

Part II: The Freedom Movement

For decades African Americans had resisted the system of white supremacy created after Reconstruction. They had carved out spaces of dignity and self-assertion, but white supremacy remained overwhelmingly strong. In the 1940s, developments in the United States created new opportunities to challenge Jim Crow.

In Part II, you will read about the rise of the mass civil rights movement in the United States. The reading will focus on the strong local movements that developed in Mississippi, the most racially oppressive state in the South. You will explore the strategies that activists used in their fight for racial justice, and the efforts of local whites to maintain white supremacy. You will also consider the responses of local, state, and federal governments to these issues.

The Beginning of Change

World War II marked the beginning of the mass civil rights movement in the United

States. Tens of thousands of African Americans fought in the war. Although they faced discrimination in the military, these black soldiers experienced life without Jim Crow in Europe. Black veterans returned home to a country still deeply divided by race, but many had gained skills, status, and confidence that would help them fight for racial justice.

“We got a chance to travel, go different places, meet a lot of different people from different backgrounds.... You saw in different countries how people...were living together, black and white.... It gave you something to look forward for. To hope for.”

—Ezekiel Rankin, World War II veteran from Mississippi

Throughout the country, black veterans began to speak out against racism in the United States and join organizations dedicated to fighting against Jim Crow. NAACP membership in the South rose significantly—from 18,000

in the 1930s to 156,000 by the end of the war. Many of these new NAACP members were World War II veterans. Although NAACP membership was more concentrated in the less violent and oppressive states, NAACP branches across Mississippi began to set goals for statewide activism.

What was the NAACP’s strategy for defeating Jim Crow and inequality?

The courts were the battleground where the NAACP chose to fight Jim Crow. The Fourteenth Amendment (1868) of the Constitution had given all



U.S. Air Force photo.

Pilots of the 332nd Fighter Group known as the “Tuskegee Airmen” in Ramitelli, Italy, 1940s. The Tuskegee Airmen were the first black pilots to serve in the U.S. military.

Part II Definitions

Social Movement—A social movement is a large group of people working together for social change. Examples of large social movements include the civil rights movement, the women’s rights movement, and the environmental movement.

Community Organizing—Community organizing is the process of bringing people from one group or community together to identify common interests and goals, and to work together for change.

citizens equal protection under the law and the right to due process, regardless of race. The Fifteenth Amendment (1870) had given all men, regardless of race, the right to vote. In the years after their ratification, the states, courts, federal government, and citizens disputed how these amendments would be interpreted. For example, the Supreme Court’s interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) made racial segregation legal throughout the country.

The legal disputes over the principles of these Amendments continued well into the twentieth century. In the 1944 Supreme Court case *Smith v. Allwright*, brought by the NAACP, the court ruled that preventing blacks from voting in state Democratic primary elections was illegal. Inspired by the Supreme Court case, black veterans attempted to vote in large numbers and helped organize voter registration campaigns throughout the South. As a result, more black southerners went to the polls in 1946 than at any point since Reconstruction.

What was the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case?

In the early 1950s, the NAACP won a series of Supreme Court cases demanding that state governments provide equal educational opportunities regardless of race. Following these victories, the NAACP decided to challenge the legality of racial segregation itself.

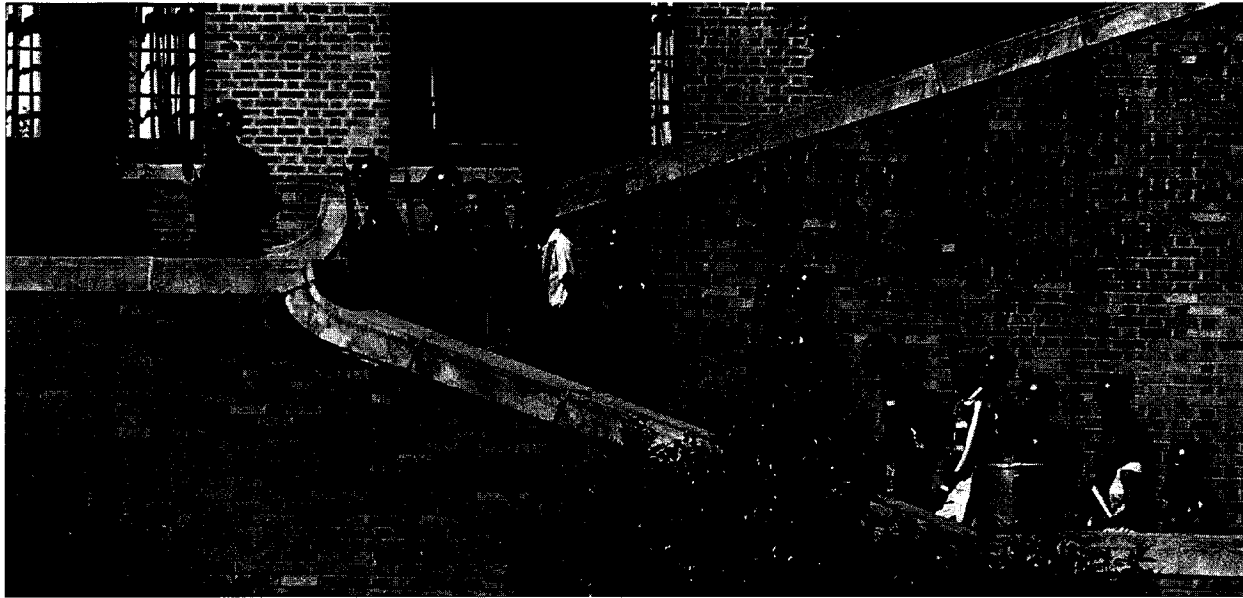
The Supreme Court agreed to revisit the issue. On May 17, 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson*, making state-sponsored segregation illegal throughout the country. The case focused on public schools, and the court ruled that: “separate education facilities are inherently unequal.... Segregation is a denial of equal protection of the laws.”

Although it did not end Jim Crow, the *Brown* decision inspired black activists. African Americans began to actively protest segregation throughout the South. For example, in 1955, black activists including Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and members of the Women’s Political Council launched a citywide bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama to protest racial segregation in public transportation. Blacks refused to ride buses for months, putting economic pressure on the city. In 1956, in one of the first great victories of the movement, the Supreme Court ruled (*Browder v. Gayle*) that segregation on buses was unconstitutional.

To test out the *Brown* decision, the NAACP attempted to register black students in white southern schools. In 1957, nine black students were chosen to enroll in an all-white high school in Little Rock, Arkansas. The Arkansas governor tried to use the state’s national guard to prevent the integration of the school, but President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent in the U.S. Army to escort the students inside. The military remained in Arkansas throughout the school year. The governor responded by closing all the public schools in Little Rock the following year to prevent integration. The event focused national media attention on the question of school integration.

How did white southerners react to the *Brown* decision?

Many southern whites opposed the *Brown* decision as an attack on the southern traditions of segregation and white supremacy. They believed that black and white populations should be kept separate, and that states had the right to make their own laws regard-



U.S. Army.

U.S. soldiers escort the “Little Rock Nine” students into the previously all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1957.

ing race relations. Although some whites did not believe in segregation, it was difficult for them to speak up in a culture rooted in white supremacy.

Alarmed at the increase in black activism, prominent whites in Mississippi organized white Citizens’ Councils to resist integration and black advancement. The Citizens’ Councils, which sprang up across the South, primarily used economic punishments rather than outright violence to intimidate black activists. When African Americans or white moderates supported civil rights activity, the white businessmen and government leaders in their communities would take away jobs, deny loans, revoke insurance, or boycott black businesses. For example, when black parents in Yazoo City, Mississippi signed a desegregation petition organized by the local NAACP, the local Citizens’ Council published their names in the local newspaper. The petition signers who worked for white employers quickly lost their jobs.

Southern state governments also took measures to keep segregation intact. They made voter registration requirements stricter, and threatened to shut down public schools rather than desegregate them.

“The South will not abide by nor obey this legislative decision of a political court. Any attempt to integrate our schools would cause great strife and turmoil.”

—Mississippi Senator James Eastland, 1954

Major newspapers only published stories sympathetic to white supremacy. Local television stations pulled the plug on national coverage of NAACP activity and other black activism. In 1956, the state of Mississippi created the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission—a secretive government branch devoted to preventing the enforcement of federal civil rights laws like the *Brown* decision. Throughout the mass civil rights movement, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (and government branches like it in other states) spied on civil rights activists and worked with the Citizens’ Councils to prevent civil rights activity. In addition, local whites continued to use violence to suppress black resistance to white supremacy.

How did the response to the Brown decision affect black activism?

This fierce white backlash hurt black activism in the South. The national NAACP

decided to drop its desegregation campaign in Mississippi, where white resistance to the movement was particularly intense. The federal government was unwilling to intervene to enforce the *Brown* decision in the environments most hostile to integration. Federal officials did not want conflict with southern politicians who would stop at nothing to prevent integration.

But despite the intensity of white repression, black activists worked to improve the lives of African Americans and fight for change within their communities. In Mississippi, local NAACP chapters organized voter registration classes, petitioned local schools to desegregate, and boycotted white businesses that were hostile to African Americans. The NAACP also developed youth councils in towns like Jackson and Clarksdale, Mississippi to organize young people and prepare them to become political leaders. In December 1954, the NAACP hired Medgar Evers as its Mississippi field director. A World War II veteran, who had been denied admission to the University of Mississippi



Protest against school integration, Arkansas State Capitol in Little Rock, August 20, 1959.

Library of Congress: LC-DIG-ppmcsca-19754.

School of Law earlier that year, Evers worked to expose the injustices carried out by the police and the courts.

Although they did not succeed in dismantling Jim Crow, local activists in the 1950s—most of whom were affiliated with the NAACP—laid a foundation for the movement that would develop in Mississippi in the early 1960s.

A New Kind of Movement

The 1960s marked a new chapter in the

The Murder of Emmett Till

On August 28, 1955, two white men in Mississippi murdered a fourteen-year-old black boy named Emmett Till for allegedly flirting with a white cashier. Pictures of Emmett Till's mutilated body were published around the country, and the trial became an international media event. Despite overwhelming evidence of their guilt, the two men were acquitted of all charges. Although most white Mississippians supported the verdict, thousands of people around the world protested the fourteen-year-old's death and the unjust acquittal. One year later, the two men publicly admitted their guilt when they sold their story to a national magazine. Because they had already been tried and acquitted, they could no longer be convicted of the murder.

African Americans throughout the United States witnessed the injustice of the highly publicized Emmett Till trial. The trial became a defining moment for a new generation of activists. Many historians see it as an important turning point in the black freedom struggle, uniting African Americans around the country in their desire for change.

black freedom struggle. While World War II veterans had led much of the activism of the 1950s, in the early 1960s, black high school and college students came to the forefront of the movement. This younger generation of civil rights activists aggressively confronted Jim Crow and forced the movement onto the front pages of newspapers across the country.

What was the sit-in movement?

On February 1, 1960, four black college students sat down at a “whites only” lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. By refusing to move, the students directly challenged racial segregation. Within weeks the “sit-in” tactic had spread to more than two hundred cities throughout the South. For example, in Nashville, black (and some white) students sat down at lunch counters throughout the city over the course of several months. The Nashville campaign resulted in more than 150 arrests and national media attention. In some cities, students were attacked by white mobs.

The sit-in protests often forced stores to desegregate or close down. The city of Nashville began to desegregate all public facilities in 1960 in response to the student protests. The sit-ins inspired black and white students

around the country to participate in the civil rights movement. It also helped to establish nonviolent direct action as a useful tactic for challenging white supremacy (see box).

What important ideas did Ella Baker bring to the civil rights movement?

In the spring of 1960, an activist named Ella Baker organized a conference for the sit-in activists at Shaw University in North Carolina. Two hundred students attended and heard speeches from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other black leaders. Ella Baker urged the students to channel the energy from the sit-ins into the larger fight against racism and segregation in all aspects of society.

“[T]he current sit-ins and other demonstrations are concerned with something bigger than a hamburger.... The Negro and white students, North and South, are seeking to rid America of the scourge of racial segregation and discrimination—not only at the lunch counters but in every aspect of life.”

—Ella Baker, 1960

What is Nonviolent Direct Action?

Nonviolent direct action is a strategy for creating social change. A group of people creates a demonstration or disturbance that draws attention to a particular injustice, and forces people in power to respond. Protests, strikes, and sit-ins are all examples of nonviolent direct action. In 1930, as part of the Indian independence movement, Mohandas Gandhi and his followers defied the British government by marching in protest of a colonial tax on salt. Despite being beaten and arrested by government troops, the marchers remained nonviolent, earning them the support and sympathy of observers around the world. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, U.S. civil rights activists confronted segregation by intentionally violating regulations that excluded black people from public spaces, and demanding that the federal government enforce laws that protected civil rights. Some of the most famous nonviolent direct action protests were the “sit-ins” at segregated restaurants and lunch counters.

“Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to so dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.”

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 1963

From 1940 to 1953, Ella Baker had worked for the national NAACP. During that time she had grown frustrated with the organization. Baker felt that the NAACP's focus on national legal reform left the majority of NAACP members—poor blacks—with little role to play in its work. In 1957, she joined the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) as its executive director. Baker tried to get the SCLC to devote more of its attention to women and students, but most SCLC ministers resisted her ideas. Baker felt that the organization was limited by its dependence on its central leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

“I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed people to depend so largely on a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight...such a person gets to the point of believing that he is the movement.”

—Ella Baker, from “Developing Community Leadership,” 1970

The NAACP and other black organizations had long depended on a few individuals (usually educated, middle-class men) for political leadership. Ella Baker and other activists affiliated with the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee believed that the movement needed to organize poor black communities in the South to fight for change. They argued that the most oppressed people should play a more important role in the movement for racial justice.



Highlander Research and Education Center.

Septima Clark, Ella Baker (left to right in center of photo), and others meeting at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee in the 1950s. The Highlander Folk School provided training and workshops for activists. As part of her work with Highlander, Septima Clark started Citizenship Schools throughout the South that taught black adults to read. The Citizenship Schools empowered poor African Americans and helped them pass literacy tests designed to prevent them from voting.

At Ella Baker's urging, the sit-in students at the Shaw University conference created their own organization, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “Snick”). SNCC set out to attack white supremacy in the South through non-violent direct action. The student activists also wanted to develop political leaders among the poor, black southerners at the bottom of Jim Crow society. Unlike the NAACP, the organization was made up primarily of young people, many of them women. SNCC worked to empower individuals, and all members had a voice in organizational decisions.

The Student Movement Comes to Mississippi

During the Jim Crow era, Mississippi earned a reputation as the most dangerous state in the South for black activism. Although national NAACP leaders warned that direct action protests would be too dangerous in Mississippi, the new youth-led movement came to the state anyway. Young activists from organizations like SNCC and CORE (the Congress on Racial Equality) entered Missis-

Mississippi's small communities and worked with with local people to fight for change. Despite fierce opposition from white supremacist groups and the state government, Mississippi developed one of the strongest and most united movements in the country.

How did the Freedom Riders bring nonviolent direct action to Mississippi?

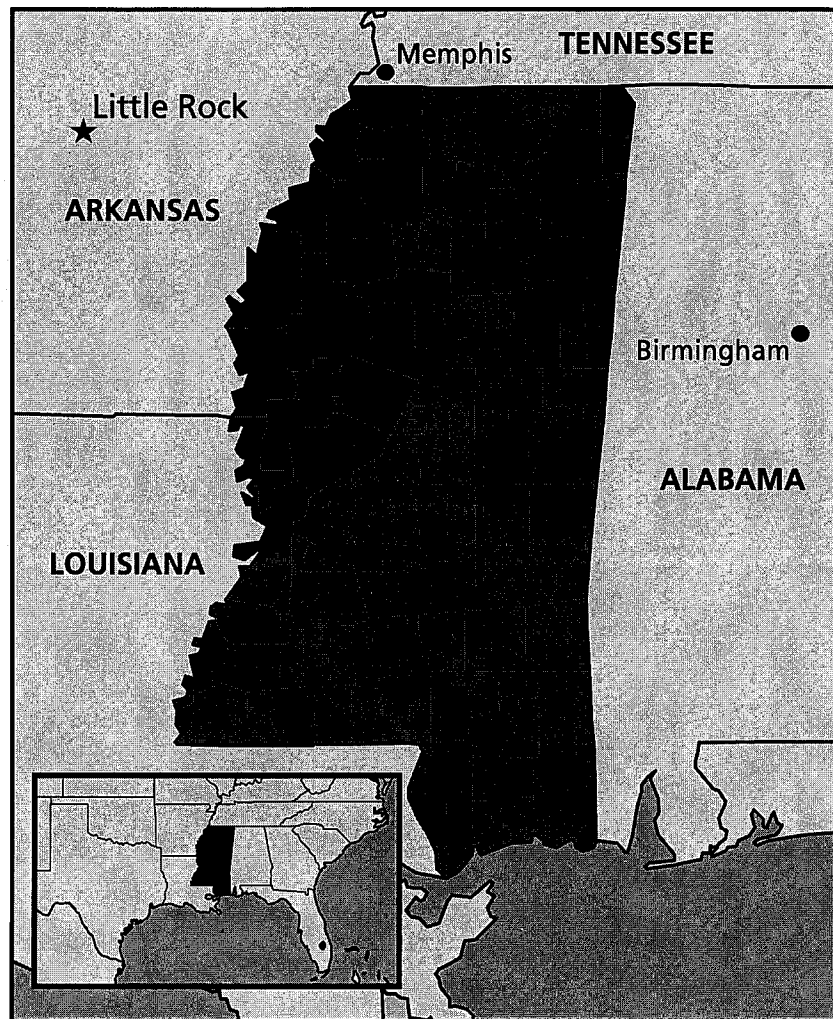
On May 4, 1961, thirteen activists brought together by CORE boarded two buses in Washington D.C. headed for the South. The "Freedom Riders" wanted to draw attention to racism in the South. They also wanted to challenge the federal government to enforce its own laws on racial integration. An earlier Supreme Court ruling had outlawed segregation in interstate bus terminals, but in practice transportation in the South remained segregated. In Alabama, white mobs attacked the activists, setting one of their buses on fire and savagely beating several people. Coverage of the event sparked international outrage at local police, who allowed the violence to occur. Energized by the events and ready to take action, black and white students from a variety of cities began riding buses into Mississippi.

How did the federal government respond to the Freedom Rides?

President John F. Kennedy tried to convince the Freedom Riders to abandon their efforts. Kennedy worried that the protests would lead to violence. He was also concerned that the Freedom Rides would tarnish the United States' international image. At the time, the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a decades-long struggle for

global power known as the Cold War. The Soviet Union used the poor treatment of African Americans to criticize the United States.

Kennedy agreed to allow Mississippi police to arrest the Freedom Riders if the state promised to protect them from mob violence. The activists chose to go to jail rather than pay their bail. The Freedom Rides into Mississippi continued, and by the end of the summer 328 activists had been arrested. Most of them were sent to Parchman prison, where they were beaten and abused by white guards. In prison the activists developed important relationships that would help the movement in the future. In September 1961, under pressure from civil rights activists and U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued orders to desegregate all interstate bus facilities.



Alexander Sayer Gard-Murray

How were SNCC activists divided about voter registration in Mississippi?

In the summer of 1960, SNCC Field Secretary Robert (Bob) Moses, a former graduate student from New York, made a trip into Mississippi with a list of names given to him by Ella Baker. There he contacted a number of older NAACP activists who convinced him of the need for a voter registration campaign in their state (see box). Amzie Moore, a World War II veteran, told Moses that because blacks were the majority in many Mississippi communities, he believed they could win meaningful political power if they were able to vote. Moses invited Amzie Moore to speak at a SNCC conference, and the Mississippi leader made a pitch for a voter registration campaign in his state.

In the summer of 1961, as SNCC began operations in Mississippi, the young activists debated whether direct action or voter registration should be their primary tactic for confronting white supremacy. The Kennedy administration tried to encourage SNCC activists focus on voter registration. President Kennedy felt that voter registration would be less confrontational and lead to less violence than direct action protests.

Many of the students were concerned that the federal government was trying to undermine the movement. Reflecting on the success of the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, they argued that direct action was more effective and empowering than voter registration. In the end, Ella Baker helped the students reach a compromise. SNCC developed two wings—one focused on voter registration and the other on direct action.

SNCC started its voter registration work in McComb, Mississippi. C.C. Bryant (the head of the local NAACP) and other local leaders helped SNCC workers run a voter registration drive. It soon became clear to the SNCC activists that, in Mississippi, registering voters could be just as confrontational and dangerous as direct action.

In McComb, for example, a local black leader named Herbert Lee, who was involved in the voter registration drive, was shot and killed by a white Mississippi legislator in broad daylight. A black man named Louis Allen witnessed the murder. When SNCC Field Secretary Bob Moses called the U.S. Justice Department and asked for protection for Allen, the Justice Department said it couldn't provide protection. Later Allen was also gunned down. No one was ever charged with these crimes.

SNCC volunteers realized whites could use violence against and even kill civil rights activists without fear of legal consequences. They also saw that even though the federal government was aware of the threat of violence in Mississippi, it did not provide the protection that activists believed was needed.

How did COFO unite different civil rights organizations in Mississippi?

In early 1962, representatives from three of the major civil rights organizations working in the South (SNCC, CORE, and the NAACP) met to plan a statewide voter registration campaign in Mississippi. They wanted to connect their efforts in the state and avoid competition between civil rights groups. The three groups united under an umbrella organization

The Role of Older Activists

Students were at the forefront of the movement in the early 1960s. But older activists, including World War II veterans and members of the NAACP, continued the work they had been doing for years. Many young Mississippi activists came from families with long histories of Jim Crow resistance, and were inspired by their older family members. Older civil rights leaders served as mentors to younger student activists, and helped build trust between the young SNCC workers and local people who were skeptical about the movement. In addition, earlier NAACP work had laid a foundation of political connections that the student organizers in SNCC could use in their attempts to register voters and organize direct actions.

called the Congress of Federated Organizations (COFO). COFO agreed to send civil rights workers into communities with large black populations to encourage black voting and develop local leadership. Aaron Henry, the head of the Mississippi NAACP, was named president of COFO. SNCC provided the majority of the workers and direction for the campaign.

How did COFO workers organize local communities?

COFO workers received training in community organizing techniques at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee in the summer of 1962. The activists then prepared to enter black communities throughout the state, including the Mississippi Delta (see map)—a region marked by black poverty and violent white racism. They would learn many valuable lessons from the local people they met in these small Mississippi communities.

“[SNCC] got [to the Delta] and we discovered...an extremely resourceful and courageous and heroic people, who had been resisting all along—contrary to the myth.... These were ordinary people without a great deal of formal education, but with resources of wisdom, resources of courage, of decency and nobility who educated and instructed us.”

—Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, SNCC activist, recollecting in 2012

At first, most people in these small Mississippi communities were wary of the young organizers. COFO workers were seen as outsiders. Remembering the Freedom Rides, many black Mississippians were afraid that the arrival of COFO workers in their towns would provoke a violent white backlash.

“People would just get afraid of me.... They said, he’s a Freedom Rider.... I was just there to stir up trouble.”

—Samuel Block, SNCC organizer in Greenwood

COFO organizers understood that if they were going to be successful, they needed to earn the respect and trust of the community. Organizers lived in the homes of local people and participated in the day-to-day life of the community. Canvassers, often the youngest activists, went door-to-door getting to know every resident on the block and talking to them about voting rights. They revisited homes repeatedly in order to build strong relationships with people before encouraging them to register.

“Go to their homes, eat with them, talk the language that they talk, associate with them on a personal level. Then go into your talk about the vote.”

—Instructions to SNCC organizers at a training at the Highlander Folk School, June 1962

Self-Defense

SNCC and other civil rights organizations used nonviolent direct action as a political tactic, but that did not mean that local people in Mississippi were committed to a philosophy of nonviolence in their daily lives. Black Mississippians, who had been living under the threat of violence for years, did not hesitate to use weapons to defend themselves from white attacks. Most black families in Mississippi owned guns.

“I wasn’t being ‘non’ nonviolent. I was just protecting my family.”

—Hartman Turnbow, describing why he shot at night riders who had tried to burn down his house in the spring of 1963

Through these relationships with local people, COFO organizers gained essential knowledge about local life, town power structures, and the nature of white supremacy in Mississippi.

Organizers would hold mass meetings to give an emotional boost to the slow canvassing work. Drawing on the black religious traditions of Mississippi, the meetings featured fiery speeches, bible readings, and personal stories about racism. Organizers explained voting rights and helped local people understand the voter registration forms. Leaders brought news of the struggle from around the country to connect their local efforts with the national movement.

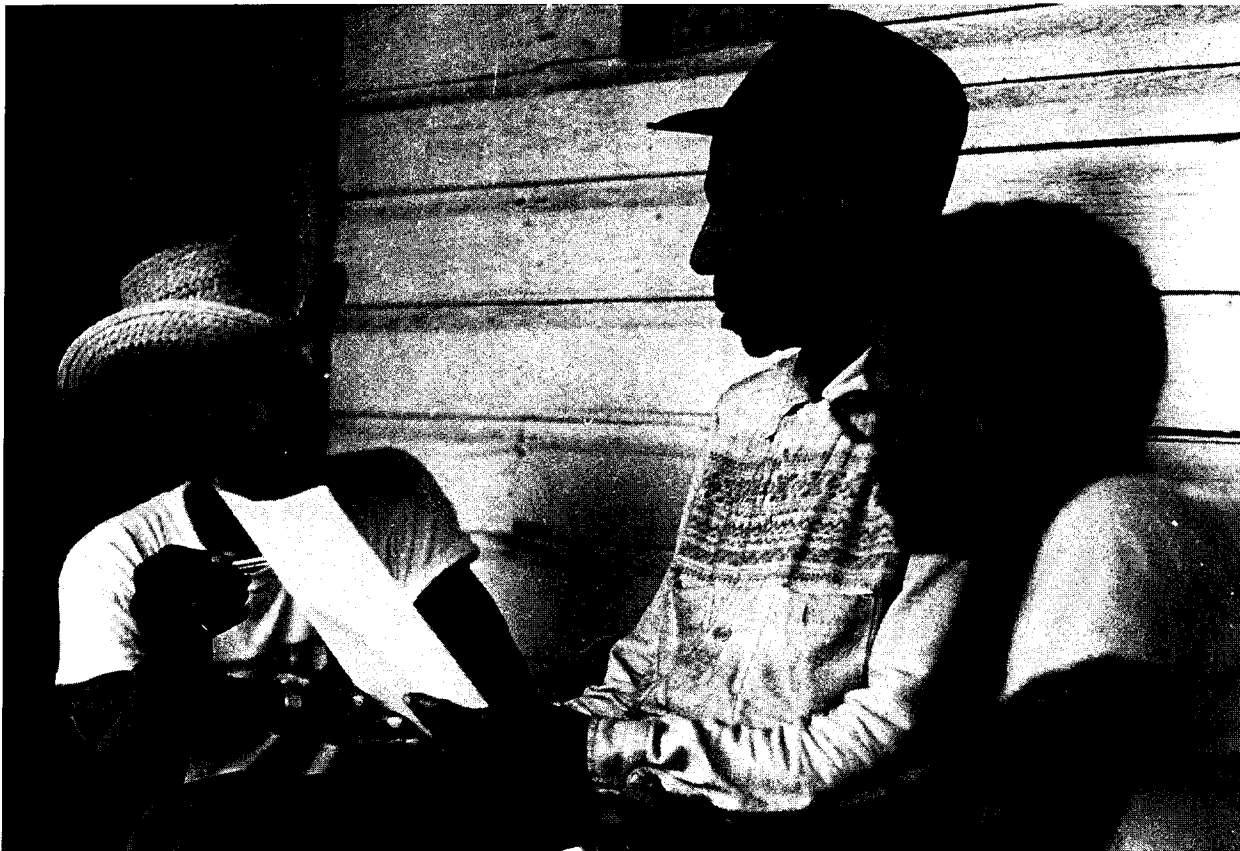
In mass meetings, often held in churches, people came together to sing freedom songs—songs about the civil rights movement that were influenced by old religious spirituals. These songs helped unite the community and

inspired local people to overcome their fears about participating in the movement.

“The most essential movement business was nurturing the people who had come.... Singing was the ‘bed’ and the ‘air’ of everything, and I had never before heard or felt singing do that on that level of power. In mass meetings I was alive and I knew what I was supposed to be doing and where I was supposed to be.”

—Bernice Johnson Reagon, SNCC worker and freedom singer, recollecting in 2010

COFO organizers also established Citizenship Schools in towns throughout Mississippi. The schools empowered many local people who had very little formal education. Organizers taught local blacks how to pass voter registration tests, and helped black Mississippians analyze the history of white supremacy.



Herbert Randall. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

Local teenager Doug Smith (left) and SNCC Field Secretary Sandy Leigh (right) urge Hattiesburg resident Felix Smith to register to vote. Summer 1964.

How did COFO activists develop local leadership?

In all their work, the young COFO organizers sought to develop local leaders and foster leadership skills among the people they worked with, regardless of social status or income. COFO activists in Mississippi made sure that everyone had a role to play in the movement.

“What we were trying to do was, starting with already existing leadership...cultivate additional local leadership, and cultivate community organization. Our argument was people have a right to have at least some say-so in the decision making that affects their lives. They have to take control over their lives. And that’s something that we can’t do for you...you have to take control of your life and make it better.... If you want to do that, we’ll help you as best we can.”

—Charles (Charlie) Cobb, SNCC field secretary, recollecting in 2012

Many local people became community organizers through their participation in voter registration campaigns and other movement activities. The movement in Mississippi depended on these local organizers. For example, Fannie Lou Hamer became one of the most influential leaders of the Mississippi movement. She was the youngest of twenty-one siblings in a family of sharecroppers from Sunflower County, and had very little formal education. Inspired by speeches she heard at her first mass meeting, Hamer attempted to register to vote in August of 1962. The white plantation owner she worked for responded by firing her and kicking her out of her home. A few days later, a group of whites fired shots into the house where she was staying. Undeterred, Fannie Lou Hamer got more involved with the movement. She took the registration test again, began to teach at Citizenship Schools, and eventually became a field secretary for SNCC.

How did local whites react to the movement in Mississippi?

Local activism challenged the common white assumption that African Americans were content with their place in society. Whites routinely blamed black activism on “outside agitators” and “communists” who came to stir up trouble. They refused to believe that the movement was an expression of discontent throughout the black community.

Black Mississippians who participated in the movement put their lives in constant jeopardy. Racist groups and individuals beat black organizers, intimidated local people, and burned down meeting houses in an attempt to stop the momentum of the movement and maintain white supremacy. White supremacists attacked and beat hundreds of civil rights workers in Mississippi; some activists lost their lives because of their work. While threats of violence deterred some people from joining the movement, it made others more determined to fight for their rights.

The vast majority of white Mississippians did not participate in violence against civil rights workers. But white Mississippians were under enormous pressure to uphold white supremacy. For example, a white family in McComb named Heffner was forced to leave town after they invited white civil rights workers to dinner.

Mississippi Heats Up

In the early 1960s, the U.S. government was more concerned with the Cold War than with black activists in Mississippi. Tension with the Soviet Union reached a boiling point in October 1962, when the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the two world powers to the brink of nuclear war. But events in Mississippi drew national attention and forced the federal government to confront the situation in the South. Below are three key events that occurred in Mississippi in this period.

Integrating the University of Mississippi: In 1961, a black Mississippi veteran named James Meredith decided to apply to the University of Mississippi to see if the school

The Federal Government in Mississippi

One of COFO's goals was to throw a national spotlight on the racial terror in Mississippi and compel the federal government to act. COFO leaders sought national attention to the systemic racism of Mississippi and federal protection from violence against activists. Because white supremacists could often act without fear of legal consequences in Mississippi, civil rights leaders wanted the federal government to deal with state and local institutions that denied African Americans justice and their rights. They believed that the federal government needed to enforce its laws and uphold the Constitution's Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

Although President John F. Kennedy consistently spoke in favor of civil rights, again and again he refused to order federal intervention when white mobs or local police threatened people in Mississippi. Kennedy wanted to protect the United States' international image as the leader of the free world and opponent of Soviet communism. He did not want to send federal troops into the South again (he had sent twenty-three thousand during the integration of the University of Mississippi), because it would call international attention to the racial faultlines and inequalities in the United States. Additionally, Mississippi Senators James Eastland and John Stennis, both strict segregationists, were powerful Democratic legislators. President Kennedy felt he needed their support to pass legislation and wanted to avoid angering them.

President Kennedy directed his administration to support the civil rights movement through voter registration, which he believed would be less likely to lead to violence and confrontation than direct action protests. In 1962, the federal government began supporting the Voter Education Project (VEP), which funded civil rights efforts to increase black voter registration. Through the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, the Kennedy administration also sent lawyers to counties across Mississippi to investigate and file lawsuits in cases of voter discrimination. These D.C. lawyers often faced county officials who refused to hand over records or judges who avoided speedy trials. Despite their willingness to fight in the courtrooms for fair voter registration, federal officials remained reluctant to offer African Americans protection from day-to-day violence.

would abide by the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. When the university rejected his application, the NAACP, under the direction of Medgar Evers, filed a lawsuit against the university for racial discrimination. The U.S. Fifth Circuit Court ruled that Meredith should be admitted to the school. Many white Mississippians were enraged by the decision, and Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett promised to defy the ruling. Attorney General Robert Kennedy had to send five hundred U.S. marshals to Oxford, Mississippi to protect Meredith and allow him to enroll. A riot broke out on the campus when a white mob attacked the federal marshals. Two people were killed in the violence, and hundreds were injured. The Kennedy administration sent twenty-three thousand U.S. troops to Mississippi to stop the riot. The integration of the University of Mississippi made international news.

Leflore County: In 1962, in response to SNCC organizing, the Leflore County government decided to end a program that had provided food to poor families during the winter. SNCC asked for donations, and soon civil rights supporters in northern cities were shipping tons of food to Mississippi for SNCC to distribute. The movement had already begun to make inroads in Leflore, but the urgency of the food drive gave the movement a much-needed lift. The donations connected many new black Mississippians to SNCC, and the local government's decision to cut the food program highlighted the importance of blacks being able to vote. Organizers asked people to fill out voter registration forms before they received food. High numbers of new recruits began taking the voter registration test.

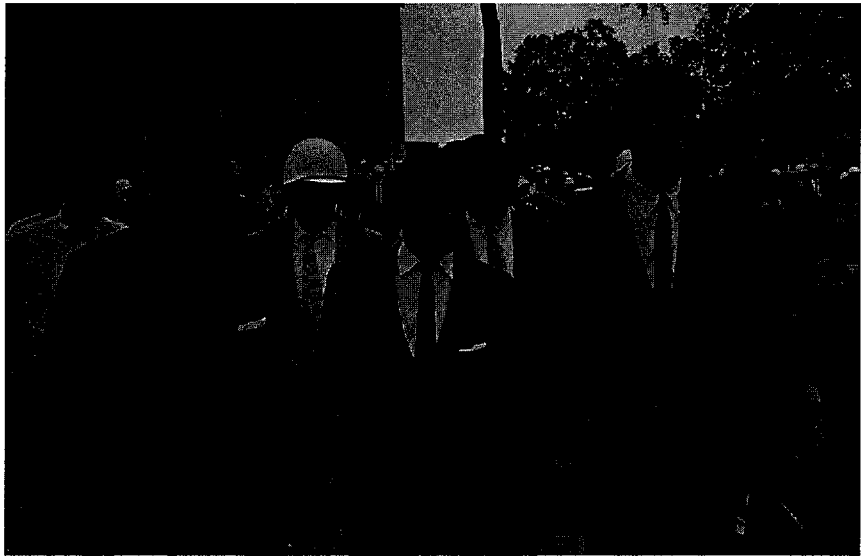
White supremacists responded by burn-

ing down black businesses and shooting at SNCC cars and offices. As tensions in Leflore County heated up in the spring of 1963, SNCC transferred most of its Mississippi staff to Greenwood, the county capital. When 150 black Mississippians marched through Greenwood, local police released dogs and arrested many of the activists.

The Kennedy administration filed a lawsuit against the city of Greenwood, demanding the release of all activists and an end to white interference with voter registration. But the U.S. Justice Department dropped the case after the federal government reached an agreement with the city to release eight SNCC activists. Although the federal government had helped get activists out of jail, many in the movement were angry that it did not stand up for voting rights. They felt the government had abandoned their cause. Even without federal assistance, the voter registration drive continued on through the spring, with twelve to twenty-four people attempting to register every day in Greenwood. Most attempts failed because officials denied or rejected the applications.

The Jackson Movement: In December 1962, the Jackson NAACP announced a boycott of Jackson businesses that refused to hire black employees. The group demanded desegregation of all facilities and fair employment practices. The mayor of Jackson refused to meet any demands and the boycott carried on into the spring of 1963. In May of that year, students and faculty from Tougaloo College, a black college in Jackson, held a sit-in at a segregated lunch counter downtown. They were attacked and beaten by a white mob as the local police and FBI agents stood by.

The event sparked marches, pickets, and other demonstrations across the city. Then on June 12, 1963, a member of the Citizens' Coun-



James Meredith integrates the University of Mississippi in 1962, with federal agents for protection.

Library of Congress. LC-DIG-ppmsca-04292.

cil shot and killed NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers at his home.

National NAACP leaders worried that the direct action protests in Jackson were too aggressive and costly. National NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins came to Mississippi to scale back the campaign. With support from the Kennedy administration, the national NAACP cut a deal with the mayor of Jackson—the city would hire six black police officers if the movement stopped all major marches. To the frustration of local activists, the original demands for desegregation and the end to racist hiring practices were not met.

What was the Freedom Vote?

By the summer of 1963, thousands of black Mississippians had attempted to register to vote with little success. Violent resistance to black activism was on the rise as the KKK reopened chapters throughout the state. COFO activists decided to try a new tactic in Jackson and Greenwood in order to generate national publicity and force the federal government to protect black Mississippians.

COFO used a little-known state law that said that those who had been denied the right to vote could cast a provisional ballot with a statement of the voter's qualifications. The qualifications would be considered later.

COFO did not expect the votes would ever be fairly considered. The votes were cast as a protest. It was also a way to show the rest of country that, contrary to white Mississippians' claims, black people were anxious to vote.

On the day of the Democratic primary, thousands of black Mississippians went to the polls. In some towns, crowds of whites blocked their way, threatening black voters while police arrested activists. But in Greenwood, between five hundred and seven hundred black voters cast ballots.

“Difficult to capture is the mood of the day—the air of jubilation at going to vote, and the infusion of spirit in the Greenwood staff.”

—Mike Miller, SNCC organizer, 1963

COFO considered repeating the protest during the general election in the fall, but decided that it would be too dangerous. Instead, COFO organized its own statewide mock

election called the “Freedom Vote.” Like the Democratic primary protest, the Freedom Vote would show that the Mississippi elections did not represent the thousands of black voters who were unable to register due to intimidation, fraud, and registration tests. COFO organizers and local Mississippians ran a campaign supporting Aaron Henry (the head of the Mississippi NAACP) for governor, and Rev. Edwin (Ed) King (a white minister involved in the movement) for lieutenant governor. In total, around eighty thousand black Mississippians cast ballots in the Freedom Vote.

Why did Mississippi activists debate whether to allow white students in the movement?

During the Freedom Vote campaign, a group of college students (most of them white) came to Mississippi to volunteer on the campaign. The national media only began covering the Freedom Vote after these college students got involved. Some COFO organizers felt that they should bring even more students to Mississippi the following summer.

“Bring the nation’s children, and the parents will have to focus on Mississippi, our thinking ran. And if the parents raised their voices, the political establishment would be forced to listen.”

—Bob Moses, recounting Freedom Summer, 2001

The proposal for a Freedom Summer project involving northern college students sparked a tense debate. Many COFO workers opposed involving so many of these students, most of whom were white and had little experience in the South. They worried that it would take the focus away from local people and the goal of building local leadership. But most local people involved

Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission photograph. Courtesy of Mississippi Department of Archives and History.



Photographs of SNCC Field Secretary Samuel Block after his arrest on December 6, 1962. Throughout the 1960s, Block worked to register black voters in Greenwood, Mississippi, the capital of Leflore County and home of the White Citizens' Council regional headquarters. Imprisoned at least seven times for his civil rights activism, Block, a native Mississippian, was known for his perseverance in a region where the NAACP had previously closed its chapter due to white violence.

in the movement felt that the students could bring much needed publicity and protection to the voter registration work in Mississippi. As white violence increased in early 1964, COFO's leaders moved forward with the Freedom Summer project.

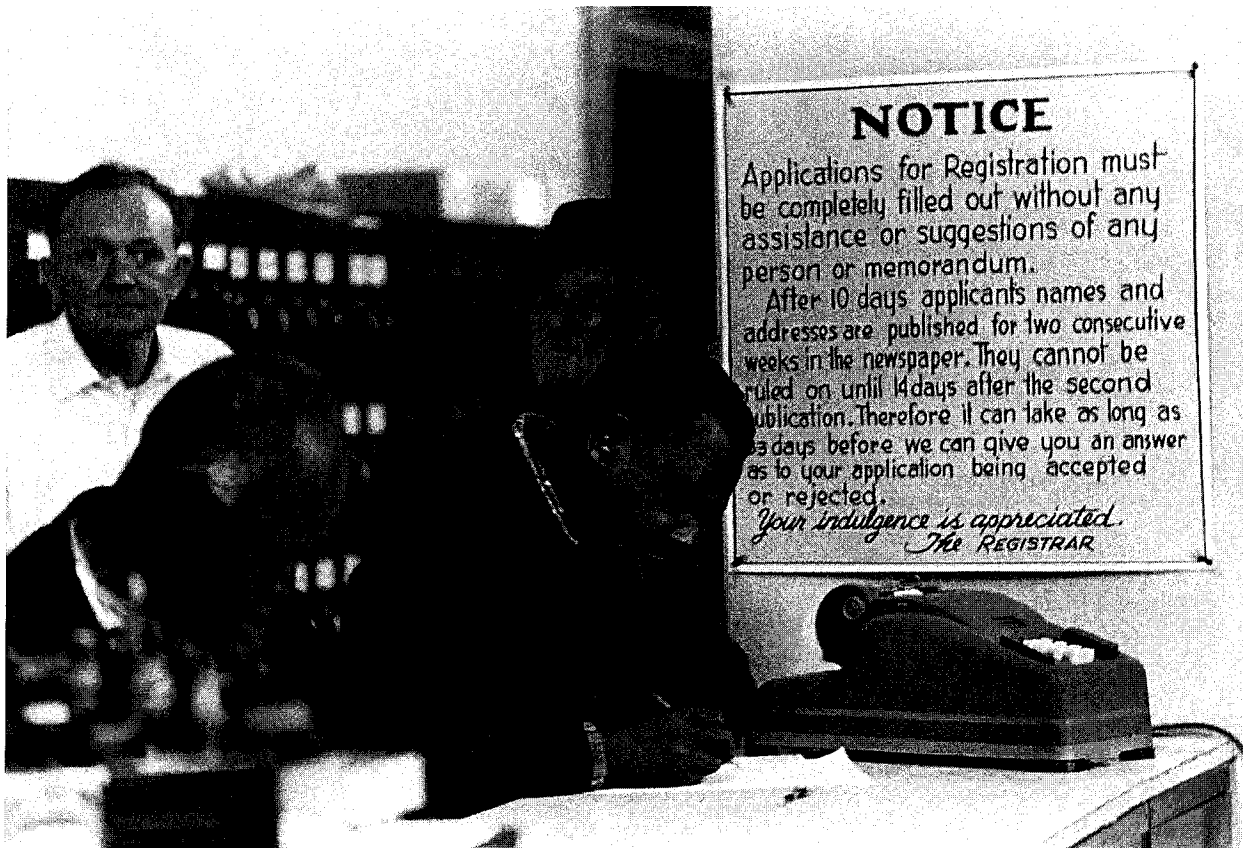
What happened to the Freedom Summer volunteers when they got to Mississippi?

The main goal of Freedom Summer was to register black Mississippians to vote. The project also focused on black education. In all, over eight hundred northern students participated. Although most of them were white, about 10 percent of the volunteers were black northerners. After training in Oxford, Ohio in voter registration tactics, nonviolence, and the

history of Mississippi, the volunteers began the journey south on June 20, 1964.

A day later, tragedy struck. A sheriff in Neshoba County, Mississippi pulled over a car carrying two white activists, Michael "Mickey" Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, and black CORE activist James Chaney. Later that night police turned the three men over to a mob of Klansmen, who executed the activists and buried their bodies in an earthen dam.

At least a dozen black Mississippians had been murdered in recent years, including Medgar Evers, Henry Lee, and Aaron Lewis, but only with the arrival of white student activists from the North did the country begin paying attention to violence against civil rights activists in Mississippi. The FBI dispatched



Black citizens attempting to register to vote in Hattiesburg, a town in Forrest County, Mississippi, January 22, 1964. Like many counties across Mississippi, Forrest County applied special rules to keep black applicants from registering to vote. In July 1963, a federal court ordered the circuit clerk in Hattiesburg, Theron Lynd, to stop discriminating against African Americans. The court found evidence of Lynd assigning difficult portions of the Mississippi Constitution for black registrants to interpret and leaving his office before he could review applications. At the time of the court case, more than ten thousand whites in the county were registered to vote, versus only fourteen African Americans. In spite of the federal court order, Forrest County's discriminatory practices continued for several more years.

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1964 Civil Rights Act

On June 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy called for federal legislation that would desegregate all public spaces. While most movement participants supported the idea of a Civil Rights Act, many worried that the bill did not offer protection from police brutality or protection for black activists. At the August 1963 March on Washington, SNCC's John Lewis demanded a bill that would also protect black activists and provide relief for the poor people of the South.

“We must have legislation that will protect Mississippi sharecroppers, who have been forced to leave their homes because they dared to exercise their right to vote. We need a bill that will provide for the poor and starving people of this nation.”

—SNCC Chairman John Lewis, 1963

President Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963. The new president, Lyndon Johnson, was determined to pass the civil rights bill. In the face of fervent opposition from white southern senators, President Johnson resisted compromises that would water down the bill and drew on his own experience in Congress to get the bill passed by both houses. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law in July 1964. The bill prohibited segregation of public accommodations and employment discrimination. In the short term, the bill had little effect on Mississippi, which remained a highly segregated state for years to come. But the 1964 Civil Rights Act would prove to be an important piece of civil rights legislation that is still used in legal cases to this day.

hundreds of agents to the state, something it had previously refused to do.

“It’s tragic, as far as I’m concerned, that white northerners have to be caught up in the machinery of injustice and indifference in the South before the American people register concern. I personally suspect that if Mr. Chaney, who is a native Mississippian Negro, had been alone at the time of the disappearance, that this case, like so many others that have come before, would have gone completely unnoticed.”

—Rita Schwerner, wife of Michael Schwerner, summer 1964

The murder of two middle-class white students brought national media to Mississippi and forced the federal government to investigate. Despite the FBI’s presence in Mississippi that summer, racist violence against black Mississippians continued.

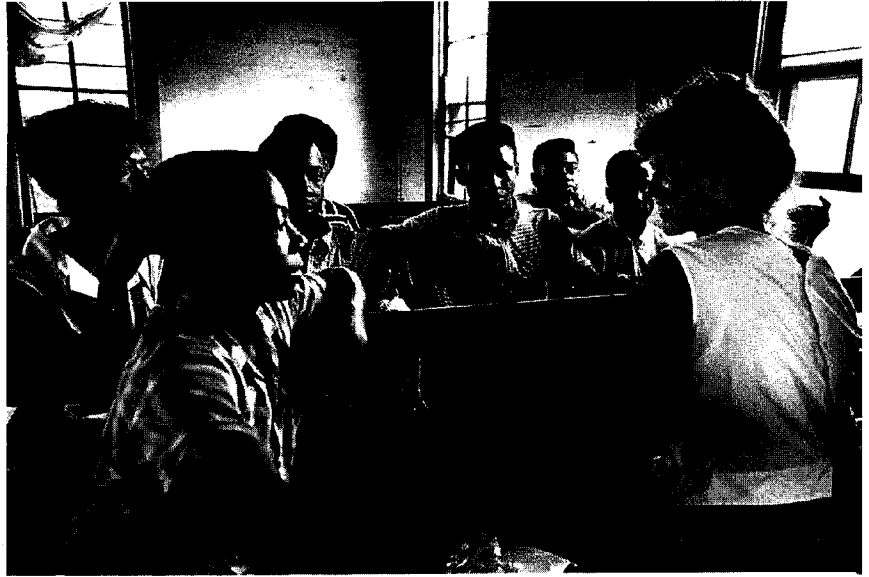
“We most certainly do not and will not give protection to civil rights workers. In the first place, the FBI is not a police organization. It’s purely an investigative organization, and the protection of individual citizens, either natives of this state or coming into the state, is a matter for the local authorities. The FBI will not participate in any such protection.”

—J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI,
July 10, 1964

During Freedom Summer, there were at least three additional murders, thirty-five shootings, and sixty-five bombings or burnings of black homes and churches. White business owners fired employees that participated in the project, and local police arrested over one thousand movement activists. Countless others were beaten.

Despite the threat of violence, Freedom Summer carried on, and COFO used the additional volunteers to expand its work into many communities previously unexposed to the movement.

Although black Mississippians had many reasons to distrust white people, most welcomed the northern volunteers with warmth and hospitality. The white students usually treated the local Mississippians with respect, and had a desire to learn from more experienced organizers. Although the presence of white students was a source of tension, by and large black Mississippians and northern volunteers worked well together with mutual admiration during the Freedom Summer project.



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August 1, 1964. Edie Black (right) teaches at a Freedom School in Mileston, Mississippi, a community of independent black farmers in the Mississippi Delta. The Freedom Schools taught academic subjects like math, English, science, and social studies that were often not taught to blacks in Mississippi schools.

What were the Freedom Schools?

After witnessing the inequality of the Mississippi education system, SNCC Field Secretary Charlie Cobb suggested using the summer project volunteers to improve black education in Mississippi. Throughout the summer, COFO staff and volunteers developed schools across the state to serve black students of all ages. One goal of the Freedom Schools was to develop young leaders for the civil rights struggle. The Freedom Schools were designed to empower black youth to be critical thinkers and politically active citizens.

“[The goal is] to fill an intellectual and creative vacuum in the lives of young Negro Mississippians, and to get them to articulate their own desires, demands, and questions...to stand up in classrooms around the state and ask their teachers a real question.... [This] will make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities and to find alternatives and ultimately, new directions for action.”

—Charlie Cobb, 1963

By summer’s end, about 2,500 students were enrolled in almost fifty schools across Mississippi. The Freedom Schools opened young Mississippians’ eyes to new possibilities, and raised their expectations for a better future. The schools also showed that the movement could create its own institutions to support the black community in Mississippi.

What was the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party?

As part of Freedom Summer, COFO established its own multiracial party—the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP or sometimes FDP). The goal of the MFDP was to represent the black citizens that were excluded from the all-white Democratic Party. It also hoped to represent poor whites, whose views were also not represented by that party.

Following the success of the Freedom Vote in 1963, COFO decided to challenge the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. They wanted to send the MFDP delegation to win political recognition for black Mississippians, and force the

national Democratic Party to acknowledge that the all-white Democratic Party in Mississippi did not, and therefore should not, represent Mississippi.

“[W]e can’t get past these people at the state level because they lock us out. But we just know that once we get to the national level, with all the proof that we have been locked out and the fact that we’ve had the courage to go ahead and create our own party, then we feel like we are going to get that representation that we’ve been denied for so long.”

—Victoria Gray Adams, SNCC activist

What was the political atmosphere in the United States during the summer of 1964?

It was nearly certain the Democratic Party would nominate President Lyndon Johnson to run for president at the Atlantic City convention in August 1964. Johnson, who had assumed the presidency after Kennedy’s assassination, wanted the convention to be a show of unity and support for his candidacy.

The country had rallied together following the assassination of President Kennedy. Nevertheless, as 1964 progressed, the racial

divisions in the country were gaining more attention. Freedom Summer had focused the country’s attention on the civil rights movement in Mississippi, but racial strife wasn’t limited to Mississippi or the South. After a white police officer shot and killed a young black man in Harlem, New York, violent protests erupted in July. Demonstrations and violence also spread to other northern cities as African Americans protested their treatment at the hands of whites as well as unequal economic and social conditions. And although 60 percent of U.S. citizens supported civil rights legislation according to polls, nearly the same percentage thought that the pace of racial integration was moving too quickly.

It was in this heated atmosphere that the Democratic National Convention began. Many sensed that a moment of change was looming and that the country was on the verge of a new era. Some hoped to provoke change, others wanted to prevent it. The MFDP had come to Atlantic City seeking justice and to bring attention to its cause. National civil right leaders believed that another term in the White House for Lyndon Johnson would bring progress for African Americans. The all-white Mississippi delegation felt betrayed by the Democratic Party they had supported for nearly one hundred years. And President Lyndon Johnson was

within reach of a dream: his nomination by his party for the presidency of the United States.

These competing forces would collide over four days at a political convention filled with drama and unexpected turns. The result would change the course of U.S. politics and history.



Alabama Governor George Wallace at the Democratic National Convention. Wallace was a strong opponent of civil rights.

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