

Chapter 32 Advocacy Building

“There is something inspiring in a story of people who stood up to injustice when everyone around them was afraid. That is a fable that will always serve us well.” Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*

The Deacons for Defense and Justice, starting out as a simple self-defense guard to counterweigh for the lack of police protection, became a more visible political organization with clear alternatives to pacifist strategies promoted by national civil rights organizations.

Deacons’ history, short but colorful, was captured by Lance Hill in his book, *The Deacons for Defense*.ⁱ It was the image of a nonviolent civil rights movement that was believed to guarantee white liberal support in the North; this was only an image but a well guarded one.

One Northern volunteer in the Mississippi movement, Sally Belfrage, learned this lesson when forced to keep out any reference to armed self-defense in her memoir. When she was warned by a local black activist, “If you write about the guns, we’ll kill you,” Belfrage opted to leave out the “parts” about guns in her book.ⁱⁱ

Deacons were openly defiant to local authorities and the Klan, while making no secret they were well armed. By the summer of 1965, they were receiving national publicity through major news stories in *The New York Times* and other mass media publications and becoming “the talk of the movement and folk heroes to legions of African Americans in the Deep South.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Another kind of advocacy

Four months before the Jackson MFDP and Deacons meeting, in April of 1965, a separate Mississippi advocacy group was formed – the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union or MFLU. Several COFO workers along with about fifty black cotton choppers and tractor drivers met in the small community of Shaw in Bolivar County and decided it was time to do something about the low farm wages (typically \$3 for a ten-hour day). Within a month some 1,000 workers joined them with the first labor action taking place a month later in Tribbett, near Greenville.

When family representatives of those living and working on the A.L. Andrews plantation asked for an hourly wage of \$1.25, they were rejected by the planter, who then evicted them after they refused to go into the fields. The displaced families moved into tents in a small community – “Strike City” – and requested help from Northern unions. Subsequent strikes took place in Indianola, Shaw, Rosedale, and even Cleveland, where ten women walked off their jobs as maids when they could not negotiate a \$1.25 hourly wage.

The MFLU could not sustain the strike, however, and local police arrested some of the union leaders. Delta farm workers simply had no leverage; by this time, over 90 percent of the cotton crop was harvested by machines and chemical herbicides replaced choppers of weeds among the cotton plants.

There were no longer any jobs for the black Delta families who had for generations worked the fields. This attempt to organize Delta workers, even though it failed, was the most ambitious effort since the Southern Tenant Farmers Union organized in Mississippi during the late 1930s.

Also, during that summer of 1965, the Delta Ministry began helping farmers organize cooperatives in Bolivar County. The North Bolivar County Farm Cooperative, within three years, became the largest in the state with nearly 900 families producing over 1 million pounds of vegetables for the market and for their own use.

In Sunflower County Fannie Lou Hamer organized the Freedom Farm Cooperative to provide land for unemployed plantation workers. Her farm grew to 680 acres and included a “pig bank” that gave cooperative members free pigs to raise and slaughter for food.

The cooperative failed, mostly because of inadequate capital. There was no corporate or government support and local banks refused to extend credit. By the early 1970s, cooperative farming once again declined.

It did not take long for neighboring Louisiana Deacons to spill over into the Magnolia State.^{iv} A nine-man delegation of Deacons traveled to Jackson in August of 1965 to meet with the MFDP. Led by Aaron Henry, the Freedom Party was in the national picture as well after the earlier conflict at the Democratic National Convention, and so it was no surprise this Jackson meeting was covered by *The New York Times*. Organized by Rev. Ed King, the meeting was not held to endorse the Deacons, but to provide a forum, King told reporters.^v

Deacons leader Charlie Sims used the setting to make fun of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and their threats of violence during his Jackson speech ... that was to be “a clarion call ... challenging black men to prove their mettle against the Klan.” Sims also spoke of organizing a Jackson chapter and the next day, Deacons teams began recruiting efforts in Mississippi.

The Willie Hazelwood family of Goat Mountain, a small community several miles south of Belzoni next to the Yazoo River levy, hosted the most infamous Deacon for several years – Randolph “Rudy” Shields. The ex-boxer from Yazoo City was Charles Evers’ assistant and liaison to the Deacons and later became head of the short-lived national organization.

From 1961 to 1980, the Hazelwoods also hosted COFO, SNCC, voting rights and Freedom Summer volunteers, but none could match the personality and disposition of Shields. To the Sovereignty Commission, he was an enigma whose presence in any community demanded much of its time and resources, thus hundreds of reports were gathered on Shields and remain in the Commission’s files.

To the Hazelwoods, Shields was a “character” who would be remembered for acts such as threatening to “burn down the house” or “cut off the hair” of any black person who refused to register and vote. Shields was involved in several Mississippi communities, particularly in voter registration and boycott activities; stories circulated of how he drove from one community to another – each time, furnished with a different car with “guns on the car seat.”^{vi}

A Sovereignty Commission report on Shields^{vii} placed him initially in Natchez during October of 1965 as 100 blacks led by Charles Evers were arrested during a march. Shields took over as Evers was led away by the police. From a local church where they had gathered to rest, he encouraged the 350 demonstrators to go home instead of marching. If they marched again, he told protestors, they would most likely be arrested.

While Evers first rebuked the Deacons for Defense, he later used their services for protection, changing his mind after recognizing that “deep down in himself, he knew he needed this protection [and he knew] he wasn’t going to get it from anywhere else.”^{viii}

After Vernon Dahmer was murdered in Hattiesburg in 1966, Bogalusa Deacons immediately organized a chapter (“the police unit”) in Hattiesburg. Another chapter was formed in Laurel and extended activities into the labor movement.

Deacons Chapters were also formed in Fayette, Vicksburg, Kosciusko, Woodville, and Centreville and recruiters also visited Greenville, Poplarville, Canton, Jackson, Meridian, Tougaloo, Columbia, Hattiesburg, Lexington, Edward, and Holmes County, according to Hill. Sovereignty Commission records also place Deacons in Clarksdale and other parts of the Delta.

Deacons became widely known and did much to neutralize the Klan throughout the South as the only south-wide organization created and controlled by the black working class and veterans during the Civil Rights Movement. While Deacons did not oppose nonviolent action – they supported it and employed it as a tactic – the organization opposed “the dogmatic idea that nonviolent direct action precluded self-defense.”

Hill characterized the Deacons as evolving a “more flexible strategy – similar to the 1930s labor movement – that employed tactics of nonviolence, direct action, symbolic protest, and the judicious use of defensive force.”

[I]t is noteworthy that even the most militant campaigns ... occurred in communities that, prior to the Civil Rights Act and the arrival of CORE, never engaged in a single organized public protest against segregation laws. To ignore this reality is to miss how radically the Deacons departed from the politics of the past, and to diminish the magnitude of their contribution to the African American freedom movement.^{ix}

Resistance of another kind

One very cold morning of January 31, 1966, just two weeks after Vernon Dahmer, Birdia Keglir and Adlena Hamlett were murdered, a small group of poor blacks and civil rights workers quietly drove a caravan of about a dozen cars onto an empty U. S. Air Force base outside of Greenville.

After prying loose the padlock on the main door, the men, women and children moved into an empty barracks with blankets and boxes of food. Quickly the base commander appeared to charge them with trespassing on government property and tell them to leave. But they remained, and handed him a statement explaining they were cold, hungry and had no jobs or land.

“We don’t want charity. We are willing to work for ourselves if given a chance,” the note read. Spokespersons demanded food, land, job training, and jobs.^x The decision to occupy the base had been made during a Delta Ministry meeting two days earlier, attended by over 700 people.

As others moved into the complex bringing the total to about 100, city and county officials chose not to evict the activists, fearing bad publicity. But President Johnson, instead of sending any help to these cold and hungry citizens who were displaced from their homes and jobs, sent troops instead.

More than 150 military police, two full colonels, three majors, and a major general dragged the protestors out of the building and off the base. Protestors believed they got their message across, however, when Attorney General Katzenbach, rarely known for his civil rights concerns, warned President Johnson “the situation demonstrated by the invasion of the Greenville Air Base ... is potentially explosive.” In the Delta “many thousands of poor Negro workers are losing their jobs, and, in many instances, their homes as well ... [and that the situation is] more acute because of the unwillingness of the white community to attempt to deal with the problem even at the welfare level.”

There had been great delays in getting federal programs carried out by state officials, said Katzenbach, concluding there was “a real possibility that Mississippi will be the Selma, Alabama of 1966.”

Child development at issue

Six months before the Greenville Air Force Base occupation, the Office of Economic Opportunity granted \$1.5 million to Mississippi for preschool training for several thousand Mississippi children, attempting to do something about the state’s horrific poverty.

The Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) was one of the country’s pioneer Head Start programs, providing poor children with medical care, hot meals and preschool training. Some employment was also provided for several hundred local people who worked as teachers and helpers. So of course it was target for destruction by the planter hegemony.

The story of CDGM and Headstart can be cited to illustrate “both the possibilities and limitations of federal programs designed to eliminate the causes and the conditions of poverty” as Mississippi’s white establishment not surprisingly worked hard to oppose both CDGM and the entire War on Poverty.

All of Mississippi’s Congressional representatives voted against funding the poverty programs in the first place. The *Jackson Daily News* compared such programs with those in “Soviet Russia ... and Hitler’s Germany.”

Head Start and other poverty programs represented “the most subtle mediums for instilling the acceptance of racial integration and ultimate mongrelization ever perpetuated in this country,” the *JDN* editorialized.

This attitude was shared across the state, as several CDGM workers were shot at by racists; local schools would not rent their buildings and buses to the program; and in one Delta town, Anguilla, plantation owners would not allow sharecroppers’ children to enroll. Klansmen there burned a cross in front of the Head Start center to make their point.

Even though the new educational program was seeing successes, many white state political leaders tried their best to destroy CDGM, charging financial mismanagement. U. S. Senator John C. Stennis was contacted and he demanded that Sargent Shriver, head of the U. S. Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), withhold remaining funds.

But it turned out there were only a number of administrative problems that were “easily corrected” by OEO auditors; there were never any findings of fraud or graft in connection with the grant and in the end, less than \$5,000 of the \$1.5 million grant was disallowed.^{xi}

Yet after two years of investigations, surveillance, firings, audits, press attacks, closures and threats, CDGM died in December 1967. Mississippi Action for Progress or MAP gained control over most of CDGM’s funding and projects.

This state-sponsored anti-poverty organization operated under a twelve-member board appointed by the governor. While Aaron Henry and Hodding Carter III were named to the board, two former Delta Council presidents whose families dominated the region, Leroy Percy and Oscar Carr Jr., were also named. Owen Cooper of Yazoo City –president of two of the largest agricultural chemical firms in the world – was appointed chair. Supporters of a third group, Friends of Children of Mississippi, “were determined to maintain their programs free of local white control ... [and] deep resentment developed between black MAP and FCM workers as they fought over the children.”^{xii} Observed historian John Dittmer:

Whatever its original intentions, the poverty program in Mississippi had divided the black community into warring factions, often pitting the poor men and women who had become politicized in the early 1960s against the old, traditional, middle-class leadership. Fannie Lou Hamer commented on this phenomenon in Sunflower County, where Head Start people associated with the movement were doing battle with the local CAP-sponsored programs: ‘Now the ministers, to get a little money, are selling their church to the white folks so the CAP program can run Head Start.... They’re these middle-class Negroes, the ones that never had it as hard as the grass roots people in Mississippi. They’ll sell their parents for a few dollars. Sometimes I get so disgusted I feel like getting my gun after some of these school teachers and chicken-eatin’ preachers.’^{xiii}

In March of 1967, two members of the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty completed a field trip to the Mississippi Delta where they encountered hunger and poverty at its worst. The subcommittee hearings held in July became an important media event when Senator Robert F. Kennedy said he was stunned at the malnutrition of Delta children.

Senator Kennedy asked attorney Marian Wright (Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children’s Defense Fund) beforehand to testify at a hearing before the subcommittee. At the time, she was working as a legal advocate for poor people in rural Mississippi as mechanization had thrown hundreds of thousands of poor blacks out of work.

“People are starving,” Wright told subcommittee members. “They are starving and those that get the bus fare to go north are trying to go north. There is absolutely nothing for them to do here. There is nowhere to go, and somebody must begin to respond to them. I wish the Senators would have a chance to go around and just look at the empty cupboards in the Delta and the number of people who are going around begging just to feed their children.”

Wright led Kennedy and others on the Delta tour, three days later, taking them into shacks without water or light or heat, and introducing them to families whose children were hungry and sick.

In one of those shacks, Senator Kennedy had an epiphany. There was a baby sitting on the mud floor looking filthy, with a swollen, bloated belly. Senator Kennedy sat there on the floor and tried to get a response from the clearly emaciated baby, but he couldn't. He was visibly moved and disturbed.^{xiv}

Meanwhile, the Head Start battle ended when Helen Bass Williams, a black Tougaloo professor and former CDGM staff member, was named director of MAP in mid 1967. Under Williams' leadership, MAP politics were rewritten to give more local control to Head Start parents but in 1968, OEO cut funding by 25 percent after giving four counties to the FCM and two to MAP. Besides the major cuts in Head Start funds, poverty programs were affected as well due to increasing demands for underwriting the Vietnam War and the general conservative backlash. "In Mississippi, where fundamental economic changes underway for decades now literally threatened the survival of thousands of poor black families, the reduced commitment to fight the war against poverty would have serious consequences."^{xv}

As SNCC, CORE, COFO, and most other Northern volunteers left Mississippi, the lynching, murders, and horrid mistreatment of blacks did not stop. While some homegrown programs like the FDP continued, and as new civil rights groups and coalitions formed, Mississippi still retained its identity as the worst place for black people and civil rights advocates to be.

Klan terrorism kept up – one victim was the Rev. Don Thompson, a white Unitarian minister and civil rights advocate, who was shot near his apartment in Jackson in August of 1965.

African American, NAACP Treasurer Wharlest Jackson, 37, was killed February 27, 1967, after a bomb on that was planted in his pickup exploded. Jackson was just promoted to the job of chemical mixer at the Armstrong Rubber Co. in Natchez. Whites previously held the job.

Klansmen targeted white moderates who spoke out for civil rights. In two months starting in September of 1967, dynamite explosions hit a Jewish temple, the home of the Tougaloo academic dean, and the homes of both a rabbi and a white business owner, all in Jackson. In November, the home of Rev. Allen Johnson, a black NAACP activist, was bombed. In June the following year, a Jackson schoolteacher was killed.

Tufts School of Medicine Aids Deltans

Tufts University set out to do something about starvation^{xvi} in the Delta, by setting up a clinic in Mound Bayou in 1965. What happened over the next few years was so *typical Mississippi*, as "officials" from the state and local levels set out to make sure Tufts would have to close its doors – the sooner, the better.

A letter to Tufts President Dr. Nile Y. Wessell from Governor Paul Johnson on March 24, 1964, let Wessell know the Governor had been against the project from the start. Johnson did not mince words:

Tufts' proposal to establish a demonstration and research project in the field of public health and medical care has received strenuous opposition from every interested party in Mississippi. When it appeared that Panola County, Mississippi was considered by Tufts to be the ideal location in the United States, the Executive Officer of the State Board of Health, the Mississippi State Medical Association, and the Panola County Medical Association expressed objection to such a proposal. There is even greater and widespread objection to the location of a project in Bolivar County, Mississippi. . . . You go to great length to imply that the various meetings produced expressions of interest in the project and offers of cooperation, but I have yet to find such to be true.^{xvii}

Johnson could not keep Tufts out of Mississippi, despite his complaints. Later Sovereignty Commission files show various memos complaining about Tufts personnel and their willingness to join community members in Mound Bayou and nearby Rosedale in advocating for basic human rights.^{xviii}

The need for this “outside” medical intervention could not be more evident, as a journalist from the *Hartford Connecticut Times* who visited Mound Bayou in March of 1968 observed, where infant mortality was (and remains) triple the national figures.

The baby was too weak to cry. A listless rolling of the eyes was his only movement as the tiny Negro boy was being examined by pediatricians at the Mound Bayou Community Hospital. Physically, this tiny new American was grotesque. His head was completely formed but his arms and legs were the thickness of a man's little finger. His ribs stood out like the bones of a filleted fish. He had been born about a month before in Bolivar County, Mississippi, U. S.^{xix}

The baby under observation was suffering from “chronic malnutrition compounded by acute dehydration.” Dr. Christian M. Hansen Jr. of the United States Public Health Service told the Connecticut journalist the baby was “one of hundreds of Negro children in the Mississippi [Delta] who are destined to grow up stunted in body, and perhaps in brain, by the consequences of acute poverty.”

A second pediatrician, Dr. Aaron Shirley, told the reporter, “A few more hours without medical attention, and this baby would have died.” Asked why the figures were so disturbing, “Dr. Shirley, a Mississippi negro, shot back bluntly ‘ignorance and poverty. And one breeds the other.’”

The two pediatricians were staff members of the Tufts Delta Health Center in Mound Bayou, started by Boston's Tufts University Medical School to provide medical services for 12,000 residents of the Northern half of Bolivar County. The project was supported by a \$1.6 million grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) while poverty program funds also were used to build a \$900,000 clinical center. It took political muscle to get the project opened in the first place, but with a federal grant, seven physicians and about 80 nurses, midwives, welfare workers, dieticians and trainees staffed the health center.

Originally coming into the Delta believing they were going to operate a health program, the clinic's directors quickly recognized that medical needs were only part of the overall physical problems, said John Hatch, associate director of the project. Mass unemployment, low education levels, and poor sanitation

aggravated medical problems. Hot running water was found in only 10 percent of the houses – 70 percent of homes had no running water at all. While many houses had electric power, few had toilets.

Most Bolivar County blacks made their living picking cotton and chopping the weeds. Mechanization and herbicides had eliminated most hand labor leaving many families with nothing; it did not take long for the new health center to detect 30 cases of iron deficiency anemia.

Dr. Roger Cohen, a medical sociologist and part of the Tufts team, was pessimistic about meeting any success in Bolivar County and Mound Bayou “without a concerted effort by a large number of people nationwide.” While technically “no one dies of starvation in [Mississippi], clinical malnutrition makes for hungry children, who don’t learn easily because they are stunted and retarded due to the lack of proper nutrients, in addition to the physical, they also have a tendency for psychological problems.”

The Negro in Mississippi “lacks hope for the future,” Cohen noted, and “dental care is almost unheard of as is pre-natal care.” And yet a study carried out in 1968 by the Committee on Farm Policy of the National Council of Churches found the Delta planters were “strangers to the notion of suffering” since they were subsidized more than any other agricultural group in the country.

In 1966, there were more payments of \$50,000 in each of eight Mississippi counties than in the states of Iowa and Illinois combined.... In the seven states of Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Ohio, 165 producers received checks of \$25,000 or more, as compared with the 194 in Mississippi alone who received payments of \$50,000 or more.^{xx}

Delta and Pine Land Company, the British-owned “world’s largest plantation,” received a subsidy totaling \$653,253 in 1967. The 5,000-acre Eastland Plantation Inc. was handed \$157,000.^{xxi}

While the planters were living high on the hog, the War on Poverty was meeting with limited success throughout Mississippi, as did most antipoverty programs initiated by Congress between 1964 and 1966. Nearly all attempts coming from the federal government to aid Mississippi’s poor were either controlled or blocked entirely by white, wealthy Mississippians who typically were planters.

Even forty years later, in 2005, Mississippi’s infant mortality rate – a good indication of the health of both women and children – was the highest in the country. For every 1,000 live births, 10.5 infants under age 1 died in Mississippi. In parts of the impoverished Delta region, that number ranged up to 18 per thousand. By comparison, the national infant mortality rate was 6.8. Anthropologist Crystal Grayson, who collected these statistics, completed research in 2002 at the University of Mississippi showing that residents of the Mississippi Delta were being exposed to lethal doses of agricultural pesticides yearly.^{xxii}

Grayson wrote of a “higher concentration of these chemicals being administered in the Delta” than in any other area of the state of Mississippi. Further, the anthropologist stated it is evident that “pesticide exposure has a great effect on the health of the population of the Delta [where there is] a higher cancer mortality rate, infant mortality rate, a greater proportion of low birth weight infants, and a higher percentage of individuals suffering from chronic headaches, respiratory problems, and neurological disorders.”

Grayson also found that residents do not take necessary safety precautions to avoid being exposed to pesticides – yet some attempts were being made to solve this problem as educational sessions and interviews

were being held throughout the Delta “in order to make individuals more aware of the dangers of these chemicals.”

Voting Rights fights carry on

Racial tensions continued during the 1967 elections, with Ku Klux Klan terrorism and state police power directed against civil rights activists. COINTELPRO operations undermined the black movement, but with the help of federal registrars, both the NAACP and MFDP increased voter registration.

In turn, the Mississippi legislature enacted a series of laws to slow the effects of the Voting Rights Act. Charles Evers and the NAACP successfully responded with NAACP-sponsored boycotts against white business owners in several cities.

Also in 1967, Sunflower County gave the MFDP a unique opportunity when the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals called for new elections in the small town of Sunflower; the 1965 election in Sunflower City was overturned by a federal court on the grounds that Negroes were barred from the election.^{xxiii} This decision, “which came in answer to an MFDP suit marked the first time since Reconstruction that an election had been overturned in the South.”

In Sunflower City, blacks constituted 75 percent of the town’s 700 residents but had been unlawfully excluded from political involvement. MFDP decided to run candidates for Mayor, city clerk, and three out of five Alderman positions.^{xxiv}

Delta Ministry and FDP worker Joseph Harris helped the black community conduct meetings and workshops, register voters, and appoint block captains to support an all-black slate in races for mayor and five alderman set for the following spring.

When the Sunflower votes were counted in the May 2, 1967 election, with federal observers on the scene, blacks lost every race with the average margin nearly seventy votes. Whites had actively sought votes and years later, some blacks say that votes were bought and sold, a problem that has continued on, many believe.^{xxv} Many found themselves asking what went wrong.

While it was clear that whites voted for white candidates and that some blacks split their tickets, intimidation played a role, too. Once the election was over, reports came out that many black voters were warned to stay away from the polls, received threatening letters, and some were threatened with the loss of their jobs if black candidates won.

Even with federal observers present, groups of whites stood around several polling places, including city hall, harassing black voters and taking photographs of some who were lined up to vote. Trucks parked nearby with shotguns visible in their gun racks and each black voter was forced to pass by the chief of police, while moving through the segregated voting lines. These tactics to harass black voters continued in rural parts of Mississippi, even into the 1970s. MFDP sued to have the results voided. Their complaint was that federal observers present did not allow MFDP leaders to assist blacks in voting.^{xxvi}

As bad as the 1967 elections were in Sunflower County, MFDP won its first and perhaps its greatest victory that year in Holmes County when school teacher Robert Clark was the first African American elected to the Mississippi legislature in the twentieth century. Clark’s successful bid for state representative came after years of organizing by local leaders, most land-owning farmers, in a county 72 percent black.

He was well known and his credentials impressed the black middle class. MFDP organizers including Henri and Sue Lorenzi, a white couple who had been working in Holmes County for three years, developed an impressive organization, with block captains in all parts of the heavily rural county.

Yet less than two weeks after the election, on May 12 a former member of the Freedom Corps of Delta Ministry, Benjamin Brown, was shot and killed when police fired on protesters at Jackson State College.

Brown was not part of the protest. Police had come onto the campus to arrest a student for speeding, triggering a protest that escalated into a confrontation between 1,000 students and hundreds of police and national guardsmen.

The following night, police wounded several people and killed Brown – a bystander – when they opened fire on a group of protesters. Brown had gone out to buy hamburgers for himself and his wife when he was killed.

Officially, Brown was caught in "crossfire" between police and demonstrators but "local activists believed otherwise. Brown had been arrested in Jackson seven times in civil rights protests and was well known to local police. He died from bullet wounds in his back and in the back of his head."^{xxvii}

Through the end of spring, the bombings continued.

Dr. Martin Luther King Assassinated

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968. Before the Poor People's March on Washington set off from the Mississippi Delta town of Marks, its principal organizer, Dr. King, was gunned down on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel and died at St. Joseph's Hospital of a gunshot wound in the neck.

On a previous visit to Marks, Rev. King was profoundly shocked when he found himself in the midst of starving children. After years of fighting for human rights throughout the world, King realized the need to directly confront the Delta plantation bloc.

In later years it would be learned the FBI had targeted King for surveillance, harassment and sabotage just as they had done to Malcolm X and countless other black activists during the civil rights struggle under COINTELPRO, the FBI's Counterintelligence Program. FBI chief Hoover once described King as "the most dangerous man in America, and a moral degenerate."

"A few months before the assassination, Hoover distributed an internal memo at the FBI calling for King's 'removal from the national scene.' In April, Hoover approved the plan that led to King's switch to the Motel Lorraine. One documented COINTELPRO operation involved surveillance of King's alleged 'sexual escapades.' Tapes were later used in an attempt to blackmail King into committing suicide."

Cartha Deloach, the man overseeing the FBI's surveillance and harassment of King, was also put in charge of the investigation that indicted James Earl Ray and concluded that he acted as a lone mentally ill assassin.^{xxviii}

Another murder followed King's assassination, this time in the Delta, when George Hayes, a 33-year-old black, was reported lynched near Coffeerville at the edge of the Delta on August 10, 1968. Hayes had been visiting his relatives while on vacation from Chicago and his murder had the signs of Klan involvement.

Hayes' body was found; it was evident he had several fractures of the skull, a crushed stomach and other damaged organs. Vital parts of his body were cut off and his clothes were missing. Hayes' murder was reported in "The Real Thing," a mimeographed Jackson newsletter "published in the interest of black freedom."

In the October 7 issue of the newsletter, it was reported that Hayes had "just left a party on a plantation. The Mississippi State Police claimed that he was [victim of] a hit and run accident and the driver got away clean."

The body must have been returned to Chicago, because the newsletter's writer stated that according to the Cook County coroner, "the automobile could not have done all that." Chicago civil rights groups were "pressuring" for an investigation of the murder, the report stated.

Despite the death of Dr. King and other violence that occurred, it was clear that the movement had still gained significantly in Mississippi by the end of 1968, at least with respect to voting. Over 250,000 black people were registered to vote – 60 percent of those eligible, according to the Voter Education Project.

Dr. John Dittmer, a follower of "local people" in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s suggested the "level of political discourse was now changing, and overt race-bating was strikingly absent in campaign oratory."

Head Start, reforms in food stamp allocation, and Medicare and Medicaid had resulted in some improvement in the lives of the black poor. Segregation was still a fact of life throughout the state, but most Jim Crow signs had been removed, and it was not unusual to see black people eating in white-owned restaurants, using previously segregated libraries, motels and other services, particularly in cities like Jackson and Greenville.

School desegregation continued slowly, and then, in 1969, a unanimous Supreme Court in *Alexander v. Holmes County* ruled that the time for all deliberate speed was over. Mississippi was told to desegregate its public schools forthwith. This decision was followed by massive white flight to private academies – and a rise in violence.

Down on Eastland's Farm...

Some civil rights activities were definitely more creative than others. On June 13, 1969, a "plant-in" was set for Senator James Eastland's plantation in Sunflower County. James Mohead, reporting to the Sovereignty Commission, said county authorities planned to be on hand, accompanied by two plain-clothes Highway Patrolmen, an attorney, and a county judge as marchers arrived.

"If any violations of the law occur, arrests will be made. There is no land on the Senator's property where there are no crops planted; therefore, it will be impossible for present plans by marchers to be effected without damaging property."

"Principle trouble-makers" – all of Indianola – were listed by Indianola's chief of police: Walter J. Smigiel, a Catholic Priest; John Daniel Smith, a youth worker; Carver Randall, president of the local NAACP; and Rudolph Arthur Shields, "a field representative for the NAACP in the Delta

... for the past four years.” Shields leadership in the Deacons for Defense was apparently unknown to Mohead.^{xxix} No Sovereignty Commission reports followed – leaving the rest of this story untold.

ⁱ Lance Hill, “The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement,” (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2004), 2.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 3. Belfrage wrote *Freedom Summer* in 1965. Defensive violence was never alien to the Civil Rights Movement, even well before the advent of the Deacons. But “... there had been a long history of white attempts to limit the availability of weapons to blacks. Most nineteenth century firearm statutes in the South were intended to prevent free blacks from obtaining firearms. Louisiana slaves were denied firearms unless they had written permission to hunt within the plantation boundaries, and antebellum laws in both Louisiana and Mississippi banned freedmen and free people of color from carrying a pistol. Most concealed weapon laws in the South originated as attempts to limit black access.” (Hill, 2).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 3.

^{iv} By the end of 1966, Deacons grew to twenty-one chapters with several hundred members concentrated in Louisiana and Mississippi.

^v Hill, 182. Cites *NYT*, August 30, 1965.

^{vi} The Hazelwoods were frequently arrested for their civil rights involvement and their personal Sovereignty Commission files are extensive. Mrs. Hazelwood said she was once beaten by deputies for her involvement in the community’s Freedom School: “I was pushed into the police car and they hit me when I pushed back. Later they released me, but the next day I went to work and they came and took me to jail. The deputy asked if I thought I was going to rule Belzoni and I told him, ‘No, we are just trying to live like you’.... Even in the 1980s volunteers were still needed to help us protect ourselves. Goat Hill and Belzoni were rough places to live. Whenever Medgar Evers came to speak, he would quickly leave. Rev. King marched through Belzoni and we only saw him briefly – he got out of here fast. A lot of nights we had to put our son under the bed to keep him from catching a bullet,” Mrs. Hazelwood recalled. The Goat Hill black community was organized in the early days of Reconstruction by the ancestors of Hazelwood and others. The families met regularly in churches to talk over community betterment projects, always helping each other out when needed. “It was always a struggle. We survived off our land, planting our gardens to sell vegetables for money and to eat. Sometimes we would be sitting in our homes at night and see a cross burning in the yard. This type of violence and harassment really did not end here until the 1980s.” One night in Belzoni in 1979, “mobs fought all night and the police couldn’t do anything about it. All of the men in town had guns. The men didn’t come home until the next day. Willie told me the police were finally taking guns away from the blacks – not the white people. When Willie saw a policeman coming towards him, he hid his gun under the step of a restaurant. He could see his gun through the cracks and he thought he would lose it to the policeman, but the officer couldn’t see it. Finally, the officer left and Willie grabbed his gun and came home. Later, he told me what happened and we laughed about it.”

^{vii} Mississippi Sovereignty Commission SCR ID # 1-112-0-4-1-1-1

^{viii} Hill, 2. Quotes James Stokes.

^{ix} Hill, 272.

^x The group’s elected spokespersons included Isaac Foster, a Delta labor organizer; Ida Mae Lawrence of Bolivar County and Unita Blackwell of Issaquena County.

^{xi} Dittmer, 372. Cites Jules Sugarman interview by Stephen Goodell, March 14, 1969, 29, 30, LBJ Library.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 381.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 381, 382. Dittmer cites Greenberg, CDGM, 632; OEO, “Inspection Evaluation,” April 1968, OEO Archives, box 109; Washington Post, July 10, 1967. Fannie Lou Hamer, “To Priase Our Bridges,” in Dorothy Abbott, ed., *Mississippi Writers: Reflections of Childhood and Youth – vol. II: Nonfiction* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 327. See also Tony Dunbar, *Our Land Too* (New York: Pantheon, 1971), chap. 7.

^{xiv} From a copy of Children’s Defense Fund materials on the Child Watch Visitation Program. Undated.

^{xv} Dittmer, 382.

^{xvi} Another possibility is that Tufts “might have been here for medical experimentation, since they could not open up such a program elsewhere,” one Delta sociologist told this author.

^{xvii} Sovereignty Commission file SCR ID # 99-1-0-1-1-1-1.

^{xviii} Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission file(s) SCR ID # 99-1-0-1-1-1-1; SCR ID # 99-1-0-2-1-1-1.

^{xix} *Hartford Connecticut Times*, “Mississippi Children – Stunted Lives.” Copy of the article found in Aaron Henry’s papers at Tougaloo. There is no date, but it has a date stamp of March 26, 1968.

^{xx} Woods, 194. Woods writes that a 1969 study by the Committee on Farm Policy of the National Council of Churches found that Mississippi Delta planters were being subsidized more than any agricultural group in the country. “In 1966, there were more payments over \$50,000 in each of eight Mississippi counties than in the states of Iowa and Illinois combined.” Lauren Soth, “The Paradox of Hunger and Agricultural Abundance,” Farm Policy Committee, National Council of Churches, August 1, 1969, Delta Ministry Papers, Box 1, Folio 23. Press release of U.S. Sen. John J. Williams entered into the *Congressional Record*, May 23, 1968, Southern Christian Leadership conference (SCLS) Papers, Box 177, Folio 42; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 17, 1972.

^{xxi} Ibid.

^{xxii} Crystal Grayson, “Abstract: Changing Behaviors/Changing Health Risks: Agricultural Pesticide Education in the Mississippi Delta,” *Department of Anthropology*, The University of Mississippi, (online) May 2002.

^{xxiii} *Hamer v. Campbell* (Northern District, Miss.) [358 F. 2d 215 (1966)]. MDFP, in the spring of 1965, sought to halt municipal elections in Sunflower County on grounds of discrimination. But elections were held on March 11, 1966: The Court of Appeals (5th Circuit) voided elections in Sunflower City only. In November 1966 MFDP sought to invalidate other elections in the county. Case pending. See Civil Liberties Docket, XII, 58, at 501. Miss. 20b. (Source: Black Politics, *Legal Cases*, 32.

^{xxiv} Staff Correspondent, “A Chance for Power in New Election,” *The Deep South Patriot*, Sample Issue, 1966, 7.

^{xxv} From interviews by Susan Klopfer with several older Sunflower County residents who asked to remain anonymous.

^{xxvi} *MFDP v. Sunflower Town Elections Board* (District Court, Miss.). See civil Liberties Docket, XIII, 144, at 501. Miss. 20c. Source: Black Politics, *Legal Cases*, 34.

^{xxvii} Dittmer, 413. Cites Delta Ministry report on Ben Brown shooting, May 1967, Moore Papers; *Southern Patriot*, June 1967; JDN, May 11, 12, 1967.

^{xxviii} Sources include: *Code Name Zorro: The Murder of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, by Mark Lane and Dick Gregory, 1977; *Murder in Memphis*, by Mark Lane and Dick Gregory, (New York: Thunders Mouth Press, 1993); *Orders to Kill, the Truth Behind the Murder of Dr. Martin Luther King*, by William F. Pepper, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1995); *The Final Report of the House Select Committee on Assassinations*, 1978.

^{xxix} Sovereignty Commission report filed by James M. Mohead on July 21, 1969. SCR ID # 1-112-0-31-3-1-1 and SCR ID # 2-38-2-14-4-1-1.