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Time Code: 0:00 – 6:12

The civil rights workers who spent the summer of '64 going door to door didn't have much success at getting blacks registered for the vote, but it was much easier to sign up for the new Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). So by August, the new party had 60,000 black members, and some white ones. MFDP Chairman Lawrence Guyot organized the effort to build a legal convention delegation based on the rules of the national Democratic Party.

"We paralleled the state organization of Mississippi where we could, where it was possible to do so and remain alive," Guyot says. "We had our registration form, we conducted precinct meetings, we conducted convention meetings, we conducted county meetings, and congressional district meetings, we elected a delegation. We then put that delegation on the way to Atlantic City."

Guyot stresses the Freedom Democrats followed one key rule of democracy that the regular all-white Mississippi Democratic Party systematically violated: The MFDP was open to everyone.

At its national convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, the Democratic Party prepared to nominate President Lyndon Johnson; the Party wanted unity, not controversy. The delegates elected by the MFDP—64 blacks and four whites—arrived in buses and asked to be seated in place of the all-white delegates from the regular state party. Testifying before the credentials committee, the Freedom Democrats argued theirs was the only legitimate delegation from Mississippi.

"My name is Mrs. Fanny Lou Hamer. And I live at 626 East Lafayette Street, Ruleville, Mississippi," Mrs. Hamer began in televised testimony that would electrify the nation.

Hamer detailed how Mississippi's white power structure used the state's political and legal systems to oppress and brutalize black citizens.

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

"The clincher was her retelling of her beating in the Winona jail," says Leslie Maclemore, then a young Freedom Democrat delegate from northern Mississippi, and now a political scientist. "She told it in such a way [that] if you could have stopped the reel right then and there and said, 'Let's take a vote up or down on these



Freedom Democrats,' without the intervention by the hardened political pros, Fanny Lou Hamer would have won the day."

But the hardened political pro running for President, Lyndon Johnson, feared that if the MFDP delegation were seated, he would lose the Southern white support that he thought he needed to defeat Republican Barry Goldwater. So Johnson asked Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey, his choice for Vice President, to negotiate with the Freedom Democrats.

Bob Moses characterizes it this way: "Johnson is the President and Johnson says, 'If you want to be Vice President, you deliver this. You get this monkey off our back.'"

Rather than making a clear decision between the two Mississippi parties, Humphrey directed his young protégé, Walter Mondale, to propose a compromise: two members of the MFDP, one black and one white, would be seated as delegates at-large. Members of the all-white Democratic party would be seated, but only if they promised to support Johnson for President. In addition, the national party promised never again to seat a segregated delegation.

Most of the delegates from the all-white regular party were Goldwater supporters; all but four of them left the convention. The Freedom Democrats rejected the compromise, too. "The compromise was two seats. And Miss Hamer said, 'Well, we ain't gonna take no two seats. All of us sixty-eight can't sit in no two seats,'" recalls Unita Blackwell.

In retrospect, the Mississippians' challenge to the Democratic Party was a historic success, Walter Mondale argues. "They came with a powerful moral case, recounting the indisputable fact that blacks in Mississippi were sealed out of the Democratic Party, and that our Party finally had to do something about what was a moral disgrace." Never again, Mondale points out, was a segregated delegation ever seated at a Democratic convention.

But many in the Mississippi movement were stunned at the national Party's refusal to simply seat the Freedom Democrats. The compromise proved to some that in a pinch, powerful liberals would choose tokenism over principle.

"In the end they just didn't have the guts to do it," says former SNCC staff member and MFDP organizer Frank Smith. Democratic Party leaders "agreed with us, they all knew it was wrong, they all knew it violated the Constitution, they all knew it had to be done sooner or later. They all knew all of the right things. They just couldn't do it



at the time. It disillusioned us a great deal. I think it disillusioned, actually, the civil rights movement quite considerably."

Time Code: 6:12 - 11:26

In the immediate aftermath of Freedom Summer, many young organizers felt they'd placed themselves in the path of American racism—and gotten trampled. They'd endured violence and harassment; three of their fellow workers had been murdered. They'd registered few black voters. The Democratic Party had turned aside their challenge in Atlantic City.

"What [the Summer Project] achieved more than anything else, I think, it exposed the system—from top to bottom," says Dave Dennis, who was the Mississippi Director of the Congress of Racial Equality in 1964. "And what it did was to show that there was a conspiracy, to some extent, unwritten—that was just so far that people were going to go to make changes, they weren't gonna step on too many people's toes at this time in this country, and really what type of a rock this country was built upon."

The sense that Freedom Summer had not brought tangible political change was exacerbated by frustrations inside the movement. Some felt the intense experiment in integrated activism had failed. The Northern white volunteers came with good intentions, "but it was like they thought they were coming to deal with a bunch of ignorant slobs, because we weren't formal in our practices, because we did things in a different way. They felt they knew better," says Matt Suarez, a former CORE staffer from Louisiana.

"There was a bit of a situation there," agrees Bob Zellner, the white Alabamian and former SNCC staff member. Conflicts over tasks like typing and copy making led to wounded feelings in the makeshift and harried civil rights offices during Freedom Summer, says Zellner. "And these were places where young Mississippians, mostly black, had gone through a lot of pain and suffering to learn some of those skills and techniques. And suddenly someone from, you know, Bryn Mawr or Brown or Stanford or wherever—'Well, I can type a hundred words a minute. Let me do that.' 'I know how to run that machine, I can even fix that machine.' So there was a certain amount of shouldering aside."

Personal entanglements sometimes turned into racial conflicts. White women angered black women by forming relationships with black men. At the same time, some of the women who volunteered for Freedom Summer were forming ideas that would lead to the founding of the modern women's movement. Their criticisms of



men, black and white, alienated some African American women, recalls Unita Blackwell: "I remember Fanny Lou Hamer says, you know, 'I'm not gonna liberate myself from Pap.' That was her husband. She did not want to liberate herself from Pap. She wanted Pap to be liberated."

Some whites struggled to understand when their black colleagues in the Mississippi movement got angry with them.

"If you were naïve like I was, and you came from a relatively sheltered background, it was like, 'Oh my gosh, what is going on,'" says Betty Garman Robinson, a native of suburban New York who had joined the SNCC staff in the spring of 1964. "And that said to me that the whites, myself included, didn't understand the anger" that comes out of being oppressed. "We didn't have a clue what that was about."

"I think that the Summer Project, by virtue of creating integration in a sheltered manner, allowed the tensions which were present in the society to surface," says Casey Hayden, also a white SNCC staff member at the time.

Others, perhaps, approached Freedom Summer with lower expectations for racial harmony, and were less disappointed. Most black Mississippians had never known whites who would shake their hands, talk to them as equals, or ride as passengers in their cars.

The Reverend J.J. Russell hosted white volunteers at his home in the Delta.

"The law of the county, they didn't want it to happen. They didn't want white students staying in the black homes, but we did it." The elderly Russell chuckles with pleasure at the memory. "And [they] didn't want us to ride together, but we rode together. Other words, we worked just like sisters and brothers."

But after Freedom Summer, bitterness and separation won out within the Mississippi movement. SNCC, the group that led the Summer Project, had been founded as an integrated movement committed to nonviolent resistance. But within two years of Freedom Summer, SNCC had new, more militant leaders, such as Stokely Carmichael, who declared the Black Power movement and dismissed the group's white staff members.

Former SNCC staffer John O'Neal says the summer of '64 helped him grasp the true nature of the relationship between blacks and whites in America—a relationship that, he argues, has not changed in the intervening decades.



"Black people, as a matter of necessity, have to deal with white people in one way or another all the time, and have a pretty good notion of who they are and how they function, what they do, and generally recognize that most of them don't understand the relationship that we have to each other, and generally don't recognize the racism in themselves, and generally are like bulls in china shops when it comes to trying to be in the world," O'Neal says.

Time Code: 11:26 – 15:15

But if Freedom Summer didn't achieve what some hoped it would, it did help to break open the South's closed political system. (Mississippi now has more African Americans in elective office than any other state.) The Summer Project proved to be a training ground for activists who went on to lead the campus Free Speech, antiwar, and women's movements of the 1960s and '70s.

Many who took part find much to celebrate in the summer of '64.

"I think that every time we got someone to register to vote—to attempt to register to vote, whether they were successful or not; every time we got someone white allowed to stay in their home; every time we got someone to stand up and say, 'Yes, I'm going to the mass meeting,' we had changed them. You don't do that and then undo it two weeks later, and go back to what you were before that act," says Mississippi native Lawrence Guyot.

"We were not the only people affected by the Summer Project," argues Dorrie Ladner. "It helped to free many white people who were there, who may have had good intentions but were oppressed and were as frightened as we were."

"But Mississippi transformed us more than we transformed Mississippi—much more profoundly," says white volunteer Lester Galt.

"People came out of the Mississippi Summer Project and looked at the questions that affected our lives ever after—questions about gender, questions about sexuality, questions about war and peace—and we had real knowledge of a way to function," says Robbie Osman.

The Summer Project is "the only thing that could have happened"—the only way finally to shock the nation into dismantling Jim Crow, says former SNCC staff member Casey Hayden. "Given who we were, and what we were doing, and what was available as resources, that was the only thing to do. The fact that we could do it, as young as we were, was a truly incredible historical event. Amazing historical event.



And it was a great thing, it was a great thing that we did. It was a grand thing that we did."

Many Freedom Summer veterans never stopped working for social justice. To take just one example: Bob Moses, the leading architect of Freedom Summer, is the creator of the Algebra Project, an innovative and highly-regarded program that teaches math to underprivileged children.

The year after Freedom Summer, John Lewis and hundreds of others marched for voting rights in Selma, Alabama, and were clubbed by riot police. That year, Congress banned the mechanisms Southern states had used to disenfranchise African Americans.

"The Mississippi summer project laid the foundation, created the climate, for the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, to make it possible for hundreds and thousands and millions of blacks to become registered voters," Lewis says.

In the end, trying to pin down the legacy of Freedom Summer is as complicated as summarizing the meaning of race in America. But the Mississippi summer does stand as a startling expression of hope. And of a willingness by young black and white Americans to throw themselves into the grinding gears of a racist culture. It's a story that's especially striking from the perspective of our more jaded times.

Alabama native Bob Zellner, the son of one-time Klan members, worked for SNCC for six years. He was beaten and jailed in five states alongside black civil rights workers. He insists he did it all out of self-interest.

"People always said, 'What made you go South to help the black people?'" Zellner says. "And I always said, 'Well, first of all, I didn't go South, I was already South. And I never set out to help the black people. I was looking for my own redemption and my own freedom.'"