Pennsylvania party boss David Lawrence is Chair of the Credentials Committee. He tries to hold the MFDP hearing in a room too small for their supporters and TV cameras, but Joseph Rauh manages to block him. In 1964, the networks still cover the entire convention proceedings which means that the MFDP supporters are able to testify before a national audience. Rauh, Aaron Henry, Rita Schwerner, James Farmer of CORE and even Roy Wilkins of the NAACP speak for seating the MFDP. Dr. King tells the committee: *"If you value your party, if you value your nation, if you value the democratic process, then you must recognize the Freedom party delegation."*

With MFDP Chairman Lawrence Guyot in a Mississippi jail cell, Vice-Chair Fannie Lou Hamer testifies for the disenfranchised Blacks of Mississippi, and by extension all those at the bottom of society who have been excluded from political power and full participation in civil society. SNCC Chair John Lewis later wrote:



AP photo.

It was Fannie Lou's testimony that everyone had been waiting for. Under the heat of the glaring television lights, with sweat rolling down her face, she began slowly, ... Finally Fannie Lou detailed her own experiences — the savage beatings she had endured in pursuit of the vote, the cruel humiliations, the violent violations of her basic rights as a human being and as an American citizen. With tears welling in her eyes — with tears filling the eyes of almost everyone watching — she asked, in the unrehearsed, down-to-earth, plain language of an everyday American, the question we all wanted answered:

"If the Freedom party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"

Watching TV coverage of the hearings in the Oval Office, LBJ realizes how powerful Mrs. Hamer's testimony is. To divert the cameras, he calls a spur-of-the-moment live press conference to announce nothing of any great importance, and the networks cut away from the conclusion of her statement. But that evening the networks replay her words to a prime-time audience, and next day the Sunday papers feature the story with photographs and quotes. Friends of SNCC and CORE chapters mobilize Movement supporters to flood the White House and convention headquarters with telegrams. They swamp the operators with phone calls.

With the convention set to convene in full session on Monday evening, Johnson's political operatives pressure the MFDP's supporters on Credentials Committee. He offers a "compromise," the MFDP delegates can attend the convention and participate vocally (that is, they can be part of the crowd cheering Johnson), but with no right to vote. The MFDP delegates and their supporters reject this offer.

By Sunday afternoon, Rauh has promises from 17 committee members to vote for a pro-MFDP minority report in defiance of LBJ. But he's a close friend and ally of Humphrey, and he's under heavy pressure from the national Democratic Party leadership to abandon the challenge. Rauh is warned that if he sticks with the MFDP, HHH won't be chosen as Vice-President. Rauh offers a compromise which the MFDP is willing to accept — seat both the MFDP and the "regular" Mississippi delegations as had been done in previous conventions where there were rival delegations. The White House refuses.

Knowing that the MFDP has the votes for a minority report at the Sunday session, committee Chair Lawrence postpones the vote. Instead, he appoints a five-member subcommittee to study and resolve the issue. The subcommittee is chaired by Humphrey protege Walter Mondale who has been promised HHH's Senate seat if Humphrey becomes Vice-President. To stall for time, Mondale adjourns the subcommittee until Monday.

Outside the convention hall on Sunday night, Freedom Movement supporters begin a continuous protest in support of the MFDP challenge. Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) later recalled:

On the boardwalk outside the convention hall, staff, local folk, and Northern supporters had set up a round-the-clock vigil. Volunteers on their way home from Mississippi detoured through Atlantic City,



AP photo

some bringing their parents. Occasionally the families of the murdered workers came by to stand with us. There were giant pictures of our three martyrs and the burned out shell of the station wagon from the Bogue Chitto swamp on display. The folks kept singing. Mrs. Hamer and Bernice Reagon came by to lead the singing, and members of the delegation came by to make speeches and thank the people. Visiting politicians came to pledge support. At times the crowd reached three, even four thousand people.

On Monday afternoon, as the convention delegates begin gathering for the opening session, Mondale's subcommittee tries without success to find a way of satisfying both the southern segregationists and the MFDP.

Hubert Humphrey meets with MFDP leaders, members of the Credentials Committee, Dr. King, and COFO Director Bob Moses. He urges the MFDP to abandon their demand to be seated as the Mississippi delegation in return for a promise that future conventions will bar all-white delegations. He tells them that the "Regular" Mississippi delegates will be required to pledge support for the party's candidate which most of them will refuse to do — so most of them won't be seated either. The MFDP leaders argue that if the "Regulars" are not seated because they refuse to support the party, then MFDP delegates should be seated in their place. HHH refuses any proposal that would result in anyone from the MFDP being recognized as a voting delegate representing the state of Mississippi. He tells them that his nomination for Vice-President depends on his ability to prevent a floor-fight between the "Regulars" and the MFDP. He begs them to give up their demand for recognition as voting delegates, he pleads with them to accept an invitation to be non-voting "guests" of the convention.



Fannie Lou Hamer, Emory Harris, Stokely Carmichael in hat, Sam Block, Eleanor Holmes, Ella Baker.

The MFDP leaders are not swayed, their delegation was elected in strict accordance to party rules while the "Regular" delegates were hand-picked in an illegal, undemocratic process that systematically excluded all Black voters. Mrs. Hamer tells him: *"Mr. Humphrey, I've been praying about you and I've been thinking about you, and you're a good man. But are you saying you think that your job as Vice-President is more important than the rights of our Black people in Mississippi? Senator Humphrey, the trouble is, you scared to do what you know is right. Senator, I'm going to pray for you some more."*

On Tuesday, August 25, with the support of the MFDP, Congresswoman Edith Green [D-OR] makes a motion in the Credentials Committee to seat all members of both the "Regular" and MFDP

delegations who are willing to sign a pledge of support for the Democratic Party's presidential candidate (Johnson). She knows she doesn't have enough votes to pass her motion, but 15 committee members are still holding to their promise of support, and only 11 votes are needed to take it to the full convention floor as a minority report. The committee chair stalls the vote until the next day, giving the Johnson forces time to apply the screws.

Overnight, the pressure against MFDP supporters intensifies. It is vicious and unrelenting. A Black committee member from California is told that her husband will not be appointed a judge if she supports the MFDP, a small-business owner is informed that a crucial loan will be canceled by his bank, the Secretary of the Army warns a delegate from the Canal Zone that he will be fired from his government job if he votes for Green's motion. UAW president Walter Reuther calls Rauh and orders him to convince the MFDP to accept Johnson's "guest" offer. If he doesn't, Reuther threatens to fire him as UAW counsel. Under this onslaught of brutal back-room politics, support for Green's motion

withers. By Wednesday morning, only five still stand with the MFDP, and six votes are not enough to bring a minority report to the convention floor.

MFDP leaders, Dr. King, Bayard Rustin, and others are called to another meeting in Humphrey's hotel suite. They are told to accept a revised "compromise." The all-white "Regulars" will be recognized as the Mississippi delegation, but they have to pledge support for the party's nominee or they won't be seated. MFDP delegates Aaron Henry who is the NAACP head in Mississippi, and Ed King who is the white chaplain of Tougaloo, will be made "at-large" delegates, and everyone else from the MFDP can attend the convention as non-voting guests. New party rules will be adopted to bar state delegations that discriminate against Blacks from participating in future conventions. (But there are no guarantees in the proposed new rules that Blacks will be able to register to vote, so Dixiecrat party leaders in the southern states can easily produce a few token Blacks to show compliance with the new rules without actually allowing any significant Black participation in the political process.)

Walter Reuther, who has been flown in from Detroit on a private aircraft, warns Dr. King point-blank, *"Your funding is on the line. The kind of money you got from us in Birmingham is there again for Mississippi, but you've got to help us and we've got to help Johnson."*

Rev. Ed King says that if there can only be two at-large delegates he will withdraw in favor of one of the Black sharecroppers. But Humphrey rules out making Mrs. Hamer — who is the ranking MFDP officer in Atlantic City — a delegate: *"The President will not allow that illiterate woman to speak from the floor of the convention."* Bob Moses challenges the racism of excluding Mrs. Hamer, and of Johnson naming who is to represent the MFDP. He and the others object that no one from the MFDP was either consulted or informed about this so-called "compromise." They tell Humphrey that the full MFDP delegation has to discuss and vote on any proposed agreement. Suddenly someone bursts into the room shouting, *"It's over!"* Walter Mondale is on TV announcing to the world that the MFDP has accepted the compromise — even though no one from the MFDP has done any such thing. Furious, the MFDP leaders walk out and call a meeting of their delegation.

The MFDP and Movement leaders meet at Union Baptist Church. Tempers are hot, anger and frustration seethes through the hall. Rauh, Senator Wayne Morse [D-OR], Aaron Henry, and others urge them to accept the "compromise" as a victory. Bayard Rustin argues that they have to move from moral protest to pragmatic politics. Dr. King walks a fine line of neutrality, condemning Johnson's manipulation but acknowledging the promise of future party rules ending segregation. *"I am not going to counsel you to accept or reject,"* he tells them, *"that is your decision. ... Being a Negro leader, I want you to take this, but if I were a Mississippi Negro, I would vote against it."*



Ella Baker. Photo by Matt Herron.

SNCC field-secretary Willie (Wazir) Peacock recalls:

"Just about everybody that spoke, spoke for them to accept those seats. Bayard Rustin, he's the one that said 'When you enter the arena of politics, you've entered the arena of compromise.' Hartman [Turnbow] turned to him and said, 'Uh-huh, but there ain't going to be no compromise.' And then Jim Farmer of CORE spoke. Son of thunder. He got that big voice thundering out there. And he spoke, and he spoke beautifully, but it all came back down to the fact that it was sort of like, 'We've come this far, and we've gotten through the door. We've got their attention. And maybe that's really a winner. They have offered us something. We should take it.' That's what it boiled down to.

"And then Martin spoke, and he said everything that the other people said. And then, you know, he's poetic, and then he unsaid it. You didn't have to be listening too hard to know which side he was on, but

in case there were people there to leak stuff to the press, he said what the establishment, what Johnson probably wanted him to say. But then he unsaid everything. And essentially, what King said was that, 'You all have struggled and you've gotten this far. You apparently know what you're doing, and you know what you want, the reason why you came here. You know what you want, and you know what you deserve, so make your decision based on that.'

"It sort of reminded me a little bit of what Bob Moses said when Fannie Lou Hamer came to him troubled, asking him what she should do. And essentially that's what Bob said, was that 'You don't need anybody to tell you what to do. It's up to you all. This is your thing. You're the Mississippi Freedom Democratic delegation. You are Mississippians.' He didn't say it like that, but in other words, 'You are the grassroots people who have come to an understanding of what it means to have the vote and what it means to have representative government and how to do that, so you know what you need to do. So you don't need to ask me.'"

After the speeches, all who are not elected MFDP delegates leave the hall so that the delegation can debate and decide on their own. It doesn't take long. They vote to reject the so-called "compromise." Mrs. Hamer explained the decision with simple clarity: *"We didn't come all this way for no two seats, 'cause all of us is tired."*

John Lewis later wrote:

It's important to say here that we – the SNCC contingent there in Atlantic City – did not push our point of view on the MFDP delegates, and I think this is one place where we shined. We had a hands-off policy in terms of decision-making. We respected the fact that this was the Mississippi delegates' call, not ours. We stated what we thought were the pros and cons, then we stepped back and let people like Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray, Unita Blackwell, E. W. Steptoe, James Travis, Annie Devine and so many others speak for themselves, think for themselves and ultimately decide for themselves.

Once everyone on the outside had had their say, the MFDP delegates themselves hashed out their decision. Aaron Henry and Ed King both wanted to accept the compromise, but they were just about alone. When the vote was taken, and it didn't take long, all 68 MFDP delegates unanimously rejected the President's offer. [NAACP leader] Wilkins, true to form, called them ignorant. Personally, I felt proud. If there's one thing I've believed in my entire life, it's taking a stand when it's time to take a stand. This was definitely one of those times.



Photo by George Ballis

As expected, almost all the white "Regular" Mississippi delegates refuse to support the Democratic candidate. They depart the convention in an angry huff — leaving their convention seats empty. Pro-MFDP delegates use their convention passes to smuggle in MFDP members. John Lewis remembered:

That Tuesday night I watched from the convention hall gallery as the MFDP staged a sit-in on the convention floor. The white Mississippi regulars had already packed up and gone home rather than agree to a loyalty oath to Johnson. The MFDP's answer to Johnson's plan was to take the floor and fill those empty seats. It was a gesture of defiance, cut short by the security guards who arrived to remove them from the hall.

The next night, Wednesday, the delegation again took the floor, only now there were no seats in the Mississippi section. The chairs had been removed. And so they stood there in that vacant space, this tiny group of men and women, forlorn and abandoned, watching silently as Lyndon Johnson was nominated for president by acclamation and Hubert Humphrey was announced as the Democratic Party's vice presidential candidate.

The next morning, we all packed up and went home.

As far as I'm concerned, this was the turning point of the civil rights movement. I'm absolutely convinced of that. Until then, despite every setback and disappointment and obstacle we had faced over the years, the belief still prevailed that the system would work, the system would listen, the system would respond. Now, for the first time, we had made our way to the very center of the system. We had played by the rules, done everything we were supposed to do, had played the game exactly as required, had arrived at the doorstep and found the door slammed in our face.

The Significance of the MFDP Challenge

In *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*, Bob Moses and Charles Cobb later analyzed the meaning of the MFDP challenge and the Democratic Party's rejection:

Today's commentary and analysis of the movement often miss the crucial point that, in addition to challenging the white power structure, the movement also demanded that Black people challenge themselves. Small meetings and workshops became the spaces within the Black community where people could stand up and speak, or in groups outline their concerns. In them, folks were feeling themselves out, learning how to use words to articulate what they wanted and needed. In these meetings, they were taking the first step toward gaining control over their lives, and the decision making that affected their lives, by making demands on themselves. This important dimension of the movement has been almost completely lost in the imagery of hand-clapping, song-filled rallies for protest demonstrations that have come to define portrayals of 1960s civil rights meetings: dynamic individual leaders using their powerful voices to inspire listening crowds.



Photo by Ted Polumbaum.

Our meetings were conducted so that sharecroppers, farmers, and ordinary working people could participate, so that Mrs. Hamer, Mrs. Devine, Hartman Turnbow, all of them were empowered. They weren't just sitting there. It was the message of empowerment for grassroots people these meetings generated that was delivered to the entire country on national television at the 1964 convention by the sharecroppers, domestic workers, and farmers who formed the rank and file of the MFDP. They were asking the national Democratic Party whether it would be willing to empower people in their meetings in a similar way.

The answer was no. In Atlantic City, the credentials committee delayed making a decision about the MFDP and we went into a "negotiation" session in

Hubert Humphrey's suite at the Pageant Motel. Walter Reuther and Bayard Rustin were there as well as Martin Luther King, Jr. Ed King, Aaron Henry, and Fannie Lou Hamer were there representing the MFDP. At the meeting we were told that the Democrats were willing to give the MFDP two symbolic seats at the convention and that Ed and Aaron had been chosen to fill those seats. No one from the MFDP had been consulted, not even Aaron and Ed. We rejected it right there in front of Humphrey and Reuther. We told them there was no way we ... could accept that decision without the delegation discussing it and deciding whether it was something that it could accept.

Bob Moses continues...

Suddenly, someone knocked on the door, leaned in, and shouted, "It's over!" and when we looked at the television, there was Walter Mondale announcing that the MFDP had accepted the "compromise." He hadn't approached anyone from the MFDP either. I stomped out of the room, slamming the door in Hubert Humphrey's face. Although Senator Humphrey was probably caught by surprise too, I was furious. I had doubted that our delegation would be seated, and even the pretense at negotiation was not wholly unexpected; but here the Democrats were saying we'll pick your leadership too.

In the years since that convention the MFDP has been attacked for being unwilling to accept the offer of two seats. They've been accused of ignorance, and if you think knowledge is book knowledge, they were. They hadn't been through the schools; they hadn't been processed in the ways in which most of the delegates to the convention were processed. Their knowledge was about life, not books, especially about life in Mississippi. And they understood the relationship of the politics they were trying to challenge to the life they wanted to lead. They were as cognizant of that as anyone needed to be. They were relying on this knowledge, plus the ability to speak directly to the truth, to qualify them for admission as the proper delegation.

The issue of seating them was also a moral one that challenged the political expediencies of the national Democratic Party. We were trying in part to bring morality into politics, not politics into our morality. The MFDP was raising an important question with this country, and with the Democratic Party, as one of its major political institutions: Generations of Black people had been denied access to the political process; could they get it now?

The sharecroppers and others who made up the constituency of the MFDP were the voice of the real "underclass" of this country and to this day I don't think the Democratic Party, which has primarily organized around the middle class, has confronted the issue of bringing poor people actively into its ranks. We were challenging them not only on racial grounds, obvious racial grounds. We were challenging them to recognize the existence of a whole group of people – white and Black and disenfranchised – who form the underclass of this country. Senator Humphrey was blunt about the party's unwillingness to face up to this when we "negotiated" at the Pageant Motel. Under no circumstances was Mrs. Hamer going to be part of any officially recognized Mississippi delegation. *"The President will not allow that illiterate woman to speak from the floor of the convention,"* he said. No, they weren't prepared to hear her; it's not clear that they are now.

The Political Fallout

In November, the Johnson-Humphrey ticket defeats Goldwater by an overwhelming majority:

They win the popular vote 61% to 39%

They win 44 of the 50 states

They win 486 electoral votes to 52.

But for the first time since Reconstruction, the Deep South states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina go Republican as a bloc. Across the South, there is a “white backlash” against Black civil rights as white voters begin switching from Democrat to Republican, a trend that swells in subsequent elections until the southern states that were once the “solid south” for the Democrats become the foundation of the Republican Party’s “southern strategy.”

As expected, in Mississippi the white leaders of the Democratic Party support the Republican Barry Goldwater. The MFDP, though bitter and angry over their treatment by party leaders and the failure of liberal Democrats to honor their promises, loyally campaigns for Johnson and Humphrey. But with only a tiny fraction of Blacks allowed to vote, they are unable to affect the outcome of any races. Though 41% of the state’s population is Black, not a single African-American is elected to any office.



Photo by Ted Polumbaum.

SNCC and CORE organizers are embittered and enraged by the betrayal of many liberals who had promised their support, and some also feel betrayed by national leaders of the NAACP, CORE, and SCLC who pushed the MFDP to accept the so-called compromise. Many activists begin to reject strategies of appealing to the Federal government or the “conscience of the nation” as futile. Responding to liberals who condemn the MFDP for “irresponsibility” in not accepting the so-called “compromise,” SNCC field-secretary and Southwest Georgia leader Charles Sherrod retorts that:

“[Accepting it] would have said to Blacks across the nation and the world that we share the power, and that is a lie! The ‘liberals’ would have felt great relief for a job well done. The Democrats would have laughed again at

the segregationist Republicans and smiled that their own ‘Negroes’ were satisfied. That is a lie! We are a country of racists with a racist heritage, a racist economy, a racist language, a racist religion, a racist philosophy of living, and we need a naked confrontation with ourselves.”

Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) recalled:

“The Democratic Party leadership had a chance to reach out to embrace the future, and instead they reached back to try to preserve a shameful past. This backward-looking racist response was among the flat-out dumbest political miscalculations the Democratic Party leadership ever made, and that’s saying a lot...”

And John Lewis later wrote:

The ramifications of not seating the MFDP were immeasurable. They permeated the political climate for years to come. The same questions that were asked by all of us that August are still echoing today.

Can you trust the government?

Can you trust your political leaders?
 Can you trust the President?
 Through Johnson, through Nixon and on through to today.
 Are we getting the truth?
 Are they lying to us?
 That was the turning point for the country, for the civil rights movement
 and certainly for SNCC.

Those who chose to stay [in the Movement] were ready now to play by a different set of rules, their own rules. "Fuck it." You heard that phrase over and over among SNCC members that month. "We played by the rules, and look what it got us. So fuck the rules."



Photo by Tamio Wakayama.

The summer volunteers are also profoundly influenced and radicalized by their experience in Mississippi and the liberal establishment's betrayal in Atlantic City. Most of them come home and back to campus with an intense commitment to social justice and a deep distrust of authority and liberals. In Berkeley, Free Speech Movement leader Mario Savio tells protesting students: *"Last summer I went to Mississippi to join the struggle there for civil rights. This fall I am engaged in another phase of the same struggle, this time in Berkeley ... In Mississippi an autocratic and powerful minority rules, through organized violence, to suppress the vast, virtually powerless majority. In California, the privileged minority manipulates the university bureaucracy to suppress the students' political expression."*

Like flaming embers scattered by a high wind, Freedom Summer volunteers from coast to coast spark protests and campaigns around racism, sexism, student rights, and the Vietnam War.

Many — but not all — Democratic Party liberals come away from the convention furious at the MFDP for rejecting the "compromise." In their eyes, the MFDP is "intransigent" and "irresponsible" for insisting that they be recognized as the legitimate Mississippi delegation. They condemn the MFDP for *"going too fast and going too far,"* and they blame it for causing the defection of southern Democratic leaders and white voters in general. They accuse the MFDP of "sabotaging" Johnson and aiding Goldwater. To some degree, their anger is also influenced by the Harlem Rebellion which had erupted in July four weeks before the convention. A continuing barrage of media stories about Black violence and Black rage against all whites creates deep unease among many white liberal delegates (particularly New Yorkers). Some come to believe that the Civil Rights Movement they have supported is being "taken over" by "Black radicals" bent on violence and anti-white retribution. In the years that follow — particularly after the cry for Black Power — some white liberals become increasingly antagonistic to an increasingly impatient and increasingly militant Freedom Movement.

Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) later noted:

"If we had gone into the convention as the little pets, the clients of the liberals, we came out as outcasts, sho-nuff political pariahs. Someone, I think Ivanhoe [Donaldson], said 'We're the new Communists.'

You know how whenever black folk got fed up and took to the streets, you always heard talk about 'Communist' agitation? As though black people lack sense enough to know they're oppressed until and unless some Communist runs up to tell them? That, according to totalitarian liberal opinion, was our role with the Freedom Democrats at the convention."

At root, the issue between Johnson and the MFDP is one of political power. SNCC field-secretary Hardy Frye later observed:

"I think the question has to be asked somewhere: 'What was at stake?' In Atlantic City and also in Washington in January [during the MFDP Congressional Challenge]. I guess what I think is that in some ways, it was: 'Who is going to control the pace of change in the South?' The Kennedys were willing to work with certain Black people, the moderates and so on, so they weren't hostile. Johnson was prepared to do that also, and he was the one who, in '65, got up and said, 'We shall overcome.' So the question was not anti-civil rights, it was the question of who was going to control the agenda.

"And that was clearly what was at stake in Atlantic City, because there were people, those 68 MFDP delegates, the mass movement, folks who had lobbied all over the country that had gotten mainstream Democrats to support these poor Negroes. And from the standpoint of the keepers of the party, the establishment, they weren't in control, and that is the most threatening thing — beyond what the issue is — to any mainstream politician. So in some ways that was what they were trying to close down in Atlantic City.

"After they had closed it down and Johnson had gotten re-elected, it didn't mean that he was going to be anti-civil rights. I mean, he sponsored the Voting Rights Act and so on. And then later the War on Poverty. So in some ways he's still seen as, in terms of actual [civil rights] content, the major American President of the 20th century who has done stuff that supposedly helps poor people and Black people. But it was the question of who is going to control it? Was it going to be the Fannie Lou Hamers [and] those grassroots folks in the Delta who were symbolizing something different?"



Hardy Frye and Howard Jeffries.

MFDP — Important Points:

- **The “Compromise” Lies.** In the aftermath of Atlantic City, the MFDP was falsely accused of rejecting a reasonable compromise — a charge some still make to this day. The truth is that the MFDP did support Edith Green's compromise motion. For more than a century, when rival delegations claimed to represent a state's electorate the traditional compromise was to seat both groups and split the vote between them. The MFDP asked their supporters on the Credentials Committee to vote for her motion. It was President Johnson who rejected the compromise, not the MFDP.

The so-called “compromise” offered by LBJ was not a compromise at all. It largely met the demands of the all-white, segregationist delegations from the southern states, but offered little of significance to the Freedom Movement. Humphrey touted the new party rules against future all-white delegations as a “great victory” for the Movement, but because those rules said nothing about voter registration they were no more than a cosmetic fig leaf. Party officials from states like Mississippi and Alabama could meet the new requirements by simply including in their delegations hand-picked, token Blacks with no electoral base or constituency of their own, while continuing massive systematic denial of voting rights to exclude the Black community as a whole from any fair share of actual political power. (It was this omission of voting rights from both the new party rules and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that necessitated the bloody Voting Rights

campaign which re-erupted in Selma and the Black-Belt of Alabama just four months after the Atlantic City convention.)

And the unacceptable offer of two “at-large” seats for Aaron Henry and Ed King left the all-white delegation as the ONLY Mississippi representatives (even though they boasted of their support for Goldwater, the Republican candidate). By denying the MFDP any standing as Mississippi delegates, the so-called “compromise” simultaneously legitimized the violence, economic-retaliation, and illegal procedures used to deny Black voting rights and Black participation in the electoral process, while de-legitimizing the democratic, grass-roots process that the MFDP had used to select a broad-based delegation from all walks of life.

LBJ's offer was a lie, not a “compromise.” The MFDP accepted the compromise, but rejected the lie.

- **Class.** Behind the issues of race lay issues of class. National Democratic leaders were willing to include Blacks and other racial groups in party political processes, but they were (and still are) unwilling to allow any widespread participation by those at the bottom of the economic pyramid — whether they be maids and sharecroppers from Mississippi or manual laborers and welfare mothers from the North. Hubert Humphrey made that explicit when he told Bob Moses: *“The President will not allow that illiterate woman [Mrs. Hamer] to speak from the floor of the convention.”* And in addition to the racist and sexist arrogance of Johnson & Humphrey presuming to name who should be the two MFDP representatives awarded the “at-large” seats, their choice of Aaron Henry (a businessman and pharmacist) and Ed King (a minister) makes clear their class and gender bias.

The MFDP believed that their democratic, grass-roots delegate election process held in strict accordance with party rules was an argument in their favor, but to party leaders and power-brokers it was a threat to (and inherent indictment of) the procedures used across the nation — not just in Mississippi — to ensure that delegates come from the ranks of wealth, power, and the middle class rather than the bottom of society. To this day, few delegates to Democratic Party conventions, or voting members of other high-level party bodies, hold blue-collar, service sector, or agriculture labor jobs, nor is there any significant number of welfare mothers or the chronically unemployed or under-employed.

Today, party officials firmly deny class bias, citing both party rules requiring an open and democratic selection process and the extensive participation by trade unionists as evidence that members from all walks of life are welcome at all levels of the party hierarchy. But without the kind of grass-roots organizing and outreach done by the MFDP, the rules requiring a democratic process are form without content. And while it's true that unions are well represented in the party apparatus, the individuals involved are either from unionized middle-class occupations such as teachers, or are full-time, salaried union officers whose positions are middle-class regardless of who the rank-and-file union members are.

- **“Liberal.”** In the electoral landscape of the 1960s, political views were often characterized by shorthand labels such as “liberal,” “moderate,” “conservative,” “Dixiecrat” and so on. In those long ago days, a “liberal” was someone who believed (or professed to believe) that issues such as justice, equality, peace, and morality, should be given greater weight — or at least equal weight — to the demands of wealth, power, and political expediency. Today it seems that the mass media and many Democratic Party leaders have redefined “liberal” as a pejorative boogey-man label for (mythical) advocates of criminals, terrorists, big government, a socialist welfare state, oppressive regulation, higher taxes, corrupt/wasteful spending, and so on. (And, of course, the Republican Party now defines “liberal” to mean anyone who does not support their extreme, far-right agenda.) In this article, and generally throughout this website, we use political labels such as

“liberal” as they were applied back in the 1960s. Our criticisms of the roles played by some liberals in regards to the Freedom Movement should not be taken as an endorsement or echo of the modern-day smear campaign against those who continue to stand by liberal social values.

- **Successful movements respond with program rather than rhetoric.** When the MFDP's quest to be recognized as the legitimate Mississippi delegation was rejected by the Democratic establishment in Atlantic City, the Freedom Movement responded with strategic program not just angry rhetoric. SNCC, CORE, and the MFDP began organizing the MFDP Congressional Challenge — an effort to unseat Mississippi's Senators and Representatives on the grounds that their election was illegal because Blacks were systematically prevented from voting or participating in the political process. And as soon as the election was over in November, SCLC begins implementing the “Alabama Project” which evolved into the Selma Voting Rights Campaign & March to Montgomery.



Photo by Herbert Randall.