

Chapter 28 Freedom Democrats

Mississippi's conservative "blue dog Democrats" in 1964 threatened to support Republican Barry Goldwater. Predictably, the state party's leaders kept out all black participation in primaries or conventions. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party decided, anyway, to become active in the state's official Democratic Party and to steer the party to support Johnson for President.

While the regular Democrats were sending a "hand-picked delegation to Chicago with only two token Negro delegates, although Negroes constituted 40 percent of 240,000 of the registered voters in Mississippi,"ⁱ MFDP members decided they, alone, should represent the state at the upcoming party convention. Aaron Henry appealed for \$30,000 to support the Loyal Democrats of Mississippi, a bi-racial coalition made up of the MFDP, NAACP of Mississippi, the state Teacher's Association, the Mississippi AFL-CIO and the Young Democrats. The coalition's purpose would be to appear before the Credential Committee of the Democratic National convention on August 26 to prove discrimination by the regular Democratic Party of Mississippi.ⁱⁱ

The secretary of state, however, refused permission to register MFDP because "there was already a Democratic political party in the state," even though Mississippi Democrats failed to support the national party's presidential candidate in the previous 1960 elections.

The MFDP was not taken very seriously by whites and it was sometimes the target of editorial "humor." The Sovereignty Commission collected nearly 1000 files on the organization including newsletters, membership lists, meeting announcements and notes, as well as commentaries from the Commission's investigators.

On August 12, an injunction was issued ordering all MFDP officials not to leave the state and go to Atlantic City for the convention. Also prohibited was engagement by the leader in any further MFDP activity. MFDP filed suit in federal court asking that more than a dozen of Mississippi's segregation laws be invalidated, taking advantage of the new Civil Rights Act legislation and causing a cloud of last-minute confusion as the group made haste for New Jersey.

Once they arrived, national Democratic Party leaders fell through in support of this unique group from Mississippi and were not prepared to greet MFDP's 64 delegates with open arms. President Johnson didn't want bitter debates initiated, even if the Mississippi Democrats were supporting Goldwater instead of him. Johnson and party liberals had campaigned on the basis of their civil rights "successes" and even though the Southern state party structures completely excluded African Americans, Democrats did not want this practice disrupted, fearing they would lose the support of Southern states.

Fannie Lou Hamer added heat to the convention when she spoke in front of a microphone before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention, telling the horrifying story of her attempts to register to vote in Sunflower County, including the beating she received in Winona. Johnson, concerned over the attention paid to MFDP and the fight for credentials, gave notice that he wanted to deliver a special televised speech on an unrelated topic, as Hamer was speaking. News networks recognized the public's interest in Hamer and played her entire speech on the evening news, giving even more air time than she would have received:

From the Testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer (August 22, 1964):

... In June the 9th, 1963, I had attended a voter registration workshop, was returning back to Mississippi. Ten of us was traveling by the Continental Trailways bus. When we got to Winona ... four people that had gone in to use the restaurant was ordered out. During this time I was on the bus. But when I looked through the window and saw they had rushed out I got off of the bus to see what had happened, and one of the ladies said, "It was a State Highway Patrolman and a Chief of Police ordered us out." ... I was carried to the county jail, and put in the booking room. They left some of the people in the booking room and began to place us in cells. I was placed in a cell with a young woman called Miss [Euvester] Simpson. After I was placed in the cell I began to hear the sounds of kicks and screams. I could hear somebody say, "Can you say, yes, sir, nigger? Can you say yes, sir?"

... They beat her, I don't know how long, and after a while she began to pray, and asked God to have mercy on those people. And it wasn't too long before three white men came to my cell. One of these men was a State Highway Patrolman and he ... said, "You are from Ruleville all right," and he used a curse word, and he said, "We are going to make you wish you was dead."

... The first Negro prisoner ordered me, by orders from the State Highway Patrolman for me, to lay down on a bunk bed on my face, and I laid on my face. The first Negro began to beat ... until he was exhausted, and I was holding my hands behind me at that time on my left side because I suffered from polio when I was six years old. After the first Negro had beat until he was exhausted the State Highway Patrolman ordered the second Negro to take the blackjack. The second Negro began to beat and I began to work my feet, and the State Highway Patrolman ordered the first Negro who had beat me to set on my feet to keep me from working my feet. I began to scream and one white man got up and began to beat me in my head and tell me to hush.... I was in jail when Medgar Evers was murdered.ⁱⁱⁱ

President wants rebellion snuffed

President Johnson told Hubert Humphrey to crush the rebellion and get the MFDP off the front pages, or Humphrey could give up on the idea of ever becoming vice-president. Humphrey instructed fellow Minnesotan and future Vice President Walter Mondale to "suppress the MFDP by any means necessary" and this was accomplished through secret meetings, and false statements, and by using information on the MFDP's strategy gathered from FBI informants in the Freedom Movement.

Johnson, Humphrey, and Mondale finally offered MFDP to seat two at-large delegates to be selected by Johnson (to ensure Humphrey that Hamer would not be selected). MFDP delegates refused the compromise. Humphrey reportedly pleaded with (whom he reportedly found "distasteful" because she was poor and uneducated) to accept the compromise so he could become vice president and push civil rights. Ed King told how Hamer expressed no sympathy for Humphrey's dilemma:

Senator Humphrey. I know lots of people in Mississippi who have lost their jobs for trying to register to vote. I had to leave the plantation where I worked in Sunflower County. Now if you lose this job of vice president because you do what is right, because you help the MFDP, everything will be all right. God will take care of you. But if you take it this way, why, you will never be able to do any good for civil rights, for poor people, for peace, or any of those things you talk about.^{iv}

MFDP kept up its agitation within the Convention, even after being denied official recognition. When all but three of the "regular" white Mississippi delegates left because they refused to pledge allegiance to the Party, the MFDP delegates borrowed passes from sympathetic delegates from other states and took the seats vacated by the Mississippi delegates, only to be removed by the national Party. Returning the next day, they found that convention organizers had removed the empty seats they had used. They stayed anyway and sang freedom songs.

Delegates to the 1964 Democratic Convention could not have known what forces they were up against, what was beneath their failure at Atlantic City and what caused much of the resulting tension among their groups, after returning home. Years later, it was revealed that MFDP was an FBI (COINTELPRO) target.^v

The Church Committee report of 1976 would finally clarify that President Johnson, anticipating trouble with the credentials fight, "directed the assignment of the special squad to Atlantic City" to gather intelligence concerning matters of strife, violence, etc." which might arise out of the credentials challenge.^{vi}

It turned out that the FBI had used intelligence "as a vehicle for covert efforts to influence social policy and political action." In fact, the FBI's ability to gather information without effective restraints had given it enormous power over the entire Civil Rights Movement, the committee concluded.^{vii}

Only a few days after delegates returned home, shots were fired into the home of the mother of slain civil rights worker James Chaney. There had been fear that retaliatory violence would occur from the FDP's public exposure, and several civil rights workers stood 24-hour guard around freedom houses and movement offices to protect them from night riders.

A major victory was achieved the following summer when President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 on August 6, prohibiting any election practice or procedure that "dilutes black voting strength or interferes with the rights of black voters to elect candidates of their choice."

The Act created a significant change in the status of African Americans throughout the South as it halted all states from using literacy tests, interpretation of the state Constitution, and other methods of excluding African Americans from voting.

There are 285 sections of the Mississippi constitution, and the document is considered to be one of the most complex and confusing in the nation. Examiners testing a voting applicant would point to a section and instruct applicants to copy and interpret it. The applicants passed or failed on the tester's decision. There were no objective standards by which to judge and no way to appeal.^{viii}

Opponents claimed Johnson used the legislation to consolidate the black vote throughout the South, believing the Act was intended to harm only Southern states:

"Not since the administration of President Grant nearly 100 years ago has it been the policy of the federal government to place illiterate Negroes on the voting rolls. Yet this is precisely what the Johnson

administration began to do today,” wrote a guest editor from the Winchester, Va., *Evening Star* for *The Clarion-Ledger*.^{ix}

Senator Eastland deplored the new, pending voting Act and stated for the March 1965 Congressional Record:

This is an insult not only to the white people of the State of Mississippi, but also to those numerous members of our Negro population who, as responsible citizens, have qualified to vote and have voted over a long period of time. Even if there had been in the past some indications or evidence of a denial or abridgement of the right to vote on the part of any individual in Mississippi by reason of his race or color there is no justification or logic in taking a position that two wrongs make a right.^x

It was an interesting time for Eastland to be talking ethics. In July, he was confronted with charges of using Parchman prisoners as laborers on his nearby Doddsville cotton farm. A black labor advocate, Andrew Hawkins, told the House Labor subcommittee that Eastland was using prisoners paroled from the nearby penitentiary to chop cotton on his farm.

Hawkins, active in trying to unionize Delta field workers and truck drivers, said conditions on Eastland’s farm were so bad his workers were operating stills and selling the moonshine to and Rep. John Bell Williams as “also running these kinds of farms.”^{xi}

Prior to the Voting Rights Act, only twenty-three percent of voting-age blacks were registered nationally. By 1969, the number jumped to sixty-one percent. In the Southern states, the numbers were more dramatic. During this same period in Mississippi, African American registration jumped from 6.7 to 66.5 percent and this increase in registration finally led to the election of African Americans to federal, state, and local offices.

With the new Act, Guyot other activists had something to work with; during an October MFDP strategy session in Greenwood, he suggested new and separate directions that would remove MFDP from SNCC,^{xii} its founding organization.^{xiii} Guyot’s entire eight-page speech was recorded and the transcription handed over to the Sovereignty Commission by an unnamed informant: “When we begin to really be aware of the fact that demonstrations as such are on the way out, civil rights as such is on the way out; the question now will be an attempt to gain political power, and an attempt to see that it’s not misused,” Guyot told attendees.^{xiv}

Guyot believed there were now two alternatives – to organize politically or work outside the system – and he chose the former: “[P]eople are not prepared to really ask for fundamental economic change. They’re prepared to ask for food, clothing, a job, education, and that may be painful to a lot of us, but I’m prepared to argue that.”^{xv}

As 1965 drew to a close, however, positive news came from the MFDP through a report filed in November: in 22 counties, 240 black candidates were running for the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) boards. Holmes County reported the highest number of candidates at 37.^{xvi}

Federal registrars were present in the Delta counties of Leflore, Coahoma, Humphreys, Bolivar and Holmes overseeing voter registration issues, and work was also under way on school integration and involvement in poverty programs. “If there is a poverty program (for example, Community Action program)

in your community that all the rich white folks and a few rich Negroes are on, and if the poor people had no part in making up or conducting the program, write to Ted [Seaver] at our office,” members were instructed in the report.

From individual counties also came reports of election and other harassment, Klan activity, and a murder: Bolivar County’s welfare office was requiring a reference “signed by some white person” for those requesting commodities, to show need. Voter registration was going on with “enough people registered so that we can win,” Frank Davis reported. A federal registrar was on site in Bolivar County and in upcoming ASCS elections, there were 13 candidates.^{xvii}

In Holmes County, a five-county anti-poverty board was set up and its board elected, all white people, in a closed meeting. Also, some 37 black candidates were on the ballot for ASCS elections out of a possible 40. In those elections, many wives were eligible to vote because they were joint owners of the farms, along with their husbands, with both names on the deeds. But the wives were not on the list of those eligible to vote, and ASCS was being asked for an explanation.^{xviii}

In Humphreys County, two candidates were running for the ASCS elections. In Issaquena County, Rufus Hurn, an ASCS candidate, took his name off the ballot after the sheriff, “whose brother was also running, came to Mr. Hurn and suggested that he take his name off.

“The sheriff’s brother sent Hurn’s sister a threat after she enrolled her child in the white school last August, and the sheriff himself put Mr. Hurn’s brother off the plantation after he enrolled his child in the white school. A shot was also fired near Mr. Hurn’s house,” the report stated. There were sixteen black candidates out of a possible twenty candidates running in the Issaquena election.^{xix}

In Panola County, black farmers had gotten together to form a Farmers Cooperative, buy equipment, including a combine. Also a group of okra farmers formed a cooperative and were selling their crop in Memphis. Ten black candidates were running in the ASCS election.

A “great deal of fear” was reported in Quitman County because in Marks, people were “afraid to register to vote, and afraid to take part in ASCS election.” Many living on plantations said they were afraid of being thrown off. Some also reported losing their jobs for registering their children in the “white” school. “People are being intimidated and followed.... The registrar refuses to register illiterates. At a meeting in the town of Darling on November 16, about 27 people were there and discussed the Union, welfare, and where to send federal complaints.”^{xx}

There was fear in Rankin County, as well, after Constable Luther Stevenson killed Joseph McNair, a father of six, in Pelahatchie in November. Witnesses said that Stevenson shot McNair once in the back, and then in the head as he was lying on the ground. MDFP Chairman Lawrence Guyot demanded an investigation by the Department of Justice, and Stevenson later said he shot McNair in self-defense after McNair lunged at him with an open pocketknife. Stevenson was carrying a justice of the peace warrant for the arrest of McNair and said he was in process of serving it when the shooting took place.

McNair was shot through the heart, according to an Associated Press report.^{xxi} The FBI was working on the case, according to the Freedom Democratic Party report; meanwhile, only two candidates ran in the Rankin ASCS elections.^{xxii}

Guyot's report did not mention the August murder of a 16-year-old Greenwood black who was murdered possibly to warn others against black voter registration.^{xxiii} Frank Bass, a half-brother to Freddie Lee Thomas, 16, in September asked U.S. Attorney General John Doar to order a Federal investigation into the Thomas death that had taken place on a highway near Greenwood August 20.

After a truck driver found the body in the early morning, a coroner's inquest and autopsy were completed before 8 a.m. the same day with a verdict of death by a hit and run accident, *The New York Times* reported.

Liz Fusco, a civil rights and union worker frequently targeted by the Sovereignty Commission, accompanied Bass to Washington. Leflore County had been assigned a Federal examiner under the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and more than 4,700 blacks had registered there since the law went into effect on August 6. Fourteen days later, Thomas was killed. "I think he was murdered. I believe he was shot in the head," Bass told the *Times* reporter, who described Leflore County as a "stronghold for the Ku Klux Klan."

Fusco said the autopsy by a local pathologist was completed by the time Thomas' relatives learned of his death. The body was buried the next day because it had not been embalmed, she said. Blacks seeing the body "saw a hole in the head but were told by the pathologist he did not believe it was a bullet wound," Fusco said. She was targeted in a Klan flyer handed out two months later in Sidon.

In December 1964, MFDP tried to halt seating of Mississippi's white Congressmen who gained their seats in racially rigged elections by filing a notice of contest. MFDP claimed that Annie Devine, Victoria Gray and Fannie Lou Hamer, three MFDP Congressional candidates who ran in the freedom vote after being kept off the official ballot, were entitled to seats in their respective districts.

Congress would not budge. SNCC, CORE, SCLC and Americans for Democratic Action endorsed the challenge but ADA would not support the seating of the three women.

The national media also rejected seating of the three candidates; hence the Freedom Democratic Party backed down from supporting the three, but continued the seating challenge. In January, 600 black Mississippians attending the opening ceremony of the 1965 session to lobby against seating of the Mississippi delegation, and more than one third of House members agreed, voting to bar the official Mississippian delegation. While the challenge again brought Mississippi into the national spotlight, at home there were serious internal problems threatening the civil rights coalition that eventually ended with COFO's demise.

By March 31, Fusco's name and Sovereignty Commission files were sent to the Greenwood office of George A. Everett, district attorney for the 4th Judicial District, by Commission director, Erle Johnston. Everett had requested information from the Commission after anticipating that "she [Fusco] is going to make every effort to harass and embarrass civil and criminal authorities in this area with regard to the racial problems now facing us."^{xxiv} Johnston told Everett that investigator Tom Scarbrough would make "additional inquiries" on Fusco.^{xxv} A graduate of Smith College and Yale, Fusco resided in Sidon, near Greenwood.

There was a smaller Freedom Summer in 1965 with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party filling the void left by COFO: freedom schools and voter registration activities were planned. There were fewer volunteers and they were placed only in communities where they were requested.

On June 14, Lawrence Guyot led 500 demonstrators in a mile-long silent protest to the state capitol – half of the marchers were teenagers and 75 were white summer volunteers. Some marchers were arrested for parading without a permit, crammed into paddy wagons and trash trucks, and dumped at the state fairgrounds.

Stories of the demonstration made the front page of *The New York Times* and supporters from across the state moved into Jackson. SNCC's chairman John Lewis and NAACP's Charles Evers participated as 204 more marchers were arrested and sent to the stockade at the state fair grounds where they were met with subhuman conditions:

At the Fairgrounds Motel (as the demonstrators called the state fair grounds) students were marched in 100 degree heat and ordered to do pushups until they collapsed. Then the police walked on their bodies. Twenty were locked in a 10 man paddy wagon parked in the broiling sun. When the doors were opened 30 minutes later, some of the demonstrators were unconscious. At meal time, food was placed on the floor, and police stood over the prisoners, ordering [them to] eat it off the floor, like dogs! On one occasion, police and guards tore a pile of mattresses to shreds, then called in news photographers and charged that the demonstrators had rioted and destroyed the bedding.^{xxvi}

Annie Mae King, a Sunflower County activist in her 60s, was one of the demonstrators forced into the paddy wagon: “They put us in those paddy wagons and they packed us in so tight until you couldn’t get breath, you couldn’t move.... It was so hot we was just about to suffocate.” She spent four days in the stockade under horrid conditions, eating grits and syrup for breakfast and string beans and hominy for other meals, sleeping on bare mattresses with no covers.

During the day, prisoners were forced to sit on cement floors.^{xxvii} Local officials denied all charges of mistreatment, which were “numerous and well documented.” The National Council of Churches sent in an investigating team that described the stockade as a “concentration camp” designed to “break the spirit, the will, the health and even the body of each individual.” While MFDP called for more demonstrators to come in, few people from outside of Jackson supported this march. Eventually 1,000 were arrested.^{xxviii}

The mood of Jackson’s Mayor Allen Thompson harkened to Civil War days of “no quarter” or mercy as he announced he was prepared to house 100,000 demonstrators at the “Fairgrounds concentration camp” if necessary. And it was soon after this that the city purchased its ‘riot control car,’ an armored vehicle capable of shooting tear gas in 12 directions.^{xxix} The mayor posed for a widely published photo of himself with “Thompson’s Tank.”

Over the summer, Delta voting rights advocates saw increased violence and harassment. In Holmes County, Hartman Turnbow was fired on by night riders, while the most concentrated attacks took place in Sunflower County. The Indianola Citizens League and the Sunflower County Citizens League formed to conduct voter registration activities and in a five-month period, some 400 local blacks tried to register, but only ten were successful.

Mrs. Annie Mae King lost her job as a cook at a white school in Indianola after trying to register. Serving as a COFO volunteer host, she suffered damages to her home when a tear-gas bomb was hurled through the window, injuring a fourteen-year-old COFO volunteer. The day before, the Indianola freedom school building was burned down, and several weeks later, on October 29, police using clubs broke up a rally attended by over 230 people at the freedom school site. Even so, local blacks cast more freedom votes in November than Indianola whites and a few blacks in the official balloting.^{xxx}

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- ⁱ Aaron E. Henry, "Mississippi Delegation," Letter to the editor, *New York Review of Books*, XI (August 22, 1968), 38-39.
- ⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Howard Zinn, "Voices of a People's History of the United States," (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004), 404-406.
- ^{iv} Woods, p. 181, cites "Edwin King, A Prophet from the Delta," *Sojourners* magazine, December 1982.
- ^v Ibid.
- ^{vi} Book II, Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, Section E., Political Abuse of Intelligence Information, April 26 (legislative day, April 14) 1976; (DeLoach, 12/3/75 hearings, Vol. 6, p. 175). "Former FBI executive Cartha DeLoach, who was FBI liaison with the White House during part of the Johnson administration, stated, 'I simply followed Mr. Hoover's instructions in complying with White House requests and I never asked any questions of the White House as to what they did with the material afterwards.'"
- ^{vii} Ibid.
- ^{viii} "Behind the Cotton Curtain," 1.
- ^{ix} Sovereignty Commission, SCR ID # 99-153-0-1-1-1-1
- ^x Sovereignty Commission, SCR ID # 99-153-0-7-1-1-1-1, from the *Senate Congressional Record*, March 25, 1965, 5683.
- ^{xi} "Senators Deny They Use Cons on Farm," *The Intelligencer*, Edwards, Illinois, July 7, 1965.
- ^{xii} If MFDP was to ever get a foothold, it would be in local elections, historian James Silver had predicted in his classic look work "Mississippi: The Closed Society." Silvers described MFDP and its platform as "neo-Populists which included antipoverty programs, Medicare, federal aid to education, urban renewal, rural development and the guarantee of constitutional rights" [all issues still being fought over in 2005, as the state was cutting off thousands of Medicaid recipients and arguing over full school funding]. "[E]xcept as they may help choose to moderate over a racist white in a local election . . . Mississippi Negroes have no prospect of major political influence, whatever the course of the Freedom Democratic Party." Silver stated his pessimism was due to the "deep-rooted discrimination in Mississippi." Silver saw the MFDP's future as bleak if it followed SNCC leadership.^{xiii}
- ^{xiii} MFDP's signing on to support the Johnson-Humphrey ticket, despite the treatment received at the convention, had angered SNCC leaders; Atlantic City proved that Democrats could not be trusted. But Guyot believed his party was better off away from SNCC's Atlanta-based "liberal" leadership.
- ^{xiv} Address by Lawrence Guyot on Strategy of FDP at Mississippi Staff Meeting, October 19, 1965, Greenwood, Miss. Transcribed by tape. Sovereignty Commission file SCR ID # 2-165-5-3-1-1-1.
- ^{xv} Ibid.
- ^{xvi} MFDP County Report, November 6, 1965, p. 2, from Sovereignty Commission files, SCR ID # 6-61-0-9-2-1-1.
- ^{xvii} MFDP report.
- ^{xviii} Ibid.
- ^{xix} Ibid.
- ^{xx} MFDP report.
- ^{xxi} Sovereignty Commission clipping, SCR ID # 10-71-0-15-1-1-1 -1, *The Clarion-Ledger*, "Negro Father of 6 Is Slain," November 8, 1965.
- ^{xxii} Ibid.
- ^{xxiii} "U. S. Inquiry Asked in Negro's Death," *The New York Times*, September 10, 1965.
- ^{xxiv} Letter to Sovereignty Commission by George Everett, dated March 29, 1966. SCR ID # 2-45-2-22-1-1-1.
- ^{xxv} Sovereignty Commission, letter to George Everett dated March 31, 1966. SCR ID # 2-45-2-21-1-1-1.
- ^{xxvi} "Behind the Cotton Curtain," 9.
- ^{xxvii} Dittmer, 345. Cites Ed King interview and SNCC press release, "Brutalities in Jackson," June 18, 1965, Hillegas Collection.
- ^{xxviii} Dittmer, 345. Cites NYT, June 23, 1965; "Action Memo to Friends of SCEF, from Anne Braden," July 1965, Hillegas Collection.
- ^{xxix} "Behind the Cotton Curtain," 9.
- ^{xxx} Dittmer, 323.